

**Q&A with Lysa TerKeurst**  
***Forgiving What You Can't Forget:***  
***Discover How to Move On, Make Peace with Painful Memories,***  
***and Create a Life That's Beautiful Again***

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**Q: Why did you write *Forgiving What You Can't Forget*?**

A: In the last several years, my family and I have been through a really devastating season. Through a series of heartbreaking events, my marriage imploded. I was so caught off guard and honestly in a state of shock. And not just for a few months. The pain and uncertainty lasted over 2 years. And I think the constant hurt upon hurt made entertaining bitterness and resentment more and more appealing and honestly seemingly justifiable.

Putting my marriage back together seemed beyond impossible and just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I was diagnosed with several life-threatening illnesses including breast cancer. I wasn't sure if I'd ever write another book. But as I finally picked up my pen again and scribbled basic thoughts around what I'd been learning during this long season of pain, forgiveness seemed to be such a present need in my life. You can always know that I'm going to write from my struggles, not my strength. So, I started writing about forgiveness.

But what seriously started tripping me up when I started studying what the Bible teaches about forgiveness, was my sudden realization of how my need for fairness makes me so very resistant to forgiveness. The idea of it sounds nice and spiritually mature. But actually giving forgiveness to people that have deeply hurt me became incredibly problematic.

Why would God ask the one who got hurt to be the one who then has to extend this gift of forgiveness? That's so hard. I think it's important for me to acknowledge that. Because just the word "forgiveness" can bring to mind people who've hurt us. And, attached to those people, are some of the most difficult and sometimes traumatic memories of our lives.

But, what if forgiveness isn't supposed to be another hard thing we have to do? What if it's actually designed by God for our healing? What if it's the necessary step to finally experience the peace we desperately want but can't get any other way? What if forgiveness is what's been missing in all the relational chaos we're so worn out from dealing with in our lives?

After spending over 1,000 hours of theological research on forgiveness, I've found so many scriptural truths for my misconceptions, progress for the most resistant parts of my heart, and encouragement to continue this journey with hurts past, present, and future. And I'm sharing all that I've learned in *Forgiving What You Can't Forget* and the accompanying Bible study curriculum.

**Q: How did you handle feeling very resistant to forgive your husband who had hurt you so deeply? Why did you decide to stay and fight for your marriage?**

A: It's been an incredibly hard journey. Many days, I didn't know if my marriage would survive. If my family would survive. If I would survive. The hurt was deep and the details, complicated. And let me just say... I have not done this perfectly. So many things are still painful even though Art and I did reconcile.

Many people have asked why I stayed and fought for my marriage. But the answer to that question is as complicated and intricate as trying to understand what makes a massive ocean pull back and stop at the shore.

Apart from God, who can ever truly understand a thing like that?

There was a season that it wasn't reasonable or responsible to stay. Just like when the ocean doesn't respect the boundary of the shoreline and hurricane conditions force evacuations.

So, there were long stretches of silence, separation, and seeking wise counsel.

But then the shoreline became safe again. And I had a choice to stay resistant or lean in to possibility. I was offered a second chance at moments of togetherness for our family that I wanted for all of us.

Simple moments that make complex situations less complex.

Forgiveness is a process. Healing is a long journey. And I'll never ever criticize another person for choices they made that were different from mine when placed in the same horror and heartbreak as I was.

Or, maybe they had no choice at all. I have nothing but tender love and understanding. I don't understand why God sometimes brings about chances for reconciliation and other times God's answer to the brokenhearted prayers of a spouse is a rescue out.

It's a brutal walk for both those who reconcile and those who don't.

So, why did I stay?  
I was given that chance.

I've seen a miraculous work of God in Art.  
I love him. I love our family. I love us.

Do I still get scared? Yes. Is healing this kind of marriage trauma the easy way to travel? No, it absolutely is not. But it is possible as long as we both stay faithful to God and the vows we made from here on out.

And I've discovered imperfect love is still full of sacred possibilities, redemptive strength, and its own kind of purity.

**Q: A big part of your journey has been realizing you held many misconceptions about forgiveness. How do we identify and correct common misconceptions we've believed in our own lives?**

A: I talk about this more in depth in *Forgiving What You Can't Forget*, but I really think the crucial first step is taking time to understand **what forgiveness is and what it isn't** so we can start to uncover our own assumptions:

1. **Forgiveness doesn't always fix relationships, but it does help mend the hurting heart.** Forgiveness is making the decision that the ones who hurt you no longer get to limit you, label you, or project the lies they believe about themselves onto you. It is the decision that their offense will not define you or confine you by the smallness of bitterness.
2. **Forgiveness is both a decision and a process, and healing is a long journey.** When you get triggered, it does not mean your decision to forgive was fake. It just means there's more to be done. Your decision to forgive the facts of what happened is done in a specific moment in time. But the process of working through all the emotions from the impact of what happened will likely take place over a period of time.
3. **Forgiveness doesn't let the other person off the hook. It actually places them in God's hands.** Forgiving the one who hurt you does not mean you are freeing them from the

consequences of their sin. It does mean you refuse the burden of taking revenge and trust God to execute his justice with appropriate measures of mercy.

4. **Forgiveness does not justify or excuse abuse.** While the limitless grace of God provides a way for all to be forgiven, the truth of God provides parameters so that wrong behavior can be addressed. Abuse is not to be tolerated. It is right for you to establish boundaries with equal measures of mercy and tough love.
5. **Forgiveness is required by God, but reconciliation is conditional.** Forgiving someone doesn't mean that trust is immediately restored or that hard relational dynamics are instantly fixed. Reconciliation is dependent on two people being willing to work on the relationship. In some cases, reconciliation is simply not an option. But that doesn't mean forgiveness is not an option.

**Q: We know that forgiveness is required by God, but what does this mean for relationships that can't be restored? What does forgiveness look like then?**

A: I believe with all my heart forgiveness received and given is the very thing that splits this world open with the most stunning revelation of the reality of Jesus, more than almost anything else.

But we have to be careful to not confuse redemption with reunion. Reunion, or reconciliation, requires two people who are willing to do the hard work to come back together. Redemption is just between you and God. God can redeem your life, even if damaged human relationships don't come back together.

And we can forgive, even if the relationship never gets restored. It's so incredibly freeing to forgive and not have to wait on other people who may or may not ever want to or be willing to talk everything through. Forgiveness isn't always about doing something for a human relationship but rather about being obedient to what God has instructed us to do.

I've found that those who cooperate most fully with forgiveness are those who dance most freely in the beauty of redemption.

And what exactly is this beautiful redemption? It is you accepting the exchange God is offering.

**What you give up:** the right to demand that the one who hurt you pay you back or be made to suffer for what they've done. God will handle this. And even if you never see how God handles it, you know He will.

**What you get:** the freedom to move on.

The scenery for your life should not be the pit of pain that person dragged you down into.

There's so much more to see and discover and experience. Let go of clawing your way through the muddy pit, hoping there's some reward buried there. There's not. Take God's hand, and, as the words of forgiveness are released from your lips, it's like scattering seeds of beautiful flowers. The mud of the pit becomes fertile soil with potential. And before long you'll be dancing through all that has blossomed and bloomed around you.

For a while, you may still have tears that come and go. That's okay. Freedom from unforgiveness doesn't mean instant healing for all the emotions involved. But it does mean those emotions will turn into eventual compassion rather than bitterness.

**Q: Some people might be afraid it is unloving or un-Christian to set boundaries in relationships. Why do you believe it's actually one of the most loving things we can do?**

A: A perspective that has really changed how I view boundaries is this: Boundaries aren't to push others away. They are to hold me together.

Personally, when I'm facing hard relational dynamics, I have the tendency to downgrade who I really am and my ability to love well in moments of utter frustration and exhaustion when I don't keep appropriate boundaries.

I know I will be tempted to downgrade my gentleness to hastily spoken words of anger and resentment. I will be tempted to downgrade my progress with forgiveness to bitterness. I will be tempted to downgrade my words of sincerity to frustrated words of anger, aggression, or rude remarks. I will be tempted to downgrade my attitude for reconciliation to acts of retaliation . . . not because I'm not a good person but because I'm not a person keeping appropriate boundaries.

I truly believe that we need to draw necessary boundaries for the sake of our sanity. And we must stay consistent with those boundaries for the sake of our stability. Our relationships will only benefit from having these healthy parameters in place.

**Q: Something your counselor encouraged you to do in the process of forgiveness was to “collect the dots, connect the dots, and correct the dots” of your story. Why was this important?**

A: The things marking us from yesterday are still part of the making of us today. If we listen carefully, woven throughout our narratives is a belief system that formed inside of us as children. This heavily impacts how we view forgiveness and healing as well.

What we experience all throughout life impacts the perceptions we carry. The longer we carry those perceptions, the more they become the truths we believe, live by, operate under, and use to help us navigate life today.

It's important to start making these connections between what happened in our growing-up years and the reasons we do some of the things we do, say some of the things we say, and believe some of the things we believe right now. And it's not just processing for the sake of understanding ourselves better. It's processing what still needs to be forgiven so we can truly move forward in healthy ways with corrected mindsets.

**Q: What advice would you give to someone struggling to forgive something that's permanent or unchangeable?**

A: When people do things to us that can never be undone, it can feel impossible to move forward and heal. The unchangeable often feels unforgivable.

And while I will be the first in line to raise my hand and admit forgiveness is a hard step to take, it's also the only step that leads to anything good. Every other choice—including the choice not to do anything and remain where we are—just adds more hurt upon hurt. But how do we even position ourselves to forgive? Here are a few truths I've been learning to hang on to in my heart when I'm struggling to step toward forgiveness:

1. **Forgiveness is more satisfying than revenge.** Revenge is paying twice for a hurt that someone else did to you. You pay a price when they hurt you. You pay double when you carry that pain inside your heart and it causes you to say and do things you wouldn't otherwise say and do. You may think getting them back will make you feel better in the short term, but in the long term it will always cost you more emotionally and spiritually than you'd ever want to pay.
2. **Our God is not a do-nothing God.** God is always working even when we don't see Him working. We must cling to this and believe this with every fiber of our being.
3. **Your offender is also suffering from pain.** It's very hard to truly forgive someone without compassion. And it's very hard to have compassion on someone who's shown you no compassion at all. So, instead of starting at the place of trying to have compassion on someone who has hurt you, start with having compassion on the pain they had to experience in order to make the choices they made.

**Q: Many of us can find ourselves slipping into bitterness and resentment when we've been wronged. And we often assume that bitterness is all bad. But you've really uncovered some surprising realities about bitterness. Can you share a bit about that?**

A: Absolutely. You know, I sat with so many friends, family members and co-workers managing their own hurts as I wrote this message. And over and over again, a different side of bitterness emerged in our conversations than what I ever imagined. As tears spilled and honesty surfaced, I realized what they were feeling deep down wasn't because they were hard hearted. Their hearts were actually broken, not bitter.

So I decided to dig deeper into bitterness and I made a few observations about what it really is:

Bitterness doesn't have a core of hate but rather a core of hurt.

Bitterness isn't usually found most deeply in those whose hearts are hard but rather in those who are most tender.

Bitterness isn't an indication of limited potential in relationships.

Being bitter shouldn't be equated to being a bad person. It's most often a sign that a person with great potential for good filled the emptiness of their losses with feelings that are natural but not helpful in times of grief.

**Q: How can we know if we're actually making progress with forgiveness and moving beyond the hurt of our situations?**

A: I've asked myself this question many times. Because life is rarely tidy. Relationships aren't easy. And the constant stresses and strains of managing and navigating so many daily issues is hard on the human heart. I can find myself feeling like I'm doing really good with keeping my heart swept clean of bitterness one minute and the next minute feeling like a forgiveness failure.

When the same person I've worked hard to forgive does another thing that hurts me, I can be tempted to dig up my proof of what they did in the past, weaponize my pain against them and feel bitterness rush back inside of me like an unstoppable flood. But as I've sat with these feelings of hesitation and wrestling, I've come to the conclusion that the goal with forgiveness isn't perfection—it's progress.

We aren't robots. We are tenderhearted humans who feel deeply, so we can easily get hurt deeply. The sign of progress isn't the ability never to get hurt or offended or knocked off balance emotionally. The sign of progress is to let the pain work for you instead of against you.

When we trade our proof of what's been done to us for healing perspectives, that's when we know... we haven't just gotten over what happened. We've moved forward, whole, healed, and healthy.

**Q: What are some main things you want readers to take away from this book?**

A: I want readers to realize that they absolutely deserve to stop suffering because of what other people have done to them. But not only that, I want them to have scriptural, psychological, and practical ways to make real progress toward the healing that their heart so desperately desires. Every page of *Forgiving What You Can't Forget* has been written with my reader in mind. I want them to know I'm right there with them for every step of their journey.

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