

## CHAPTER 9

# DEFINING FORGIVENESS

*Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*

—Genesis 50:19–20

In light of Joseph's response, this may be the right place to begin to construct a definition of forgiveness. Considering all I have said so far, it is obvious that there is no simple sound bite definition. Part of the problem is that true forgiveness can only occur in a specific context. To define it outside of that context turns it into something else. But even in its proper context, the substance of forgiveness can be confusing.

The context of forgiveness consists of two pre-existing conditions. First, there has to be repentance on the part of the offender and second, there has to be a substantial amount of healing on the part of the victim. These two conditions need to be in place before forgiveness can occur. Thus they are not the same as forgiveness nor do they produce forgiveness on their own. Rather, they set the stage for forgiveness. Repentance will be discussed in the next chapter, but here I want to emphasize that true forgiveness can only occur when the victim has experienced substantial healing.\* Following God's example (who is eternally intact), the victim must approach any attempt at forgiveness from a position of strength or health. God does not forgive to be healed of anything. He does not forgive unilaterally in order to avoid physical and emotional symptoms. In fact, Scripture shows over and over again that God forgives for the sake of the offender, that is, His forgiveness is other-centered. Furthermore, He does not seek to lower His blood pressure by passively accepting that sin happens. Instead, He actively pursues those who have sinned in order that He may forgive them. So His forgiveness is active, not passive.

## THE ROLE OF HEALING

Thus, if healing is a prerequisite to forgiveness, what constitutes healing? I would suggest first that if a victim is going to actually reengage an offender, the victim must first have achieved some sense of safety, that is, a belief and assurance that the offender can no longer hurt her. At a basic level, this safety would require physical security. Physical security may include but not be limited to establishing boundaries, limiting contact, moving to a safe environment, restraining orders, police protection, or even individual personal steps such as taking a self-defense class or buying and learning how to use a gun.

While establishing physical safety can reasonably protect against further physical damage, it is perhaps the emotional damage to which the victim remains most vulnerable,

and which is harder to repair. As mentioned earlier, persistent nonrepentance effectively sustains the damage of the original trauma or offense. Add to this the fresh damage that can occur when a victim naïvely seeks to confront her perpetrator without taking proper protective measures. This is another reason why repentance is so important. Even with repentance, the response might be mixed, but without repentance, the victim is assured of a hostile response. Excuses, denial, and blame-shifting all serve to protect the offender at the expense of the victim. These defense mechanisms also attempt to challenge the victim's radar so as to shift the focus from the original offense to the victim's ability to see straight. If the victim is not prepared for this fresh attack, she can easily spiral back into a vortex of shame and self-contempt (which leaves the offender relatively unchallenged).

This is why confronting from a place of health is so important. If the victim has processed her own damaging cognitive reframes and learned to trust her own radar again, she is in a much stronger position to face her offender. Now his words of justifying and blame-shifting merely roll off of her to no effect. His words are powerless to hurt her any more. Because she has new armor and her radar is back online, she is no longer vulnerable to his verbal assaults. She can effectively "turn the other cheek."

As important as both physical and emotional safety is, substantial healing involves much more than just living a life of self-protection. Even if the victim never has to face her offender again, she still has to process the injustice of the original act and the constant temptation to reinterpret the world in ways that only serve to damage her soul further. The fact that the offender appears to have gotten away with his sin still haunts (and damages) the victim unless and until the victim comes to some kind of faith that justice will one day be served. This is where the promise of Romans 12:19 provides great assurance and comfort: "*Vengeance is mine; I will repay,*" says the Lord" (emphasis added). This is the validation by the higher Judge spoken of in Chapter 5. Believing that God will one day execute justice takes the burden of understanding it all now off of the victim's shoulders. Now the victim knows that her offender's reprieve is only temporary, and with that knowledge she can entrust justice to God and refocus her energy into her own health.

This is also where praying through the imprecatory psalms mentioned in Chapters 6 and 7 can play a key role. Crying out for justice to the all-powerful God of the universe who sees everything and keeps score can be of great comfort to the victim. Knowing that God hates sin more than anyone, emboldens the victim to pray that God would render a just verdict in her case. This includes pleading with God to specifically judge her offender.

Finally, once protection is in place and future justice is assured, there slowly emerges a desire for the offender to repent. This is often a significant turning point in healing as the victim shifts from an exclusive preoccupation with her own healing to a desire for the offender's healing, via repentance and forgiveness.

## CLOSING IN ON A DEFINITION

Assuming everything else is in place (repentance, safety, healing, etc.), there still remains

the definition of forgiveness. What does it really mean when someone says “I forgive you”? When I teach this material in class, I often challenge the students to come up with a synonym for the word “forgive” in the statement “I forgive you.” This exercise is usually more difficult than the students expect. They are often better at defining what it does *not* mean, such as denial, cheap grace, naïve restoration of relationship, and so on; but when pressed, they have difficulty constructing a positive definition of the word. Often because of the popularity of the unilateral forgiveness view, the best they can come up with is some version of “let it go.”

## NO LONGER NEED TO FEAR

If we return to the story of Joseph, I believe we get a good clue as to what is involved in genuine forgiveness. Joseph’s words to his brothers in Genesis 50 reveal what is often the primary need of those who seek to be forgiven. They need the fear of punishment to go away. Once an offender is finally struck with what he did and the response it deserves, there is often, along with repentance, a sense of grief, self-contempt, and fear. He knows that he has charged up a debt to his victim (and God) that he cannot realistically pay off. Grief comes from knowing he made a wrong decision. Self-contempt often follows when he sees his offense for what it was and stops defending himself. In light of what he did there is a subsequent revulsion with his very person. He begins to wonder how he could ever commit such an offense, and what it says about him. Finally, there is the fear that he will be exposed, judged, and sentenced. Initially this fear relates to the victim but ultimately, the offender is afraid of the court trial in which the victim will only be a witness. It is the judge who will eventually pass sentence and this is something to genuinely be afraid of if the offender is guilty. This is what the victim has been praying for all along (through language similar to that in the imprecatory psalms). In response to all of these fears, Joseph says to his brothers, “Fear not” (v. 19). Joseph’s primary goal in this discussion was clearly directed toward reassuring his brothers that, once and for all, their fears were no longer necessary.

Several stories from Jesus’s life reinforce this idea that part of genuine forgiveness is to consider the emotional state of the repentant offender. During one of His first preaching and healing ministries around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was presented with a man who is described as a paralytic (Matt. 9:1–7; Mark 2:3–12). While it is not exactly clear what this man was suffering from, it is obvious that he could not even move, as his friends were required to get him anywhere close to Jesus. But when Jesus met him, He did not immediately heal him. Instead He said to the man, in effect, “Cheer up, your sins are forgiven.” Apparently in this case, Jesus thought the man’s need for forgiveness was much more pressing than his need to be healed. Thus, He granted him forgiveness. But this forgiveness was prefaced by the encouraging imperative, “Cheer up.” If the man still could not walk at this time, what was there to cheer up about? Apparently, Jesus could see that this man had a deeper fear than never walking again.

Similarly, when a woman whom everyone recognized as a “sinner” (Luke 7:37) came to Jesus and assumed the role of a servant (an indication of her repentance) by anointing His

feet with perfume and her tears, Jesus did not recoil but rather blessed her with two wonderful promises. After exposing the nonrepentance of the other sinners at the table (vv. 40–47), Jesus turned to the woman and said, “Your sins have been forgiven” (v. 48). The verb is a perfect passive in Greek and could be translated, “Your sins stand forgiven and this forgiveness will continue to have an ongoing impact on you.” This was great news for the woman. The huge debt she had racked up (and could never pay off in several lifetimes) was all paid in full. After the other sinners (who were still in debt) interrupted Jesus with a challenge to His identity (v. 49), Jesus blessed the woman again with the statement that it was her faith that saved her (v. 50). Because she could never pay off her debt, this was also wonderful news. Any new debt she would accrue would also be paid off, not by her or anything she could do, but rather by Christ and what He was about to do and her faith in His work. Based on these two promises, Jesus could indeed encourage the woman to “go in peace,” that is, live her life in light of the fact that her debt was forever paid. Like Joseph’s brothers before her, she had no more reason to fear.

Even during His painful crucifixion, Jesus found an opportunity to share good news with a sinner. When Jesus was placed between the two thieves, they at first joined in with the verbal abuse hurled on Him by the bystanders (Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32). However, something amazing happened in just a relatively short time. One of the thieves recognized that only two of them were paying the price for their sin that day. The One in the middle was not paying for anything He had done. There was something special about Him. The thief began to suspect that the One to whom he owed the largest debt might actually be paying it off right in front of him. The sign above this special Man was true. He was a king. Knowing his own life was coming to an end (and thus he would have no opportunity to do anything about his debt), the thief threw himself on the mercy of this King. Jesus’s reply echoes the comfort that Joseph extended to his brothers. Jesus in effect said, “Fear not” when He promised that shortly they would be together in paradise even though the thief could never pay the entrance fee.

What was the basis for Jesus’s call for these sinners to “cheer up”? They still warranted a death sentence for their sin but Christ was going to pay that price *for* them. They were no longer obligated to pay, as their debt would be paid in full, permanently. Jesus Himself was about to be the payment. Justice was not thrown out here. Good news indeed.

## GOD IS SOVEREIGN

The next phrase uttered by Joseph after “Fear not” was, “Am I in God’s place?” (Gen. 50:19). What was behind this phrase and why would Joseph try to comfort his brothers by saying it? Joseph realized that all sin involves not only running up a debt with the victim but also running up a debt with God (see treatment of Psalm 51 in the next chapter). Ultimately, then, God is the final Judge and the final One to execute the sentence. Because God is the highest judge, His verdict is final. Thus if God pronounces someone forgiven, His judgment trumps all others. I believe Joseph was recognizing that there are some situations in which

God had deemed that forgiveness was appropriate and if this was one of them, Joseph would not go against God and refuse to forgive. As mentioned earlier, believers do not have the option of choosing Spring's first category, *unconditional unforgiveness*.

Recognizing God's ultimate authority also laid the groundwork for Joseph to remind his brothers of God's sovereignty and goodness, another integral part of forgiveness. "What you meant for evil against me, God meant for good" (Gen. 50:20). Even though sinful acts cannot be undone and require a price to be paid, those sinful acts are never the end of the story. God always gets to write the final page and the story will always end with His plan being carried out. This again is great news for the offender. No matter what he did, God was watching the whole time and will somehow redeem it into something good. For example, who would have ever believed that callously selling your little brother as a slave would one day result in that same brother rising to a position second only to Pharaoh and thus becoming the source of deliverance for the very ones who had sold him? Only God could have imagined such a fantastic plot twist because that was what He was planning all along. Something similar happened when God decided to forgive a zealous, murderous Pharisee and turn him into the chief apostle to the Gentiles. And in one of the greatest reversals in history, when the evil one thought he had finally killed the Redeemer, Jesus rose from the dead and in doing so paved the way for all who believe to escape the evil one's grasp.

Many passages remind us of God's sovereignty and goodness. Even though Romans 8:28 (NIV) is misused at times, there is still the reassuring claim that "we know that in all things [even horrendous acts of evil], God works for the good those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And the Old Testament parallel, Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV), states, "'I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" In spite of the fact that the recipients of this promise were currently in exile and had no prospect of going home, God still claimed He had "good" in store for them.

Ephesians 1:11 (NIV) reminds us that we are predestined "according to the plan of him who works out *everything* in conformity with the purpose of his will." Is there anything (especially sin) that occurs and wrecks irreversible damage *outside* of God's sovereign power and will? This verse seems to claim that there is no such category. This is great comfort, both to victims seeking some good to come out of what they suffered, and to sinners (all of us) when we realize that even our disastrous and evil choices cannot occur outside of God's control or capacity to redeem. His plans are still guaranteed and He is in control. This means that whatever happens, nothing and no one is beyond God's redemptive power. Understanding this about God contributes to the healing of both victim and offender. Since we are to model Jesus's forgiveness, we must embrace the truth that there is no sin or trauma that God cannot redeem.

The illustrations in Scripture of God's power to redeem evil are numerous. One vivid example is the metaphor of locusts used by the prophet Joel. In speaking of the last days, when God will have His final victory over sin, Joel provides a dramatic reminder of how God can bring life out of utter devastation. In ancient times there were few forces more

thoroughly destructive than a swarm of locusts. They numbered in the millions and with several varieties, very little would survive their devouring (Joel 1:4). Their voracious appetite could turn a bountiful land into a desolate wilderness in a very short time, leaving nothing living in their wake (2:3). The people dependent upon the fruit of this land could easily conclude that nothing could recover from such a devastating attack, and yet God promised that even a locust attack could not thwart His ultimate plan to restore His people. The locusts were not the end of the story. God promised that one day, “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten. . . . You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed” (2:25–27, NIV). If God can restore the land after a locust attack, He can bring good out of the devastation that our sin incurs.

Some might conclude that death is at least one example in which evil’s power is irreversible, and yet God demonstrates that not even death can escape His redemptive power. Another vivid example from the Old Testament is the sermon of Ezekiel about dry bones (Ezek. 37:3–6, NIV). Many commentators have recognized a prophetic element here but I would like to focus solely on the fact that God *can* and *does* bring life even out of death. God asks in verse 3, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel must have suspected something was up and therefore he gave the correct theological answer: “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” What follows is a stunning demonstration of God’s ultimate power. “This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD” (vv. 5–6). In the next seven verses, this phrase is repeated two more times, as if God wanted to make a clear statement as to just who was responsible for bringing life out of death. Even when the people said, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off” (i.e., sin has had the final word in our case), their words were overridden by God’s: “I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. . . . Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord” (vv. 12, 14, NIV). Even death cannot thwart God’s redemptive power. Of course, the final victor over death is the One who claimed, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me *will live even if he dies*” (John 11:25, emphasis added).

Not only does God prevail over sin in the life of an individual, but one day He will defeat sin everywhere. All the damage will be reversed and the God of sovereign goodness will reign forever (Rev. 22:1–5). In the words of Joseph, what was ultimately meant for evil (the seduction and fall of the human race by the evil one), God will one day work out permanently for good. Thus, no matter what, God wins in the end.

## TOWARD A FINAL DEFINITION

So what are we left with in our attempt to define forgiveness? What is my answer to the

question that I ask my students? What does “I forgive you” really mean? What I have said up to this point is that human forgiveness needs to be modeled after God’s forgiveness, requires repentance, is other-centered, and is active. It also presupposes a level of healing or intactness on the part of the victim. All of this can take time in many cases but, apart from a resolute position of unconditional unforgiveness (an option not available to a believer), eventually there will be the opportunity to offer genuine forgiveness. Perhaps part of what is being offered is recognition of the reversal of Murphy’s levels of damage mentioned earlier. First, through His healing, God takes care of the damage of the original sin. Then, the offender’s repentance stops the hostile messages of nonrepentance, setting the stage for the victim to feel less pressure to cognitively reframe the sin away. Finally, in light of this process, the relationship between the offender and the victim changes, hopefully in a healthy direction. To put it all in one comprehensive statement, my full exposition of “I forgive you” might go as follows:

*Because of your repentance and the facts that the price for your sin has been paid (by God), the effects of your sin against me have been substantially healed, and your repentance has stopped the previously hostile messages to me, your sin can no longer damage me. Since you are taking responsibility for your sin, I no longer have to make up distorted reasons why it happened, and that is good for both of us. Finally, our relationship is now different and I agree to treat you in light of this new relationship.*

## A WORD ABOUT HOW FORGIVENESS CHANGES RELATIONSHIPS

The last part of this definition involves a change in relationship between offender and victim. Care must be taken when identifying the nature of this change. Many might assume that this change represents nothing more than resuming the relationship as it was before the betrayal. For example, imagine a married couple who separate due to unfaithfulness on the part of one or both parties. If repentance is offered and forgiveness granted, most would assume the couple could resume living together and pick up where they left off before the betrayal. But I wonder if this can ever really happen. Yes, they can move back in together, but can the relationship ever be *exactly* as it was before the betrayal? Trusting someone who has never betrayed me is risky enough; trusting someone who has already betrayed me is an even larger risk. Whether there is a season of counseling, initiation and implementation of church discipline, or even just an increased vigilance, these changes characterize a relationship that was *not* present before trust was violated.

Likewise, someone who is suspended from ministry due to a moral failure should not *demand* that relationship change mean a reinstatement to ministry. Nor should a perpetrator of sexual trauma *require* that his victim treat him as if no betrayal has occurred. Often the offender is so preoccupied with recovering his former relationship, that he is blind to the fact that what he had before was based at least partly on trust; when that trust is violated, the relationship as he remembers it is no longer possible. For an offender to demand that a

relationship based on trust be resumed when trust has been betrayed would call into question the authenticity of the repentance being offered (see the next chapter for more on authentic repentance).

So if the change in relationship is not a return to the previous relationship, what kind of relationship is it? Just because the original relationship can never be resumed, as if no betrayal took place, does not mean that the relationship between offender and victim cannot change at all for the better. Indeed it should change. While the previous relationship based on trust is a thing of the past, the subsequent relationship based on untrustworthiness, betrayal, and nonrepentance is also a thing of the past (pending authentic repentance and forgiveness). Therefore, if the original relationship of trust is impossible, and the guarded relationship based on nonrepentance is no longer relevant, I believe some kind of *new* relationship needs to be established between victim and offender that somehow reflects that they now both agree on what happened. They both agree that sin occurred and that it should not have. They also both agree that the offender's repentance is authentic enough to warrant a reevaluation of the relationship. Even as they attempt to build this new relationship, some characteristics of the old, guarded relationship (before repentance and forgiveness) probably need to be retained.

For example, no church would responsibly allow a convicted sex offender to volunteer in its children's ministries. Most would assume the rationale for this policy is to protect the kids. While this is true, the policy also benefits the sex offender, for it removes him from an environment of enticement for which he experiences a pull that he has proven is difficult to resist. For a sex offender, temptation should not distract from worship. Thus it is good for the church, *and for him*, to limit his ministry to that which does not involve children.

Likewise, there may need to be some permanent boundaries in the future relationship between victim and offender, even if genuine repentance and forgiveness have occurred. Each case is unique and the boundaries may look different depending on the situation. But two extremes must be avoided—unconditional unforgiveness on one hand, and naïvely trying to resume what was lost on the other.

In some cases it may be best for there to be no ongoing relationship between offender and victim. There may have been no relationship in the first place (i.e., stranger rape), but any kind of personal relationship might provoke unnecessary interference with growth in both of their lives. Again, neither one *needs* a relationship in order to move forward. Some relationships may have to wait until heaven. I imagine in heaven that the martyr Stephen and the apostle Paul (who never had a chance to be forgiven by Stephen) have a much better relationship there than they ever had on earth.

Even if there is no ongoing interaction between victim and offender, one way the relationship could change is how the victim modifies her prayers for her offender. Prior to repentance, her prayer would appropriately include cries for justice (see the imprecatory psalms) and prayers that the offender would experience a change of heart (i.e., repent). But now, after repentance and forgiveness, her prayers can shift to petitioning God to strengthen the offender as he strives to live out his new life based on repentance.

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- \* In this section, I am referring to a case in which trauma has occurred. Obviously, in the case of day-to-day sin, the process can be accelerated.