



# Learning to Forgive

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# Not Wanting to Forgive

## Why can holding a grudge feel so good when it's so bad?

The other night my husband and I got into one of those awful snippy arguments where we both ended up zinging each other's feelings. I found my husband's comments particularly jabbing and left the room in a huff. I went to work on my computer—where I was smack dab in the middle of editing the articles in this packet on forgiveness. Not exactly what I wanted to read about!

It was yet another time when I've been faced with either forgiving or holding on to angry, bitter feelings. For reasons I don't understand, the choice to forgive can be hard to make. Sometimes staying indignant feels good, almost powerful, and forgiveness seems like wimping out. This was one of those times.

This was in stark contrast to earlier that day when my four-year-old son decided the best way to let me know he disagreed with my decision to shut off the TV was to punch me on the arm and leave the room in a huff (where does he get that?). After I sent him up to his room while I figured out a good punishment, I had no problem forgiving his action—even though he hadn't apologized and it was a horrid thing for him to do. But somehow it seems silly to stay bitter at a preschooler, especially one as normally sweet as mine.

Of course, from God's perspective it seems silly to stay bitter and refuse to forgive anyone, for any reason—he certainly doesn't refuse us and even sent his own Son as a perfect sacrifice so we might experience his full forgiveness. It's when I'm faced with this truth that I can forgive my husband (and he forgive me) for big and small wounds.

If you've been struggling with this issue in your life—and who of us hasn't at one time or another?—you'll love the articles in this download. We have great practical advice on the how to's of forgiveness as well as stories of the transforming power of forgiving someone.

Blessings to you,

*Caryn Rivadeneira*  
*Managing Editor, Women's and Family Resources*  
*Christianity Today International*



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## How to Use “Learning to Forgive” for a Group Study.

“Learning to Forgive” can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow:

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternatively, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the “Thought Provokers” be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experience. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.



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# What Forgiveness Isn't

**6 myths that may be keeping you from letting go.**  
*by Denise George*

I listened quietly as my friend Jamie told me the frank details of the sexual abuse she'd suffered as a child.

"I hate my father!" she blurted out. "He abused me for more than a decade!" Jamie cried. "But my pastor said if I want to heal from my childhood pain, I have to forgive."

"What did you tell your pastor?" I asked.

"I told him I could never forgive my father, that I didn't want to forgive him, that no one—not even God—would expect me to forgive him!"

Jamie told me all the reasons that kept her from forgiving her abusive father. I'd heard many of them before. In fact, I'd used some of them two years earlier, when a friend I'd trusted to keep a confidence told several women in my Sunday school class about a painful circumstance I was going through. I felt betrayed by my friend—as I should have. But forgive her? That was the last thing I wanted to do! I dropped out of the Sunday school class and avoided her at church. But a year later, when I reread what the apostle Paul said about forgiveness, his familiar words touched my heart in a special way: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

As I meditated on that verse, I knew I'd been forgiven much. I needed to forgive my friend, even if I didn't feel like it. I decided to do so. Later, when I met her and told her I'd forgiven her, she apologized, and we both cried. I wish I could say she and I became good friends again—but I can't. Her betrayal deeply hurt our friendship, and I was careful never to share another confidence with her. But God's Word and my decision to forgive set me free from bitterness.

## **Facing the Challenge**

Forgiveness can be difficult—almost impossible—to do. Yet in Luke 6:37, Jesus says, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." He elaborates in Matthew 6:14–15: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." The



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apostle Paul repeats Jesus' command: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). Surely Paul's "whatever grievances" covers any kind of hurt, betrayal, or injury another person could inflict!

In talking with hundreds of women about forgiveness, I've discovered six myths that keep us from the healing and freedom God desires for you and me.

**Myth 1: Forgiving means the offender didn't really hurt you.** Jamie thought if she forgave her father, it lessened the severity of his abuse. Yet Jamie's forgiveness doesn't deny her father hurt her. In fact, it clearly recognizes the enormity of his evil—if Jamie's dad hadn't deliberately caused her pain, she'd have no reason to forgive him.

"Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded," wrote author Lewis B. Smedes. "Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure us accidentally, we excuse them. We only forgive the ones we blame." Choosing to forgive her father acknowledges the pain Jamie endured at his hands. It also begins her healing.

**Myth 2: Forgiving means you excuse the offender's hurtful act.** When I chose to forgive my friend, I didn't condone her cruel behavior. Forgiveness, I've discovered, is a response that seeks to redeem the hurt, not brush it off. An accidental "slip of the tongue" needs no forgiveness because it isn't deliberately caused. Intentional hurts—like my friend's betrayal—need forgiveness. When I forgave my friend, my forgiveness didn't lessen the impact of her painful action. But forgiveness unlocked my own "prison" of bitterness.

**Myth 3: Before forgiving, you must first understand why the offender hurt you.** On December 1, 1997, Missy Jenkins, a sophomore at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, stood with her classmates and prayed before school started. Before they said their final "amen," 14-year-old Michael Carneal pulled out a pistol and fired 11 shots into the student prayer group. One bullet severely damaged Missy's spinal cord. Paralyzed from the waist down, Missy will spend her life in a wheelchair.

Missy doesn't know the reason her classmate deliberately hurt her. Michael may not understand his reasons. But that didn't keep Missy from choosing to forgive him.

"I believe hating him is wasted emotion," Missy says. "Hating Michael won't make me walk again. Besides, I know it isn't what Jesus would do."

Our human mind yearns to make all the confusing puzzle pieces fit together neatly before we forgive. However, the truth is we can forgive an offender even if we never discover the reasons for the inflicted pain. Author Philip Yancey writes in *What's So*



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Amazing About Grace, "Not to forgive imprisons me in the past and locks out all potential for change. I thus yield control to another, my enemy, and doom myself to suffer the consequences of the wrong."

**Myth 4: Before forgiving the offender, you must feel forgiving.** Forgiveness has nothing to do with how you feel. You can feel hurt, betrayed, and angry, and still completely forgive the one who wounded you. Biblical forgiveness is an act of the will. It's a choice you make.

Can you still feel angry after you forgive? Yes! Anger means you're in touch with reality—it's part of being human. But be careful to aim that anger at what your offender did, not at the offender herself. Then let your anger push you toward justice.

**Myth 5: Forgiving means the offender will face no consequences.** When we choose to forgive someone, our forgiveness doesn't "let him off the hook." Forgiveness also doesn't mean justice shouldn't be served.

In December 1983, Pope John Paul II visited a prisoner, Mehmet Ali Agca, at the Rebibbia prison in Rome. In May 1981, Agca had aimed a pistol at the pope and shot him in the chest. After much pain and agony, John Paul recovered, and now he looked Agca in the eye, extended his hand, and said, "I forgive you."

Even though the pope forgave him, Agca still faced the consequences of his crime. He served a lengthy prison sentence until he finally was released.

**Myth 6: When your offender is punished, you'll find closure.** On June 13, 1990, Linda Purnhagen saw her two daughters, Gracie, 16, and Tiffany, 9, for the last time. Dennis Dowthitt, a dangerously sick psychopath, strangled Tiffany to death, then raped Gracie and slit her throat. When authorities discovered the girls' bodies, they arrested and convicted Dowthitt, and scheduled his execution.

A decade later, as executioners strapped him to his death gurney, Dowthitt apologized for the savage killings. But not even his confession, apology, and execution brought closure for Linda. She was disappointed after the execution, not relieved.

We think we can more easily forgive others if they confess the crime and apologize for the pain they caused. But don't look to justice, imprisonment, or execution to bring needed closure and healing. Only forgiveness will do that.

## The Choice to Forgive

The decision to forgive an offender is probably the hardest choice we can ever make. Some crimes seem too horrible to forgive. Our instincts tell us to avenge the person who caused us pain, not to release him from the debt he owes us. But as



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Christians, we can't afford to have unforgiving hearts, for we have been greatly forgiven by God in Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

Only forgiveness can release us from a life of hatred and bitterness. "Forgiving is a journey, sometimes a long one," wrote Lewis B. Smedes in *Shame and Grace*. "We may need some time before we get to the station of complete healing, but the nice thing is that we are being healed en route. When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover the prisoner we set free was us."

*Denise George, [www.authordenisegeorge.com](http://www.authordenisegeorge.com), is the author of 20 books, including *Cultivating a Forgiving Heart—Forgiveness Frees You to Flourish* (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the July/August 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Thought Provokers

*—Which of these myths keeps you from forgiving sometimes? How might you overcome that?*

*—Denise writes, "Forgiveness has nothing to do with how you feel. You can feel hurt, betrayed, and angry, and still completely forgive the one who wounded you." What do you think about this statement?*



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# How to Forgive

## The ABCs of forgiveness.

by Denise George

**Acknowledge the hurt.** When someone deliberately hurts you, don't try to diminish the pain and its effect on you. Acknowledge your suffering—and express it aloud to God. Scripture promises: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18), and “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

**Blame the offender.** If a person hurts you by mistake, she didn't mean to inflict pain, so she needs no forgiveness. But if a person intentionally hurts you, then the pain she caused was deliberate. Say aloud: “I personally blame you, (name of offender), because you hurt me on purpose.” Correctly placing the blame readies you to begin the forgiveness process.

**Cancel the debt.** You've acknowledged the hurt and rightly blamed the offender. Now you're ready to make the willful decision to “cancel the debt” your offender owes you. Find a quiet place to be alone and ask the Lord's help in forgiving the person who hurt you. You might pray the “Lord's Prayer” (Matthew 6:9–13) and meditate on verse 12: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” After you've prayed and while you're still alone, speak aloud your decision to forgive: “(Name of offender), I've chosen to forgive you for hurting me; I've decided to cancel the debt you owe me.” You've now embarked on the process of forgiving the person who hurt you.

*Denise George, [www.authordenisegeorge.com](http://www.authordenisegeorge.com), is the author of 20 books, including Cultivating a Forgiving Heart—Forgiveness Frees You to Flourish (Zondervan). This article first appeared in the July/August 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Thought Provokers

—How might blaming the offender—out loud—impact your ability to forgive?

—Denise suggests asking the Lord's help in forgiving. Have you ever sought God's help in forgiving? Why or why not?



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# Why Forgive?

It's more about you than you think.

by Neil T. Anderson

I was their last resort. Kurt and Mary (not their real names) called me in the middle of an argument.

"Dr. Anderson, you have to come and help us," Mary said angrily. After talking with her briefly, I was afraid if I didn't show up, their argument would result in domestic violence!

*I'm making a house call police officers don't even like to make!* I thought as I got into my car.

I played referee for a couple hours until they'd worn themselves out. This Christian couple had made enemies of each other. And forgiveness was the furthest thing from what they wanted to discuss.

"I've listened to your arguments and frustrations," I started. "Here's the overriding reality. Before God we're responsible for our own character and the needs of the other person. You two have been ripping each other's character while looking out for your own needs. You're struggling in your marriage because you're struggling in your spiritual life."

They were stunned. They hadn't connected their marital troubles with how they were doing in their individual relationships with God. But the Bible is clear: "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?" (1 John 4:20, NLT).

What makes a Christian marriage work is to forgive from our hearts, just as Jesus forgave us. He did so by taking our sins upon himself. For us, forgiving others means we're willing to live with the consequences of our spouse's sins.

## But Why Forgive?

**1. To help us mature in our faith.** God's intention in marriage is that we hang in there and grow up. In Colossians Paul writes: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (3:13).



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It's in the context of committed relationships where we either learn to be kind, patient, and loving, or we blow apart. Loving each other inevitably means that we forgive each other—and keep on forgiving as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:21–22. When Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone, “Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Yes, you may be tempted to keep a written log of how many times you've forgiven your spouse! But Jesus was really saying we need to forgive as many times as we are offended. It may seem unfair, especially when we feel as though *we're* the ones always doing the forgiving. Yet, forgiveness calls us to grow in character, which is ultimately most pleasing to God.

**2. To keep bitterness away.** In the close confinement of our homes, we'll say or do things that are offensive to our mate. Even the best of us will feel hurt, put down, or rejected. But if we let a root of bitterness spring up, the writer of Hebrews says that it will “defile many” (12:15). Our unforgiveness grows to bitterness and affects everyone. It erupts in anger and brings disease, stress, pain. Bitterness is like swallowing a bottle of poison hoping the other person will die.

### Excuses, Excuses

So many times we know we should forgive, we understand what God says about the importance of forgiveness, but still we fight it. Here are some excuses I hear from couples.

*It's not fair.* Of course it isn't, but we all live with the consequences of another person's sin. For instance, we're stuck with the consequence of Adam's and Eve's sin. And on the marriage front, since it's God's will that we remain married, the only real choice we have is whether we want to live out those consequences of our spouse's sin in the bondage of bitterness or the freedom of forgiveness.

*But you don't know how bad he (or she) hurt me!* That's not the issue. Your spouse may still hurt you. But forgiveness is how you stop the pain.

*I have to heal first—then I'll be able to forgive.* Research shows over and over that forgiveness brings healing, not the other way around.

*But I want revenge!* The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’” (10:30). We have to trust that God will even the score and make things right.

*Why should I let him (or her) off the hook?* If you don't forgive, you're still hooked to that offense. You'll gain freedom from the past if you let your spouse off your hook. But remember, your spouse isn't off God's hook.

*Where's the justice?* It's in the cross. Jesus died for your sins, and my sins, and his sins, and her sins.



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### Sloppy Forgiveness

Forgiveness doesn't mean we offer cheap grace, though. Here are two statements I often hear that offer faux forgiveness.

*I'll just try to forget about it, because God forgot my sins.* True, God remembers our sin no more. But we can't just will ourselves to forget. I like to think we remember because we can learn from it. The most important part of "forgetting" our spouse's sin is that we don't take the past and use it against our spouse—just as God doesn't use our sins against us. The one who keeps bringing up past offenses hasn't forgiven.

*I'll keep forgiving even though he never changes, since that's what Jesus calls me to do.* Yes, Jesus asks us to forgive over and over, but he never asks us to put up with wrong behavior. When Jesus forgave, he told the person, "Go and sin no more." Part of offering grace is to set clear-cut boundaries that protect us from further abuse. Forgiving from our heart isn't being a punching bag. Although the Lord forgives, he doesn't tolerate sin, and neither should we.

### True Forgiveness

The closer we connect to God and understand the forgiveness he's given us, the more able we are to forgive our spouse. If we struggle with forgiveness, we can pray something such as: "Lord, I forgive my husband for (list every offense that God brings to mind), because it made me feel (rejected, unwanted, judged, small). Heal my damaged emotions and bless my husband."

Remember, you're the only one who can keep yourself from being the person and spouse God created you to be. We don't just forgive the other person for his sake; we forgive for our own emotional, physical, and spiritual health. If you'll assume responsibility to grow in Christ, and forgive those around you, the family can be the kind of environment where everybody wins.

*Neil T. Anderson, Ph.D., founder and president emeritus of Freedom in Christ Ministries, is co-author of The Christ Centered Marriage (Regal Books). This article first appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

### Thought Provokers

—Which of the listed excuses not to forgive hits closest to home for you?

—Neil writes, "The closer we connect to God and understand the forgiveness he's given us, the more able we are to forgive..." When you consider God's forgiveness for your sins, how does that affect your anger toward others?



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# The Power of Forgiveness

## What I learned when I stopped hating my ex's new wife.

by Kari Schneider as told to Kathy Pierce

It should have been one of the happiest moments in my life—the birth of my second daughter, Rachel\*, in February of 1988—but it was bittersweet. A few hours earlier, my husband of nine years, Larry, a successful physician, had matter-of-factly announced, “I don’t love you anymore.” The emotional trauma I experienced triggered Rachel’s entrance into the world six weeks early.

Larry played the role of devoted father until he brought us home from the hospital. Then he started packing suitcases. Outraged, I screamed, “If you’re leaving, you’re putting your things in trash bags because that’s what you are: trash!” A wretched argument followed. When he walked out of the house, he took my heart with him.

“What’s happened to my husband, God?” I sobbed. “What’s turned him against you and me?”

Only a year earlier, Larry, 33, had been a strong Christian, a loyal husband, and a good father to Terri, our toddler. The only inkling I’d had that Larry’s faith was faltering was when we learned our pastor had had an affair. While we were both stunned, Larry felt as though he’d been played a fool. Larry abruptly stopped attending church, tithing, and even stopped wearing his wedding band. He offered no explanations other than he was depressed about his practice. I wondered if there was another woman, but Larry was home every night on time and also spent entire weekends with me. I told myself he was going through a phase. But with Larry’s devastating announcement, my dreams of a happy ending exploded in my face.

Over the next several months, the front door to our house became a revolving door. Larry moved in and out repeatedly. Some days he was certain he wanted a divorce; on others, he appeared on my doorstep, pledging his undying love for me. I prayed constantly to God to restore our marriage. Because I didn’t want it to end, I allowed Larry to come and go as he pleased. But when he was home, I had no peace, wondering when and if he’d leave again.

One morning, I received a phone call from an anonymous woman who told me to check my mailbox. In it I found an unmarked envelope that contained some audio cassettes. Afraid of what they contained—but too curious to discard them—I played



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them. Tears flowed when I heard taped telephone conversations of Larry telling his father about his affair with his secretary, Marie.

News of Larry's affair prompted me to hire a divorce attorney. I later learned he'd already beaten me to the punch. The next 18 months of dividing assets and dealing with attorneys were tumultuous, but ultimately a court date was set. With one swift pound of a gavel, a judge would terminate what God had joined together.

Yet despite all my confusion and anger, I still felt a tiny spark of love for the man I'd promised to cherish forever. I realized Larry wasn't the only person to blame; I'd often treated Larry more as a father figure than husband in our marriage. On the eve of our divorce, I called to apologize and asked him if he, too, had second thoughts. To my surprise, Larry admitted he missed me and the girls. But he felt the best thing to do at this point was to finalize the divorce, then start over from scratch.

"Just go ahead and sign the papers; don't worry that the child support is low. This will only be temporary," Larry offered. He even suggested we seek Christian counseling before we remarried. When I asked him about Marie, he said she was history, but he did admit there was a new lady in his life, Lisa. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll end that right now." I signed the divorce papers fully believing Larry.

Sadly, everything Larry said to me was a lie. A few days later, I saw him leaving a local gym arm-in-arm with Lisa. He had no intention of breaking up with her and remarrying me; he'd tricked me at my most vulnerable moment into accepting a small pittance in child support.

Lisa, a freshly divorced woman with a five-year-old son, knew I'd tried to get Larry back, so she began to harass me. I never knew what to expect when I opened my front door. A blonde, statuesque bodybuilder, Lisa once stood on my porch in a string bikini with her arm around Larry. Another time, right after she and Larry married, Lisa flashed her rings in my face and shouted obscenities. "You better start treating me nice because I'll be watching your children!"

As our battles waged, Larry sat passively in the car. Occasionally, he sent Lisa in his place to pick up Terri, now almost 4, and Rachel, 18 months old, for visitation. Lisa became so verbally abusive, it wasn't unusual for me to call law enforcement officials to remove her from my property. I'm sure my neighbors enjoyed watching the three-ring circus in my front yard, but I saw no humor in it; my hatred toward them both was venomous.

Realizing I'd never get my fairy-tale life back, I ran straight to worldly adventures—and away from God. I was mad at him for allowing my marriage to crumble. In my mind, I had no recourse but to ignore God.

Every other weekend, when Larry had the girls, I went to nightclubs and



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anesthetized my pain by drinking and dancing. One Friday night after I'd gotten home late, I was startled when my best friend's husband came knocking. As if my world wasn't chaotic enough, Rick admitted he was in love with me. Appalled, I threw him out of my house. But he was relentless. Tired of fighting, I thought, If you can't beat them, join them. After having an affair for a couple months, I thought I loved Rick and could be semi-happy with him. On the other hand, I was plagued with guilt.

I finally telephoned a trusted friend and shared the details of my illicit affair. Sarah listened, then we prayed. She encouraged me to end it with Rick, but I wasn't ready. But Sarah wouldn't leave me alone. One night when I was leaving to meet Rick, she called. I wasn't in the mood for a sermon, but she gave me one anyway. She said sternly, "What makes you think you won't suffer consequences for what you're doing?"

In my defense, I said, "Rick makes a lot of money. He can provide the best of everything for me and my girls."

Sarah asked lovingly, "Don't you think God is big enough to do that?" Her simple yet profound question was the beginning of my awakening; I called Rick and ended the affair, as well as my year-long walk on the wild side.

Finally the day arrived when as part of the divorce settlement, I had to surrender possession of my custom-built home to Larry and Lisa. God proved his love by allowing me to purchase another house and by leading me to a part-time job. I changed churches and started attending a larger one with a strong singles program in downtown Houston. In a Bible study class I met William. He thought he'd met the sweetest person on earth. Why shouldn't he? I smiled constantly, sang hymns, and prayed with him. The truth was, I was just going through the motions. But William loved me so tenderly that I agreed to marry him after only a three-month courtship.

Just when I thought I'd swept my ugly past under the rug, Rick's wife called in the middle of the night to tell me she knew of my betrayal. After that horrendous phone call, I had to come clean with my husband of four weeks. I was consumed with shame and guilt, and thought I had to punish myself for the affair. Although I knew better, it seemed too easy to believe Jesus' blood could pardon such a repulsive sin. William reminded me I'd been forgiven—by Jesus and him—and that neither would ever leave me. His steadfast love gave me such a spectacular picture of Christ. But I still wondered why I felt so much inner turmoil.

God revealed the answer: I had too much unforgiveness in my heart. I knew he wanted me to forgive the entire cast of characters in my nightmare. I began with Marie and Larry. While it was difficult, I managed to forgive them. Then God said clearly, "Forgive Lisa."



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I struggled with that command; it was the hardest thing I'd ever tried to do. God knew this, so he had a former neighbor call me. She said, "I know you hate Lisa, but listen to this. Yesterday, Rachel fell off her bicycle and scraped her knees. Lisa ran and picked her up and carried her all the way home." With tears in my eyes, I thought, *There must be some good in Lisa, or she wouldn't have done that.*

I mailed Lisa a card, thanking her for comforting Rachel. In the months that followed, I made several such gestures. Some days, I was happy with my headway, but others, I wept bitterly; I wasn't ready to be forgiving—especially when I went to pick up my children at my former home.

Despite these painful setbacks, I asked God to give me the ability to love Lisa. He began to answer that prayer by flooding me with compassion. About a year later, I was able to ask myself, *How can I hate her? She was created in God's image.* When I started focusing on Lisa's positive attributes and how much God loved her, hatred began to drop off me like dead scales.

Initially Lisa questioned my motives. "Are you just trying to get more child support? It won't work!" But I didn't let her skepticism stop me from loving her.

When I heard she was recuperating from surgery, I took her a meal, as well as a daily Scripture calendar. I received a phone call from her a few days later, urgently asking me to come over before Larry got home. In a flash I was at her side. "Why are you so good to me—after all I've done to you? No one's ever loved me like you do." That was my invitation to tell her about Jesus and his plan of salvation. Sobbing, Lisa asked, "How can I know Jesus?" Blinking back tears, I said, "We'll say a prayer and you can invite him to be the leader of your life." On our knees in my old living room, I led Lisa as she prayed for God's forgiveness. Then I held my new sister in Christ in my arms as we wept together.

For one year I disciplined Lisa, which included attending a weekly women's Bible study. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world for us to sit together and talk about Jesus. Larry was glad our war was over—but suspicious about our friendship. Lisa was disheartened that Larry wasn't interested in rededicating his life, but her joy was contagious when her now 10-year-old son became a Christian. When Larry realized Lisa's love for God was intensifying, he became irritable with me. At this point, he'd been married to Lisa for five years, and in his opinion I should have been long gone. I agreed; it was time for me to fade out of sight. Lisa knew it, too. One solemn night she and I held hands, prayed, and parted.

Since that experience with Lisa, God moved me to reach out to people consumed with the bitterness of divorce. The next thing I knew, I found myself as a facilitator of DivorceCare at our church.



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While I was speaking one night, God told me to confess my affair. I argued that it was a skeleton I wanted to keep hidden. But God showed me I'd been telling half-truths in class when I recounted how Larry and his lovers tormented me, but omitted the role I played in damaging a marriage myself. In humble obedience, I exposed my shame to the class. Cleansing tears flowed all evening from people who identified with my sin. They stood in line to thank me for being honest.

God reminds me occasionally that I'm like an olive tree. Olives have many uses but are used most effectively when they're crushed. I thank God daily for the crushing that enables me to share with wounded souls that with God's help, their hearts can beat with love again—just like mine.

*\*Names have been changed.*

*Kathy Pierce, a freelance writer, lives in Texas. This article first appeared in the September/October 2000 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Thought Provokers

*—In what ways might forgiving someone in your life open up unexpected relationships?*

*—If you harbor bitterness toward someone, how can you release that through forgiveness?*



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# Forgiving the Dead Man Walking

**What would it take for crime survivor Debbie Morris to finally find peace?**

*by Jane Johnson Struck*

At age 16, Debbie (then Cuevas) of Madisonville, Louisiana, and her boyfriend, Mark Brewster, were sitting in a parked car one hot summer night when they were abducted at gunpoint by career criminals Robert Willie and Joe Vaccaro. Several hours into the kidnapping, a gun-whipped Mark was led into deserted woods near the Alabama state line, tortured, shot, slashed, and left for dead. But the ride of terror continued for Debbie, who never knew from moment to moment if she would live or die. For a total of 30 hours, Debbie was repeatedly raped by her captors. Throughout that time, she also picked up some chilling clues that led her to believe they had brutally murdered a young woman several days before—Faith Hathaway.

It's the Hathaway murder that provided the backdrop for the 1995 award-winning movie, *Dead Man Walking*, with actor Sean Penn playing the Robert Willie character and Susan Sarandon as Willie's Death-Row spiritual advisor, Sister Helen Prejean. But unlike the movie victims and the real-life Faith Hathaway, Debbie, miraculously, was released. Her survival enabled authorities to save Mark's life—and her testimony enabled the State of Louisiana to put an end to Robert Willie's.

Unlike Mark, whose wounds were readily visible, Debbie's wounds were less apparent. The strength she'd developed as the child of divorced parents and an alcoholic mother had aided in her survival, but now it masked her fear, depression, and smoldering anger against Robert Willie, her mother, and even the God she'd committed her life to as a teen. "I felt abandoned by God," Debbie admits. "It took me years to realize I'd abandoned him."

That realization—and her journey toward forgiveness—hasn't been without its detours. A former public school special education teacher who's on hiatus and a MOPS (Mother of Preschoolers) coordinator for her local church, Debbie articulately tackles questions about God's grace, goodness, and power over evil in this interview.



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### **Why do you think so many people are drawn to your story?**

The mainstream media's attracted to my story because of the movie Dead Man Walking. That's fine with me, because the movie is a connection to my story. Then they see the word forgiving in my book title. I can't tell you how many times an interviewer has said, "Forgiving? Most people wouldn't even consider that. How could you?" They're intrigued by the concept of forgiveness.

### **Especially in light of how heinous the crime was ...**

Yes. People are always surprised to find out what happened to me. They're usually blown away. That's a compliment, because it shows me I've overcome my past. When people see I survived—and have a happy, productive life—they're given hope they, too, will be able to overcome tragedy.

### **Isn't the world hungry for that?**

I think so. Look at some of the unexplained tragedies we've gone through over the last couple years—the Oklahoma City bombing, the school shootings. People try to explain away evil—but sometimes they can't. So where do they go from there?

I've been pleased with some of the opportunities the mainstream media's given me to talk about the source of my ability to forgive and experience peace. Of course, they edit out an awful lot!

### **All the God stuff, right? Weren't you a Christian before the kidnapping?**

I was 14 when I accepted Christ at a church camp in North Carolina. There salvation was explained to me in a way I could finally relate to.

When I was nine, my parents divorced. When I was in junior high, Mom went through her second divorce, and I started attending church with my best friend, Kay, because they had a large, active youth group. There were families there, intact families who'd have the youth group over to their house. I'd walk into their house and say, "Wow, this is what normal is."

I grew to realize my unhappiness in life wasn't because my parents were divorced, my mother was an alcoholic, or the money was tight. It was that I needed Christ. And by asking him into my heart, I could change my life and experience peace regardless of my circumstances. He had a plan for my life! It was the answer to the turmoil I'd felt as a child.

Unfortunately, it's hard for faith to mature without the support of family. Mom was single at the time, and she never went to church or got to know my youth group friends' parents. She felt awkward.

### **Was that hard for you?**

Actually, it was sort of nice not having a mom who looked over my shoulder every step of the way. I liked bossing my younger brother and sister around, holding



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things together. It made me feel significant. But even though I didn't realize it, I desperately wanted boundaries. Mom went out on the weekends and didn't know when I came home, so I started to test the limits. That's around the time I started dating Mark.

### **Then this awful thing happened.**

Right.

### **How did this trauma impact your fledgling faith?**

People told me it was a miracle I survived. I thought, *If God really saved me, why did he let me go through the whole horrible experience in the first place?* I felt angry at God; I felt abandoned. I thought God punished me because following him hadn't been the first thing on my mind anymore.

I'd awake at night in a cold sweat from vivid nightmares; I was terrified to go out alone at night. But I didn't voice my concerns to anyone. I even refused to speak to a rape counselor. I felt I had to remain strong. So whenever I was asked how I was doing, I'd immediately answer, "I'm fine."

I tried to be strong for Mark. His condition reminded me of a stroke victim. I felt guilty for the physical suffering he'd endured that I'd escaped. I visited Mark, drove him to his physical therapy, coached him with his speech. Sometimes I wanted to scream, *What about me—I'm hurting, too!* Then I'd scold myself, *What right do you have to feel hurt?* Look at how Mark suffered. I started feeling trapped by the expectations Mark and his family placed on me to remain a part of his life. Eventually I told Mark I needed a break, that I couldn't come over anymore. I felt incredibly selfish and guiltier than I ever remembered feeling.

I felt I'd let Mark down, but I was determined that I wasn't going to do the same with the police and prosecutors. Through the next several years of trials (including testifying in front of a mocking, leering Robert Willie), I convinced everyone I was fine. But I wasn't.

### **Is that the toll rape takes?**

It's difficult to explain to someone who's never been raped what rape takes away from you. Not only did it rob me of something sacred that should have been mine to give away, it robbed me of my self-worth, confidence, and security—the very things you depend on to live a normal life.

For 30 hours, I'd lost total control of my body and my life, and I was angry about it. But I didn't want to acknowledge that anger.

### **Did your fear and anger abate when Robert Willie was executed?**

Mostly I felt numb. I had trouble sleeping; the thought of someone dying who hated me so much troubled me. But I realized it might be just as bad for him to die with me hating him. I knew I needed to do something to get rid of my pain, anger,



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and shame.

The night of his execution, as I lay in bed in the dark, I told God I forgave Robert Willie. It was a selfish, practical, desperate, I-need-to-get-through-this sort of thing. After that prayer, I immediately felt a burden lift. But I didn't realize I still needed to forgive for other reasons and at a deeper level. Forgiveness was an event, I thought, not an ongoing process.

It didn't bring the closure I expected. The thing I thought I'd fixed still wasn't. And that led me to a lot of poor choices.

### **Such as?**

Because of the rape, I felt like damaged goods. I always thought people would look at me and see the faces of Robert Willie and Joseph Vaccaro, think about what they did to me, then instantly be disgusted by me. I wondered if others would ever find me valuable again. I didn't place importance on virginity anymore; that choice had been taken away from me.

I also suffered from depression. I lashed out at family members and started drinking, despite everything I knew about alcoholism, about how it devastates families. My drinking dulled the pain. When I drank, I didn't feel as fearful.

Finally, at age 24, I checked myself into a 30-day treatment program in a Baton Rouge hospital. There I was told I was full of suppressed anger and resentment. After treatment, I discovered it had been easier for me to forgive Robert Willie than to forgive my mother and God.

### **Why your mom?**

I've never doubted my mom loves me. But I'd always had a problem with her sense of priorities. For instance, she wasn't home when I went to my prom. Nothing will stand in my way—I'll be ready with the camera—when my daughter, Courtney, goes to her first prom.

When I was a high-school sophomore, I was inducted into the honor society. My mom went on a date instead of being there that night to see me be recognized as one of the 10 most outstanding sophomores in my school.

Little things like that built up before my kidnapping. I was already angry at my mom for not being the kind of mom I wanted her to be.

The night I was kidnapped, my mom was out on a date. She just assumed I got home safe and was spending the night with my grandparents, who lived next to us. I was angry because she didn't know until the next day I was gone. But she was devastated by what happened to me, so I didn't want to compound her pain by saying, "I feel like you failed me. I feel like if you'd been the mom who stayed at



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home and didn't go out on dates, it wouldn't have happened."

I harbored that anger for a long time. But I finally realized I needed to accept my mom as she was.

### What was the turning point?

When I got treatment for alcohol abuse. I always said I'd never become like that. Then I realized I was like that. When I came to grips with my alcoholism, I knew I could forgive my mom and her obsession with her addictions. God was softening my heart.

### Did she ever ask for your forgiveness?

Yes, she did. But when I forgave her, I didn't expect that everything would change. When somebody has a history of doing things that hurt you, she can't just say, "Okay, I'm never going to do that anymore." You're like, *Yeah, sure.*

### There's no trust there.

Right. Trust has to be rebuilt in little ways first, then in bigger ways. Let's say you have a husband who's been unfaithful. You're finally going to divorce him, but then he says, "From this day forward I'm going to be faithful." You're not going to trust him until you've seen that trust restored in tangible ways. If your husband's still faithful while you're separated, you move back into the house but not into the bedroom. If he's still faithful during that time, eventually you make the big move. You see he's faithful when you go on vacation or visit relatives. Those are all opportunities for him to make compensation. And that's been happening with my mom and me.

### How did you make peace with God?

I made a conscious decision to rededicate my life to God about four years ago. My husband, Brad, and I were living in Louisiana at the time, right after Conner was born. During this time, we were dealing with some significant issues—*Dead Man Walking* was being released, and Brad was commuting. We were having some problems in our marriage—nothing serious, but just things we hadn't faced before.

Whenever we were in church, our Sunday school lesson or the worship service had a message that seemed tailor-made for us. After the service, we'd sit in our car; we couldn't even drive away. The messages spoke directly to what we were dealing with. It was so powerful.

That power made me realize God had not abandoned me. Suddenly I realized that if he's here now and cares about all the things that are going on, chances are he was there all along. That's when I finally put my life completely back in his hands.

### And the result?

Since I've totally surrendered to God, I've become much more accepting and loving.



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I'm still strong-willed. I still say what's on my mind. But I don't attack or force my beliefs on people. People who are angry want to pick fights; I used to be like that in private. If you ask the people on the inside—my sister, my mom, my in-laws, my husband even—they've all seen the difference my faith has made.

I know now God forgave me for my bad choices, and he wipes the slate clean. I don't believe in forgive and forget. I don't think it's possible for me to forget what happened to me even though I've been able to forgive Robert Willie. But while God knows all, he treats us as though he's totally forgotten.

I've learned how big God is and how small I am. And I know that if he can forgive me, then who in the world am I to second-guess him?

### **What about the death penalty?**

That's one of those issues where if I could see some clear evidence of what God expected, I'd know on which side to be. But I haven't seen that. Instead, I try to focus on where these people are going to spend eternity. I know that no matter what someone's done, God wants that person to spend eternity with him.

### **Even a Robert Willie?**

Even a Robert Willie.

### **It must be incredibly hard to say that.**

Well, if I say I forgive Robert Willie but don't want to see him in heaven, that's contradictory. If I forgive him the way God expects me to forgive him, I'll want God to win his soul over.

I couldn't have said that when I was 18 or 22. I just wasn't ready. I had to be able to stop looking at it as a victory for Robert Willie and start looking at it as a victory for God. I needed to accept a difficult truth: God loved Robert Willie as much as he loves me.

### **Which seems impossible to fathom.**

It's hard to understand God's grace. Even though the Bible says it has nothing to do with what we deserve, we still tend to think that way.

Jesus' parable about the vineyard workers in Matthew 20 finally put this in perspective for me. I'd heard it many times before. But a few years ago, I applied it to Robert Willie and realized it didn't matter how late in the game he came to Jesus, as long as he came. And if he did, God wanted him every bit as much as he wants me, because he loved him every bit as much.

This has been the final step in my forgiveness. The night he was executed was one step. Then, when I had Conner, I realized Robert Willie, too, was a baby once. Over the years, these things softened my heart little by little so that I was finally



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able to forgive him for what he did. God knew I wouldn't be able to do that right away, so he took me through the process step by step.

### **This gives other people hope they can make it through the process.**

God doesn't expect us to "be there" overnight; he expects us to say, "Okay, I'm willing to start on that journey toward forgiveness."

There was a time I never thought I'd be the type of woman who'd be a MOPS coordinator. So many women in my church don't have all this junk in their past! But knowing I'm important to God keeps me from focusing on my past; instead, I focus on his presence in my life. I look at the incredible husband God's given me, the home we're committed to making for our two beautiful children. That's his way of saying, *You're mine, and you're okay now*. I accept that. And to see God using me in others' lives—that's truly a miracle!

*Jane Johnson Struck is editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article first appeared in the May/June 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Thought Provokers

*—Debbie says it was easier to forgive her rapist than her mother. When have you been surprised by the ease at which you can forgive one person but not another?*

*—Debbie says realizing Robert Willie was a baby once too helped soften her heart toward forgiveness. What thoughts or images might help soften your heart toward some who has hurt you and lead you toward forgiveness?*



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# Ripples of Faith

**A forgotten gesture of forgiveness came back to find her 60 years later.**

by Evelyn Thor

*“Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.” — Ecclesiastes 11:1*

Forgiveness and kindness are never lost nor wasted. Situations and time pass, but sometimes help comes to us from sources we would never expect.

Let me tell you about my friend Martha Johnson, who was having money problems. At 95, she enjoyed good health, other than weakening eyesight and arthritis, which caused her to use a walker. Like many older people, she was alone, and now she had outlived her pension. When we were having coffee together one afternoon, she told me she had been to the bank to talk about taking out a second mortgage on her home. She didn't want to do this, as she wanted to leave the house to her disabled granddaughter who lives in another state.

When I left her that day, I knew she had a serious problem. I couldn't help her financially, but I could support her in prayer. And I did.

A week later she called to tell me that she wouldn't have to mortgage her home. A boy named Billy Hendricks came to see her and gave her \$300, promising to send her \$300 each month for as long as she lived.

“Who is Billy and how did this come about?” I asked. So she told me how it happened.

Sixty years ago she was a young woman living with her husband in a modest home in Chicago. Among their neighbors was a nice family with a 14-year-old boy named Billy.

One day, coming home, she and her husband found their house had been broken into. Their clothes and possessions were strewn about and their furniture in disarray. They had a small radio that was missing. Also gone was a jar of pennies, a flashlight,



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an army jacket, and a small stamp collection.

There was no damage. Only the theft of items which probably cost less than \$100 total. They called the police and went about putting things back in place.

After a few days, a police officer returned to their door to tell them the thief had been caught. To their dismay, it was the neighbor boy, Billy.

Although Martha and her husband didn't want to press charges, a judge decided to send Billy away to a boys' reform school for a year.

Martha was disheartened. She bought a box of Fannie Mae candy and gave it to Billy's mother to bring when she visited him. At Christmas, she sent the book *Stories of Jesus*.

When Billy was finally released from reform school, the family moved away.

Years passed. Sixty years.

A week ago, Martha, now 95, answered her door to find a gray-haired man standing there. "Mrs. Johnson, do you remember me? I'm Billy."

She stared at the man, and seeing a glimmer of her former neighbor boy, she invited him in.

"Billy, is it really you?" Martha asked as she led him to the couch.

"It is."

With tears streaming down their faces, they recalled the incident that took him away from home.

"I was always glad you thought kindly of me, even though you knew it was me who broke into your house. I cherished the book you sent me that Christmas. I had a very rough year, and when I got out, I was determined to study and get ahead in life."

He told her he went to high school after he was released. He then became an apprentice in a machine shop. He advanced there and began taking business courses at night. He married but had no children. His wife died of cancer some years ago. He was now alone. He was recently promoted to vice-president of a steel and wire company in Detroit.

"I was in Chicago, and I wondered if you were still here in the old neighborhood. So when I saw your name in the phone book, I had to come out and see you."



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Drying his eyes, he asked, “By the way, how are finances?”

She hesitated, and then said, “It’s hard. I’ve lived too long. Each night I pray that God will take me.”

“Oh, no. God will take you in his own time.”

He took out his checkbook and wrote a check for \$300.

“Mrs. Johnson, every first of the month I’ll send you a check for \$300. And if there’s a special need, let me know, and I’ll call someone here to take care of it. I’ll be out this way again in December, and I’ll stop by to see you.”

“So you see,” Martha said to me, “I don’t have to get a second mortgage on my home!”

Together we prayed and thanked God for Billy’s gift. We blessed Billy over and over again. A young boy needed forgiveness and kindness, and Martha was there. An old woman needed help, and Billy came.

Forgiveness and kindness are never lost in time, but return to us multiplied.

*Evelyn Thor is a writer living in Illinois. This article first appeared in the January/February 2004 issue of CHRISTIAN READER.*

## Thought Provokers

*—How have you seen your willingness to forgive “pay out” in other areas of your life?*

*—In what ways have you experienced the life-changing aspect of being forgiven by another person?*



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# Unforgiven

**The only antidote to bitterness was something I didn't feel like doing.**

*by Golden Keyes Parsons*

"I need to talk to you," my husband said. I was resting comfortably in our bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed, and I knew from his serious look that something was terribly wrong. My heart began to pound, and I feared some tragedy had taken place.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've kept a secret from you all these years—and it's kept me from being completely open and honest toward you. I want to break the power this secret has held over me—and us."

The words came slowly as he told me he lied to me during our engagement when he told me he was a virgin. I was shocked. I felt betrayed—and I was angry.

Being pure when we married was important to me. What angered me more, though, was that he'd lied about it for 35 years. I wanted to lash out and hurt him as much as he'd hurt me.

I grabbed one of his favorite shirts and shook it in his face. "You don't deserve to wear this shirt any longer." The shirt bore the logo of the Promise Keepers men's association, "Men of Integrity." I threw it in the top of my closet.

Later, as my anger cooled, I remembered a few years earlier when I'd hurt my husband deeply—a time when I'd become emotionally involved with another man. My husband chose to forgive me. I knew I had to do the same for him. I just didn't want to.

How could he do this to me? Especially when I trusted him? I thought about how Jesus told us to forgive so that we will be forgiven (Luke 6:37). But nothing was going to change my attitude toward my husband.



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As Father's Day approached, God continued to deal with me. Finally, I realized our marriage couldn't overcome this obstacle until I chose to forgive. Asking God for strength, I tearfully took the shirt from the closet, wrapped it, and gave it to him. He cried with relief as we embraced.

I was surprised by how that simple act doused my anger and flooded my heart with forgiveness. And we moved on with our lives.

### Emotions Follow Actions

I had to choose to forgive my husband even before I felt forgiveness. Though still angry and hurt, I had a responsibility to forgive. The apostle Paul writes, "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:12–13).

Every Christian knows about the importance of forgiveness. It's an expectation: just forgive; you're supposed to forgive. But what happens when it becomes difficult to forgive? It doesn't even have to be over something big, such as infidelity. What if it's over the annoying little habits or seemingly stupid things your spouse continues to do or not do?

How do we truly forgive our spouses when they offend us? What does forgiveness look like in practical, everyday life? In marriage we find an opportunity to learn to forgive a myriad of hurts, large and small. In *Sacred Marriage*, author Gary Thomas writes, "One of marriage's primary purposes is to teach us how to forgive."

At a conference several years ago, I was talking to a woman who'd been physically abused throughout the course of her marriage. She was now divorced but still having trouble forgiving her ex-husband. I explained that in the Bible the word for *forgiveness* means to abandon, to send away, leave alone. True forgiveness is a releasing. I don't have to wait until I feel like forgiving. That may never happen. Instead, I must choose to forgive. God will deal with whatever else needs to be done. When someone first shared that insight with me, I felt a tremendous sense of relief. And as I shared it with this new divorcée, her eyes filled with tears. She realized forgiving her ex-husband didn't mean condoning his behavior, it meant releasing him so God could deal with him.

Bitterness and unforgiveness are two of the most difficult issues many of us deal with in marriage. Ordinary annoyances that occur in every marriage can cause anger and frustration—such as when your spouse interrupts you during a conversation or forgets to pay a bill. These small irritations can grow into mountainous obstacles if we don't deal with them daily. But if we make forgiveness a habit, even for the little things, it will be much easier to forgive the big ones.



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Anger can be toxic. If we don't take care of it, it can turn inward and become bitterness. The apostle Paul says, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). Our bodies aren't equipped to handle residual anger: harboring anger and bitterness takes a toll on us psychologically and physically. It causes undue stress and physical illness.

In the October 27, 1997, issue of *Archives of Internal Medicine*, the editors asked physicians, "What specific personality characteristic causes physical illness?" Their answer: anger.

God didn't design our bodies to carry the venom of anger, unforgiveness, and bitterness. He designed us to live in peace and harmony with our mates, which can only occur through forgiveness.

In everyday living, when our hearts are bleeding, our emotions are bruised, and our sense of justice screams for revenge, how do we exercise true forgiveness?

**Confront.** There is a time, a place, and a way to confront the offense (Mark 11:25). Though immediately confronting my husband with his shirt made me feel better, it wasn't the best time or way to handle my anger. My hurt was still too fresh. Pray before you speak, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your words and thoughts. Once you've spoken your peace, let God take over. He does a much better job of convicting and convincing.

**Let it go.** Every time you remember that offense or frustration, pray that God will help you forgive, and then determine not to dwell on it. In *Steps to Freedom in Christ*, Dr. Neil Anderson writes, forgiveness is "a crisis of the will. Since God requires us to forgive, it is something we can do. You will let [the offender] off the hook, but [that person is] never off God's. He will deal with them fairly, something we cannot do." Not until we're obedient and choose to forgive will we experience the freedom forgiveness offers.

**Remember how God forgives us.** Whenever I get upset by something my husband does and I want to hold onto that pain and anger, God reminds me of how completely he has forgiven me. I think about Jesus hanging on the cross, crucified to remove my sins. Put in that perspective, I realize I can forgive others.

**Bless your spouse.** When you remember the offense, pray that God would bless your mate. Avoid criticizing. Determine to give up any dishonor, scorn, or reproach toward that person. Forego any critical conversation about that issue. Release it.

Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. Dr. Anderson says God doesn't expect us to have "spiritual amnesia." While we can't control what we can or can't forget, we can control what we do with that memory.



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If you still have trouble forgiving, seek a trusted, mature friend or a Christian counselor who can help you walk through those steps.

How do we practice forgiveness in marriage? We choose to forgive our mate as Jesus forgave us. We choose to release the offense. We choose to believe the truth of the Word of God—that he will heal our wounds over the painful shouts of our emotions. The Holy Spirit will help us as we make it a matter of will. As we walk in obedience to God’s command to forgive, eventually we’ll find ourselves truly free from bitterness.

*Golden Keyes Parsons, a freelance author, Bible teacher, and speaker, lives in New Mexico. This article first appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.*

## Thought Provokers

*—How might forgiveness improve your health?*

*—Golden writes, “It doesn’t even have to be over something big, such as infidelity. What if it’s over the annoying little habits or seemingly stupid things your spouse continues to do or not do?” Do you find it more or less difficult to forgive the “stupid things”? Why?*





# Finding Forgiveness

**High-school sophomore Missy Jenkins thought her school was safe—until one day in December. Here's her story.**

*by Missy Jenkins as told to Kay Lawing Gupton*

Looking back, December 1, 1997, began like any other school day—nothing out of the ordinary. My hair in ponytails, I wore a pair of sweatpants and a black Adidas t-shirt with a white long-sleeved shirt over it. My twin, Mandy, and I planned to do our homework after school, like always. Then I was going to study my driver's handbook so I could earn my permit on December 24, our birthday.

Mandy and I had started our sophomore year at Heath High School with the typical classes taken by most of our classmates: world civilization, algebra, journalism, English, choir, band. As Christians, we'd also started going to a morning prayer group.

But at about 7:45 that morning, as our group of 35 students finished our devotional, a classmate, Michael Carneal, started shooting. At first, Mandy and I both thought it was a staged stunt. The gun pop sounded fake, like on TV. But when a bullet flew through Mandy's hair, she knew it was real. Mandy threw herself on top of me to protect me.

I'd been shot, but I didn't realize it right away. I wasn't aware of any pain, just a sensation of pressure. I felt as though I'd been knocked down. I was completely stunned, confused, in shock; I couldn't believe what had just happened. In fact, it's still unbelievable to me—even after these long months.

After the shooting, the ambulance took me to Lourdes Hospital, which is near the school. The doctors told me the bullet entered my left shoulder and damaged my spinal cord. As a result, I'm paralyzed from the waist down. They told me I'll never walk again.

I was sick a lot my first week at Lourdes—nausea, fluid on my lungs, swelling around my spinal cord. Once all that improved, they started my therapy. First was the tilt table to get me used to being upright again. Then I began exercises to



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strengthen my arms and upper body.

At first, dressing myself took 45 minutes. Trying to learn how to do everything again, to be normal, was so hard it made me sick or wore me out. I also started learning how to get around in a wheelchair.

Then in February, I went to Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital in Lexington, 260 miles away, to continue specialized therapy. I was glad my family went with me—my mom, Joyce, my dad, Ray, my older sister, Christie, and Mandy—and rented an apartment. I began daily physical therapy, including aerobic exercises to get my heart rate up. One of these was the arm bike, which is exactly what you would do with your feet, except it's done with your arms to strengthen them.

Another daily event was occupational therapy. There I learned how to transfer myself from my wheelchair to the bathtub and to put on my shoes.

The best of my daily therapies was recreational therapy. I got to play basketball, throw Frisbees, and swim. I also had to stand for a half-hour each day, so Mandy and I would play cards to pass the time.

Thankfully, I got to leave Cardinal Hill in time to go home and finish my sophomore year at Heath. Physical therapy continued every day—even at school. The therapists came to school at 11 a.m. to help me stretch my legs. Sitting in the wheelchair for a long time makes them stiff.

Being back at school felt comfortable because everybody treated me as though the wheelchair wasn't there. But the hardest part of being back at home and in school is getting around in my wheelchair. It's more frustrating than I expected. Most places aren't wheelchair-accessible. Houses are hard to get through. Doors are narrow and hard to open. I've had to figure out ways to do steps. Our house has a gravel driveway, and it's very difficult to move a wheelchair in gravel. Things that once were easy are now hard. I never even thought about them before.

I have, however, thought about Michael and wondered why he decided to shoot us. Mandy and I both knew him; we'd been in band with him—ridden the same bus several times on trips. Joked with him. I remember when he got a button machine and began making up slogans and pictures for buttons that he wore to school. One day, just as a joke, his button had our picture on it. So we made our own button for the next day with his picture on it. We had a lot of the same friends. Everybody knows everybody at Heath. None of us thought Michael was odd or dangerous or anything like that.

Michael took so much from so many that day. But I believe hating him is wasted emotion. I know it isn't what Jesus would do. And I'm not the one to judge him or decide what should happen to him. It's for God to do the judging. Besides, hating



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Michael won't make me walk or bring my schoolmates—Kayce, Jessica, and Nicole—back to life. Their deaths still seem unreal. I saw Nicole shot, and that scene will never leave me.

Of the three, I was closest to Kayce. I think about her every day, especially when I'm alone in my room. I don't dwell on the day of the shooting, but on the happy times we shared—parties, band, friends. I know all three are in heaven, but that doesn't keep me from missing Kayce. Nothing happens without a reason—even this—so God will somehow make good come from it. I believe that.

I do feel sorry for Michael. Unlike him, I can get on with my life. I have lots of friends supporting me every day. I will live my life and be happy. I'm not mad at him. I can forgive him. I just wish I knew why he felt he had to do it. I've heard different reasons from people in the media and friends at school, but the words haven't come from him, so I'm not sure.

My family and I have been surprised at the attention the media has focused on us. They especially want to know how we could forgive him. But as Christians, it's what God expects us to do. Besides, I've always had a hard time being mad at someone. It's a whole lot easier to forgive than to be mad. I would really hate the feeling of carrying an awful grudge in my heart.

I also feel this happened for a reason. A lot of people have told me my good attitude has been an inspiration to them. I think that's my purpose.

God's helped me in so many ways. First, he gave me a loving, supportive family, including my sister, Mandy. We love being twins. We always have someone to talk to, especially if something goes wrong. We finish each other's sentences. We know what the other's thinking, almost as though we're the same person in two bodies. Before, I'd kind of watch after Mandy at school. I'm more responsible. If I didn't keep the lunch money, she'd lose it! Before the shooting, I did more for her, like wash her clothes. Now it seems like she does more for me.

Mandy once told a reporter she wished she'd been injured instead of me. But I'm glad I didn't do anything different that day. I'm glad I didn't change anything for fear it would have been Mandy who was hurt.

God's helped me through the kindness of so many people, even ones I don't know. Some of them come to work every day on the addition to our house so I can have some space that's wheelchair-accessible. People send contributions to the trust fund for my medical expenses. A group of car dealers gave us a new conversion van equipped with a wheelchair lift, and they plan to fix it with hand-operated brakes so I can drive it when I get my license. Students sent me a laptop computer, and my hospital room was filled with cards, balloons, stuffed animals, posters, and flowers. But most important, many people have prayed for me.



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Of course I want to walk again, but when I pray, that's the last thing I pray for. I pray for everyone else who's coping with what's going on in the world, but especially I pray for my mom because she's in a wheelchair, too. She has arthritis. So all the changes people are helping us make on our home will help her, too.

I also pray for patience, because sometimes I'm not as patient as I wish I were. I was watching a tape of the choir last year and saw myself singing and dancing. I was really upset that I missed this year. I wanted to do it again. It's hard to realize I may never walk—or dance—again.

I plan to keep praying I'll get through this; I'll try my hardest and not give up. I saw people at the rehabilitation hospital who had given up. It just made their situation more difficult. They didn't get any better. I'll keep working hard and praying. I'll give it time, and something will happen.

Because of this experience, I'm a whole lot stronger than I ever knew I was. Maybe I've grown up. I always thought something like this would never happen to me, but it did. The most important lesson I've learned through all this is to never stop believing there is a God. Things like this are going to happen, but he will help us through them. Always remember that.

*Kay Lawing Gupton is a freelance writer, writing instructor, and high school counselor. She and her husband live in Kentucky. This article first appeared in the September/October 1998 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Thought Provokers

*—Missy writes she has an easier time forgiving than staying mad. Can you relate to this? Why or why not?*

*—In what ways has God used a situation in which you forgave someone who hurt you deeply to grow your faith?*

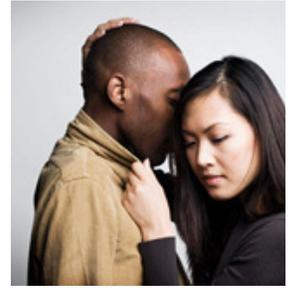


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Resources

Books and websites to help you further

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# Books to Help You Further

*Choosing Forgiveness: Your Journey to Freedom* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss (Moody Publishers, 2006; 224 pages). Offering real-life stories of “impossible forgiveness,” DeMoss shares proven, practical steps to help you repair relationships with spouses, family members, co-workers, and others.

*The Gift of Forgiveness* by Charles Stanley (Thomas Nelson, 2002; 175 pages). In this book, Dr. Stanley addresses such issues as how to practice a life of forgiveness in terms of relationships and how to make forgiveness an ongoing, practical experience.

*Forgive and Forget* by Lewis Smedes (HarperCollins, 1996; 176 pages). Breaking down the process of healing into four stages and offering stories of real people’s experience throughout, this wise book provides hope and solace for all who long for the peace that comes with forgiveness.

*Road to Forgiveness: Hearts Shattered by Tragedy, Transformed by Love* (Thomas Nelson, 2001; 224 pages). This book is the story of how Cindy and Bill Griffiths came to forgive—and eventually befriend—the woman who, while driving drunk, killed their daughter, Robyn, and Cindy’s mother, Janice, in a horrible automobile accident in June 1996.

*The New Freedom of Forgiveness* (Revised & Expanded) by David Augsberger (Moody Publishers, 2000; 192 pages). Combining personal testimonies with scriptural insight, Augsberger explores love, prejudice, anger, and other emotions, showing you what God requires and how to apply the lessons of forgiveness to everyday life.

*To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* by Michael McCullough, Steven Sandage, Everett Worthington (InterVarsity Press, 1997). Grounding their analysis and advice in the latest psychological research, the authors of *To Forgive Is Human* reveal how we can forgive and begin to repair broken relationships.

