



With fresh insights into familiar Bible passages and in opening her heart and life to readers, author Donna Pyle has tackled the topic of forgiveness. Readers will want to grab a journal to document the lessons and Bible verses the author encourages readers to write down, helping to imprint God's truths. Thank you, Donna, for delving into an area where many people struggle. Thank you even more for leading readers to God's Word for the answers.

—*Janice Wendorf,*
past LWML president

In *Forgiveness*, Donna tackles the universal struggles that underlie extending and receiving grace in our fallen world. She identifies and corrects common misbeliefs about forgiveness, defines biblical restitution, and discusses key biblical examples of forgiveness. Donna addresses revenge, bitterness, and all the ways we can respond to our wounds in the flesh, yet uses Scripture and beautiful language to remind us of the power of Jesus at work in us, making forgiveness in every relationship possible. *Forgiveness* is the perfect comprehensive approach for studying a topic that affects us all.

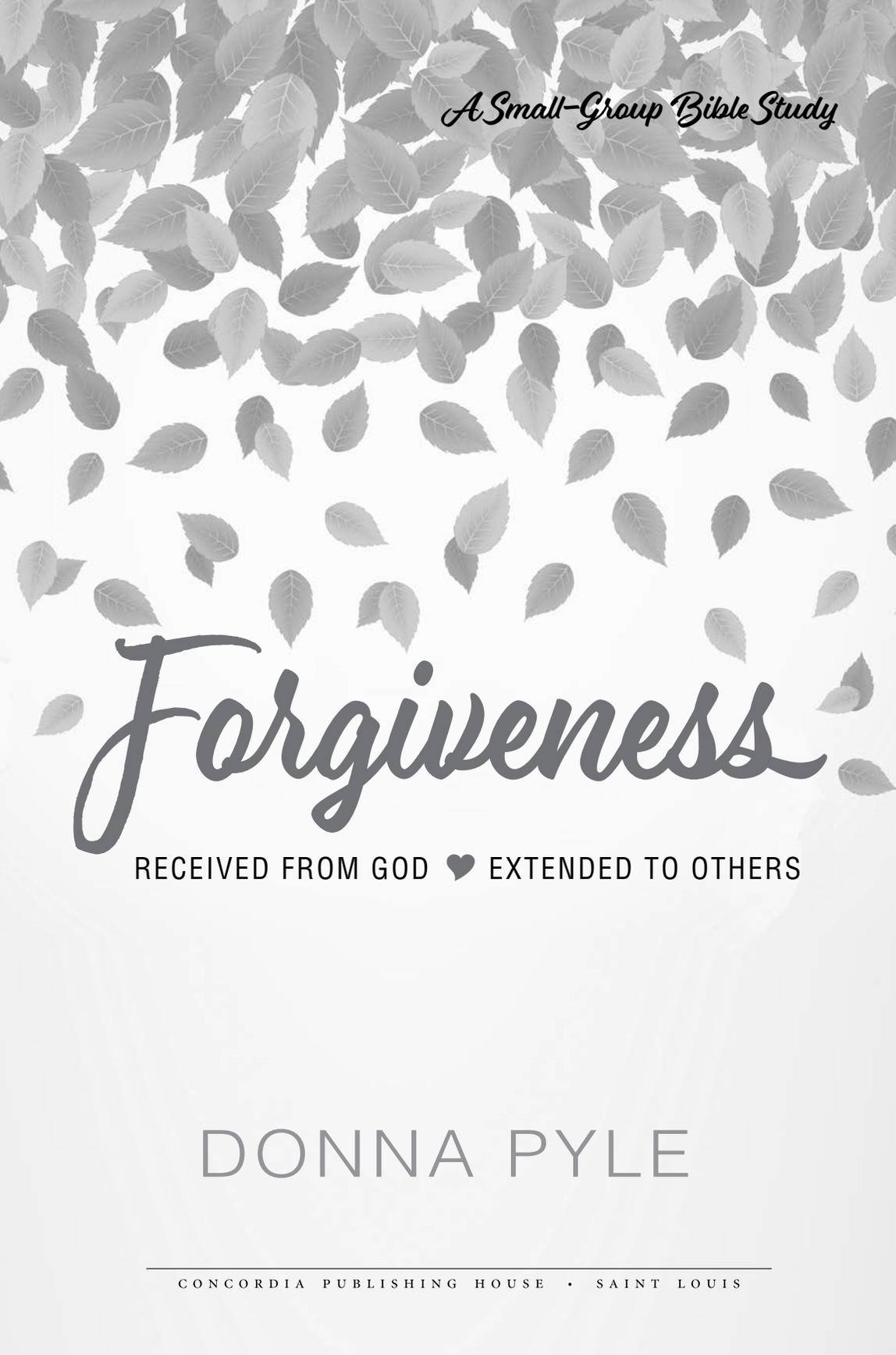
—*Angie Goeke, author of A Girl and Her Warhorse,*
musician, and speaker

With her trademark warm, candid style, Bible teacher and author Donna Pyle invites you into the life-transforming journey of true forgiveness. Turn these pages, immerse yourself in God's comforting, refining Word, and walk with Donna away from the burden of bitterness and into the liberating lightness of forgiveness.

—*Michelle DeRusha, author of Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk*

Donna Pyle's latest book on forgiveness is a welcome new resource for individuals or groups to discover more on both the process and intricacies of something that is meant to shape so much of our daily walk of faith: forgiving one another in love and truth. Donna covers the depth and the breadth of damage that unforgiveness can reap in our hearts and lives, but shines light on the freedom we are given in Jesus Christ. She recognizes the losses involved in forgiveness, and she doesn't shy away from calling out the lies and cultural myths that stand as barriers to forgiveness and freedom. She covers a wide range of experiences and offenses when forgiveness can enter in and offer much needed restoration, including adultery, abuse, family turmoil, habitual sins, to name only a few. The book is in a helpful format utilizing beautiful language, questions that root around Scripture and our personal experiences, and optional small-group sections. *Forgiveness* offers an authentic look at the pain of life's journey, but reminds us on every page that we have a Savior who came to heal and renew.

—*Deaconess Heidi Goebmann, writer, blogger,
and speaker at I Love My Shepherd Ministries*



A Small-Group Bible Study

Forgiveness

RECEIVED FROM GOD ♥ EXTENDED TO OTHERS

DONNA PYLE



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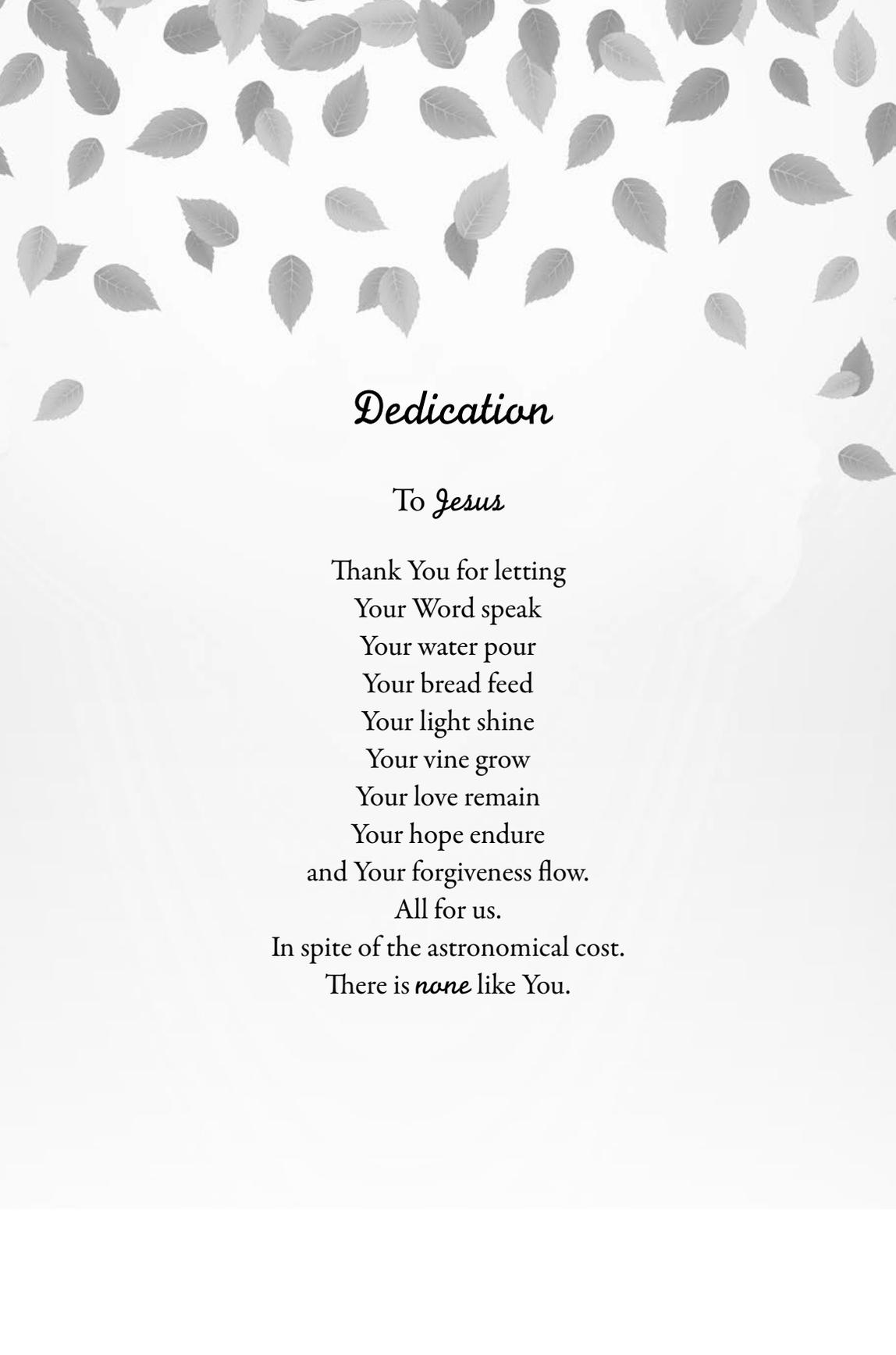
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The quotation marked KJV is from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17

The background of the page is a light, textured surface with a pattern of falling leaves. The leaves are in various shades of grey and green, scattered across the entire page, creating a soft, naturalistic feel.

Dedication

To *Jesus*

Thank You for letting
Your Word speak
Your water pour
Your bread feed
Your light shine
Your vine grow
Your love remain
Your hope endure
and Your forgiveness flow.

All for us.

In spite of the astronomical cost.

There is *none* like You.

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INTRODUCTION

*And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto **this sycamine tree**, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. (Luke 17:6 KJV, emphasis added)*

The sycamine tree was known to have one of the deepest root structures of all trees in the Middle East. A hearty and robust tree that grew to a height of thirty feet or more, its roots plunged deep into the earth, tapping into underground water sources. Blistering weather and drought posed little threat. Even shearing off the tree at its base would not guarantee its death. Because of its deep roots, it resurfaced time and again.

This tree was *incredibly* difficult to eradicate once established.

So why should we care about this tree, and what does it have to do with forgiveness? Jesus specifically used the sycamine tree to teach His disciples about unforgiveness and bitterness (see verse above). Since you are reading this book, it is safe to assume that you have struggled with one or both.

You understand how *incredibly* difficult it is to eradicate both bitterness and unforgiveness once they are established in your life.

Notice how Jesus said “*this sycamine tree.*” Why not a palm tree or olive tree? The fact that Jesus used the word *this* indicates He was making specific parallels between that tree and the detrimental effects of bitterness and unforgiveness in a person’s life.

The roots of bitterness and unforgiveness can grow deep into the human soul, watered by any offense that lies hidden in the soil of the heart. The offense does not stay hidden for long though. Left alone, it will establish deep roots and produce bitter fruit. Such fruit becomes evident through angry thoughts, words, and deeds.

But the sycamine tree was known for more than deep roots. The spiritual parallels between unforgiveness and the properties of the sycamine tree are chilling.

The wood from the sycamine tree was the preferred material for building coffins and caskets. The tree grew quickly in nearly any environment, making it readily available in many different places. In fact, Egyptian archaeologists today often discover little square boxes made from sycamine that contain various figurines placed at the feet of mummies. These sycamine boxes remained uncorrupted for at least three thousand years. *Three thousand years!*

Unforgiveness and bitterness build caskets around our hearts. When left unchecked, they have the power to eventually destroy every good thing in our lives: love, freedom, relationships, and transparent communion with the Father. When we bury hurt away from God's healing power, our self-made coffin can last a *very* long time.

Another startling fact about the sycamine tree? It was pollinated only by wasps. The pollination process was initiated when a wasp stuck its stinger right into the heart of the fruit. In other words, the sycamine tree's fruit had to be "stung" in order to reproduce.

Now think how many times you have heard a person say, "I've been stung by that person once, but I'm not going to be stung like that again!" Those people have been "stung" by hurt, and you can almost see the poison creeping deep into the soil of their hearts to pollinate every bitter word they utter. Stung people build coffins around their hearts to prevent being stung again. Can you hear the pounding of the casket maker's hammers?

Significantly, the sycamine tree was usually planted where two paths met. Since it had a large trunk with stout branches offering shade, travelers often paused under this tree to deliberate which path to take.

When you and I get hurt—emotionally, mentally, or spiritually—we stand at a crossroads. We have a choice between the dark, burdensome path of unforgiveness or the Son-drenched, freeing path of forgiveness.

This choice really *is* ours.

As children of the living God, we must believe that the process of eradicating bitter roots is never a hopeless endeavor. Jesus told His disciples in Luke 17:6 that uprooting unforgiveness is possible if a person has the faith of a *grain of mustard seed*. Since the gift of faith comes from God

(Ephesians 2:8), we have access to an abundant, unlimited supply of poison's antidote.

In God's hands, the casket maker's career is short lived.

Jesus taught that believers need faith to deal with unforgiveness. The good news is that if forgiveness is truly the desire of the heart, any person, through the power of the Holy Spirit, with even the tiniest measure of faith can command those roots of bitterness to shrivel up.

Faith is a container whose power lies not in being the container, but in what it contains: unsurpassing confidence in God's promises. Faith enables believers to put God's promises into practice.

The goal of this study is to dig into Scripture to gain knowledge and a clear understanding of forgiveness in order to equip ourselves with the tools to apply them to our daily walks.

This study is aimed at opening our hearts and minds to the life-altering, rich teachings that God's Word offers about forgiveness, the harm of harboring unforgiveness, and how to extend forgiveness to others. This path is infinitely difficult to walk alone, so we will underscore the value of regularly gathering with other believers in church and small groups to acknowledge and confess our sins, hear Christ's Gospel proclaimed, and receive the precious gift of forgiveness.

God the Father is the ultimate expert on forgiveness. He sent Jesus to rescue humanity, even knowing we would reject, despise, and kill Him.

Yet He sent His *only* Son *anyway*.

Through His nail-pierced sacrifice, Jesus eradicated the sting of sin and unforgiveness and removed them "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

Our Lord and Savior's entire ministry on earth centered on forgiveness and love. That's why He came. He alone experienced the exorbitant price tag of forgiving all sin of all time. His sacrifice purchased the priceless gift of eternal life for everyone who believes.

Several months before writing this study, I asked on social media what people struggle with regarding forgiveness: "If you were diving into an in-depth Bible study about forgiveness, what scenarios would you deem important to cover?"

The answers were real and unvarnished. Friends, family, acquaintances, and friends of friends wrote of their struggles with forgiving intentional

abuse, betrayal, family hurts, of knowing the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, knowing how to forgive yourself (which is a myth we will set straight in this study), and knowing how to teach forgiveness. We will address all of those scenarios and more in the coming pages.

We will also learn what forgiveness is *not*. It is not forgetting, excusing a sin or crime, or approving bad behavior.

But the hardest truth we will learn is that forgiveness is *not optional*—regardless of the severity of the wound. God’s command to forgive is not intended to increase our burden, but to free us from its weight. We cannot lug the millstone of unforgiveness without becoming exhausted under its load.

Jesus took our millstones of hurt and promises: *“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28–30).

I have not experienced every hurt that you have—but Jesus has. Through His life and sacrifice, we lean into this study to soak in His teaching, seek to understand His words, and move forward to embrace the freedom of forgiveness.

Because that’s what true forgiveness feels like.

Freedom.

Your freedom.



How to Use This Bible Study

This small-group Bible study is designed to lead you on a path toward a more intimate relationship with God by bringing you together with fellow believers. Serious Christ followers desire to grow in their faith, obey God, and serve as valuable contributors in their families, churches, and communities.

You can walk through this study in a variety of ways: individually, in a small group, during family discussions, and in Sunday Bible classes. But may I challenge you beyond your comfort zone? Consider stepping out and asking some friends to join you in this study. Encourage your church's small group to walk through this together. Ask your pastor to offer it as a Sunday morning Bible class.

Unforgiveness and holding grudges are pandemic in our culture. One of the marks of a Christian is forgiveness. The more we gather in community to learn forgiveness and live it out daily, the more influence we as Christ followers will have on the fabric of society.

Each lesson provides valuable tools for exploring important aspects of your faith walk with other believers who also desire spiritual growth. During this process, you will get to know one another, your stories, struggles, and victories. Some will be similar, while some will differ greatly from your own, but my hope is that they will provide you with a fresh perspective.

If you are walking through this study individually, take your time. Walk through each lesson carefully, allowing time for God to move you through at your own pace. But keep moving!

Each day's individual lesson contains important times of quiet reflection and personal application to provide intimate time with the Lord between your study group's regular gatherings. It is important that you do not neglect this valuable time of being still before the Lord. It is hard to hear the still, small voice of God through His Word and prayer beyond the cacophony of

the world. We love wearing the badge of busyness and often fail to take time to listen.

Each lesson concludes with time with your small group to dig into Scripture together and have meaningful discussion to discover God's truth and life application for that lesson's topic. As you and your group exchange insights, pray for God to expand your understanding of Scripture and deepen the bonds of faith, friendship, and Christ-centered purpose in your group.

One person should be designated as the group facilitator. He or she does not need to have prior training in leading a Bible study or discussion group. The facilitator will just make sure the discussion stays on track.

The facilitator can also speed up or slow down the group time by choosing to skip some discussion questions or concentrate longer on others to fit your allotted study time, ensuring that no one gets left out of the faith-building, friendship-solidifying process.

Each small group's dynamics and study pace will vary. You may complete an entire lesson each time you meet. Others may take their time to get as far in a lesson as time allows and then pick up where they left off during their next gathering. This study may take you eight weeks or eight months, but the most important focus is learning and growing in faith together.

And let's be honest, the learning and application of forgiveness is a lifelong process.

Now that your plan is in place, you are ready to embark on the journey! I pray that through this study, God transforms you more and more into the likeness of His Son.



F O R G I V E N E S S I S A L W A Y S P E R S O N A L

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:12–13)

The bell opening my title fight against unforgiveness clanged on December 1, 2009.

DING! I discovered my husband was leading a secret, double life.

DING! He just wanted to save face, cut losses, and disappear.

DING! Nineteen years invested in that relationship down the drain.

Divorce proceedings followed. Dividing stuff that didn't matter ensued.

Four fleeting months later, I had an ex-husband. Ex-dreams. An ex-me.

KNOCKOUT.

One day when everything seemed to be closing in at once, I bellowed to an empty bedroom, "I WAS FAITHFUL! MY 'YES' MEANT YES! THIS IS SO *UNFAIR!*"

Enter anger, stage left. Bitterness slithered in behind it. The orchestra wailed a mournful waltz. The audience trickled out. Stage lights faded to black.

Winter settled in.

Thankfully, that winter season didn't last long. Out of sheer exhaustion, I finally crumpled before the Lord, handing up my pain to God by the truckload during counseling.

The sun peeked out.

The thaw slowly started.

Spring flowers of hope began sprouting in my heart.

I learned a vital lesson during that time: *Forgiveness is always personal.* We cannot forgive a faceless entity. I could not feel "mad at life" and expect God to heal my heart.

When you and I feel a personal sense of being wronged or hurt, we need to be able to name a person, action, and pain in order to walk toward forgiveness. Workers who are mad at "the company" face the same struggle. Citizens who are angry at "the government" generally find themselves in the same drifting boat. No face to forgive, only anger to seethe.

Specificity is the first step toward freedom.

We struggle to extend forgiveness because our human nature does not *want* to forgive those who wound us. I certainly struggled to forgive my ex-husband. The wounds caused by his betrayals went deep.

Unforgiveness drags joy behind the shed and beats it senseless.

Pain reminds us that we are not metallic machines but frail flesh, capable of hurting and being hurt. Pain is the price of living in this broken world, being broken by it and broken in it.

But God wrote the victory chapter in our lives during six hours one Friday. At Calvary, Jesus broke once for all, the only breaking where true healing begins.

Forgiveness transforms souls shouting curses into shofars trumpeting God's praises.

Christ-centered forgiveness acknowledges our perpetrators as broken people operating through their own broken understanding of the world. It also acknowledges our own need to confess and repent. Time does not heal all wounds; God does. Thankfully, He never tires of offering us hope and a future centered in Him.

During times when I struggled to forgive those who hurt me, I prayed jagged words through the pain, hunted healing in the Word, and emptied toxic unforgiveness into tear-stained journals. I learned every Scripture

passage about forgiveness and how God enables us to extend it. God used those processes to teach me how to keep very short accounts of hurt in the future.

My piles of research notes, journal entries, and Scripture passages about forgiveness could fill a book. Hence this study. God used what I learned about forgiveness during that time to teach me to apply it to every area of my life: family, church, friendships, social media trolls, unkind strangers, difficult children, and challenging co-workers.

My prayer is that through this study, He will do the same for you.

We are reminded of forgiveness every time we say the Lord's prayer: "*and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (Matthew 6:12).

It is a simple prayer, yet hard.

Forgiveness means sharing the unmitigated grace we have already received; it is the extension of hope so others might discover the Source of all hope.

Unless we live in isolation, each of us regularly experiences times when we are wronged. It starts when our expectations are not met, when a complete stranger makes a simple mistake, or when a loved one commits a willful act. We feel the stings of disappointment, anger, and bitterness. Deep wounds take a long time to heal, and if we hold on to that hurt for a long time, our hearts become hardened.

A vital part of this study includes unpacking some harmful myths that many of us believe about forgiveness. One of the most harmful myths is that holding on to unforgiveness means we retain some kind of power or control over our offender. Nothing could be further from the truth. Withholding forgiveness is a self-made jail cell. Christ died to liberate us. Unforgiveness stagnates our relationship with God in sinful disobedience. I have learned those two truths firsthand thanks to wise pastors and counselors.

Learning to forgive is a difficult task. Been there. Done that. Have five T-shirts. It requires humility, maturity, and grace, which we receive from God. Forgiveness means that we confess our own part in the situation—such as harboring unforgiveness!—and repent so we can release our wounded pride, anger, and revenge to God and receive His gracious love.

The truth is that no one's transgression against you or wound you have sustained exceeds your transgressions against God. Yet He has completely forgiven you.

Because God set the example in Christ, He commands us to forgive from the heart all of our trespassers. Perhaps we recite the Lord's Prayer so often in church that we no longer hear or heed its message: "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). We confess our sins and ask God to forgive our debts (or trespasses)—but stop short before obeying the second half of that prayer.

You and I cannot forgive in our own power. "To err is human, to forgive divine" is true. And we are not divine. But God's divine power residing in the heart of every believer enables us to extend forgiveness without reservation. It is not possible to hold love and hate in the same heart. I've tried it. It doesn't work.

Forgiveness is a humanizing, dignifying, redemptive act of God.

Forgiveness frees us from the narrative of hate.

Forgiveness liberates us from our prisons.

Forgiveness equals abundant life.

Forgiveness moves us toward others to extend the Gospel of grace.

That is why forgiveness is not optional.

I pray that God accomplishes much for you during this study.





DAY 1:
UNDERSTANDING
FORGIVENESS

As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

If you asked a dozen people to define forgiveness, you would likely hear twelve different responses. Since Christians are commanded to extend forgiveness, we need to clearly understand what it means.

Webster's dictionary defines *forgive* as "to excuse a fault or offense; to stop feeling anger or resentment against; and to absolve from payment of." *Excuse* and *absolve* are difficult verbs to swallow in the context of pain.

The New Testament word *forgive* in Greek is *aphiēmi*, which means "to send away." In Christ, God packed up our transgressions and permanently sent them away. According to Psalm 103:12, how far did He send them?

The thing about east and west is that there is *no end*. Once you start heading east, you are always heading east until you change directions. Once you journey west, you are always journeying west.

When someone hurts us, God commands us to forgive because hate and bitterness do not line up with His teaching to love. Thankfully, He does not simply issue the command, sit back, and watch us struggle. He provides the Source of power that enables us to fulfill His command.

Write out Galatians 2:20.

Hate and love cannot coexist. Forgiveness cannot blossom when roots of unforgiveness hide in the soil of our hearts.

Jesus talked about forgiveness more than two dozen times in the Gospels, including a key part of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12) and teaching His disciples to forgive others "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22). He even asked God to forgive those who nailed Him to the cross (Luke 23:34). That includes you and me.

Forgiveness is not God's suggestion; it is His command. Write out Colossians 3:12–13.

Did you notice the little word *must*? We *must* also forgive. That's a hard truth to digest when the mere thought of forgiving someone makes you sick to your stomach.

It's amazing how easily we throw around the word *forgiveness* until we are asked to step forward through the pain and extend it personally. But forgiveness is the only way we will survive bleeding out from the spiritual and emotional wounds caused by the hurtful words and actions of others.

The heart of forgiveness always beats with liberation and freedom. Not necessarily for those who hurt you. But *for you*.

Forgiveness is costly. We struggle not to lash out at those who hurt us. We're absorbing the debt and cost of the consequences instead of taking it out on the perpetrator.

We suffer, and it hurts terribly. Some say it feels like dying. They are not wrong. The cost of forgiveness is death.

Just ask Jesus.

Yet it is a death that leads to resurrection.

So start by asking God for just one small step *today* on the road toward forgiveness. Tomorrow, ask Him for another small step.

The road ends in the death of bitterness and a resurrection to life.

The dead-end road ends at Calvary.

Pause for Quiet Reflection

Intentionally schedule at least fifteen minutes of quiet time before the Lord with pen and paper in hand. Ask Him to still your busy mind and open your heart. Take your time reflecting on these questions, and then write down your answers.

- 1. Identify a hurt that you have not yet forgiven. Why are you holding on to it?**

- 2. How has holding on to that unforgiveness affected your life? those around you?**

Apply It Personally

Now that this lesson has provided some insight from the Word about the basics of forgiveness, review what you wrote in the Quiet Reflection section above.

Forgiveness is a battle that no one can fight for you. It requires intentionality and prayer. So, let's get specific right now. Attach a name and face to your hurt. If you have trouble putting a face to your hurt, start there by asking God to provide one. When you can see them clearly (not a faceless entity), pray specifically for God to soften your heart against that person or persons. Each time you approach the Lord's Table, lay your hurt at His feet and receive Jesus' forgiveness. Relentlessly, ask Him to work forgiveness in you and then through you.

You might pray through gritted teeth like I used to. It's okay. God still listens and will begin to faithfully grant your desire.

God has you in the palm of His hand as you walk through this study individually and together as a group. He promises to bring beauty from ashes, so keep walking.

