



FOREWORD BY RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER

Making
Sense of
Forgiveness

MOVING FROM HURT TOWARD HOPE



Brad Hambrick

“Before reading this book, I thought that everything that needs to be said about biblical forgiveness had already been said. I was wrong. What makes this book unique is how Brad goes beyond the basics to dig deeply into the struggles and the questions we all face when being called upon to forgive those who have hurt us. Brad draws from his extensive counseling experience to address almost every imaginable situation and to correct common misunderstandings. I also appreciate the high regard he shows for Scripture as he offers wise answers to important questions.”

Jim Newheiser, Director of the Christian Counseling Program and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; executive director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD); author of *Money, Debt, and Finances*

“Brad Hambrick has done the body of Christ a much-needed favor by addressing the topic and practice of forgiveness with thoughtful nuance to the realities of trauma and abuse. His tone and empathy will be welcome words to those who have had forgiveness required of them in ways that are harmful and unwise. As he clears the debris of unhelpful notions of forgiveness, he paves the way for a robust, redemptive path to forgiving.”

Timothy S. Lane, President, Institute for Pastoral Care and Tim Lane & Associates

“*Making Sense of Forgiveness* is a one-of-a-kind, comprehensive resource that addresses both the common and complex matters of forgiveness. With expert clarity and theological accuracy, Brad explores the many spiritual, personal, and relational implications of forgiveness while sensitively taking into account the various and unique circumstances that can confuse the process. It is a healing approach to forgiveness that is sure to help many people.”

Eliza Huie, LCPC, Director of Counseling at McLean Bible Church, Vienna, VA; author of *Raising Kids in a Screen-Saturated World*, *Raising Kids in a Hyper-Sexualized World* and coauthor of *The Whole Life*

“*Making Sense of Forgiveness* helps readers consider often overlooked but essential aspects of forgiveness. Brad’s eye-opening insights are critical for those who are committed to preserving unity within the body of Christ, restoring broken relationships, and helping others understand how to forgive as they’ve been forgiven by our Lord.”

Sam Hodges IV, Vice President of Publishing, Church Initiative

“The practice of forgiveness is central to life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But it is not easy, nor is it always clear how to proceed. Brad Hambrick is a trustworthy shepherd who leads us carefully through a nuanced and practical discussion of this complex topic. Whether you are a person who has been sinned against and are wrestling with forgiving the one who hurt you or an offender receiving forgiveness from the one you hurt, Brad’s biblically-saturated guide will help you take the next wise step.”

Michael R. Emlet, Dean of Faculty and counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF); author of *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us*

“Extending and receiving forgiveness is sometimes like a sprint. More often it is like a marathon. Running well and finishing the race requires a well-planned strategy. It also is significantly aided by helpful companions. This book is one such companion. It is a reservoir of biblical wisdom. I cannot commend it more highly.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There are few voices I trust more than Brad Hambrick. This is especially true as he navigates us through the deep and often tumultuous terrain of forgiveness. From the suffering saint to the seasoned counselor, anyone who reads this book will immediately benefit from its rich teaching on a most important topic. I can say confidently that this will be a resource I will turn to with frequency and joy. I trust the same for all who read it.”

Jonathan D. Holmes, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling; pastor of counseling, Parkside Church

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Brad Hambrick



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Foreword

*“I choose to let go. . . .
I choose to trust God’s justice. . . .
I choose to leave it in God’s hands. . . .
I choose to forgive. . . .*

I closed the folder I’d stashed my loose-leaf journal in.
I felt better.
I’d handled it.
I was fine. Two days later, I realized . . . it wasn’t that easy.”¹

The day I wrote those words in my journal—as a teenager wrestling through sexual abuse I was just beginning to understand—was the day I took a step I knew had to be taken. Somehow, I had to loosen the hold my abuser had over me. I was desperate to find a way to cut the ties and desperate to be the good Christian girl who responded the “right way.” I carried the guilt of my abuse, and I didn’t want to fail again. I’d been taught that forgiveness was both a command and a necessity—something I must do, something I would *need* to do, for my own healing.

1. Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth?: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth about Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (Carol Stream: Tyndale Momentum, 2019), 88.

Not knowing where to begin my journey or how to heal, I made a list of the things I could choose. I couldn't choose what had been done to me, but forgiveness—my response to abuse—was within my power. So through anger and tears, I chose. That night, I felt the relief I'd been promised. I meant the words I had written, and their sincerity brought conviction that I had won a hard-fought battle (you'll read about this step, crisis forgiveness, as you walk through this book). What I did not know that night was that this choice wasn't the end but rather the beginning: the beginning of a multi-year journey to discover what forgiveness really meant, and why in fact it was so critical. I didn't know in that moment that the exhausted relief was nothing more than a brief calm before the storm. Not forty-eight hours later I was reeling, beginning to realize that what I thought was the closing of a door was really the wedge that allowed it to burst open.

You see, in order to truly forgive, I had to first acknowledge the reality of the wound. That meant memories. It meant admitting damage when I wanted to be whole. Not being whole meant weakness and vulnerability. And vulnerability was what brought the abuse in the first place.

It also meant deep wrestling with the theology and practical reality of forgiveness. Far from any Hallmark movie portrayal, "I forgive you" wasn't the magic phrase that brought healing and a tearful reconciliation between the wounded and the wounder. My declaration of forgiveness was met with silence (and years later, with predictable and continued denial). There was no beautiful, redemptive story of relationship restored after I penned those words.

And, it meant making myself vulnerable to each and every way forgiveness is weaponized against the wounded. I had seen Christians do it so many times before—"I'm sure that was hard but . . . look at all the beauty that came from it!" as if the gaping wound and painful scar no longer mattered, or worse, didn't exist at all. Christians love happy endings, and "forgiveness" was far too often treated like a glittery bow topping off the perfectly wrapped

“package” of a Christian “witness,” used to minimize the depth of evil that has been done—or to minimize the reality that, this side of heaven, full healing doesn’t come. What’s hiding under the sparkling bow is often treated as much less important, as long as the package shimmers enough. I didn’t need to hand anyone one more excuse to minimize and downplay the damage of abuse.

I’d seen forgiveness weaponized to pressure wounded people into unsafe relationships, to remove consequences or justice from those who caused great harm, or leveraged in immediate response to a suffering person’s appeal for help. Forgiveness was supposed to be beautiful and redemptive, but the flowery descriptions of this core theology of the Christian faith lacked much theological depth and seemed woefully ignorant of practical realities. It *wasn’t* the powerful truth it was held out to be. Until . . . I actually understood it. And then it was.

The journey that I went on, in the years following the night I thought I was closing a door, is the same journey you will be invited on in this book. A journey that delves into what it truly means to forgive, and why this theological truth really is grounded in the person and work of our Redeemer, in the holiest and most beautiful of ways. With gentleness and sensitivity to the real suffering that has taken place whenever the question of forgiveness is raised, Brad lays out a concise and comprehensive approach to understanding forgiveness and what it entails. Much as I did, you will wrestle with what forgiveness is—and what it is not. You will consider the ways it has been weaponized or misunderstood, and contrast inaccurate ideas with deeper understanding of what Scripture really means when it commands us to forgive. You will grapple with the real need to forgive in your own healing journey and why forgiveness is integral to freedom, but also walk through understanding false repentance, manipulation, and the difference between forgiveness and restoration. With insightful reflection questions and practical steps to help wisely guide the process, Brad couples careful exegesis with day-to-day application, bringing clarity and direction to a

critical concept too often mired in misunderstanding and unhelpful practices.

It isn't an easy journey, nor a fast journey. But it is a vital one. My prayer for you as you walk through the material in this book, gently and as you are ready, is that you also will find rest for your soul and freedom in the truth of what it means to forgive, and be forgiven.

Rachael Denhollander
Speaker, Author, Victim Advocate

Introduction

A GUIDE TO THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Forgiveness is a beautiful theme for a redemptive novel or movie. We enjoy crying sweet tears as we watch. But as a lived experience, forgiveness means we've been hurt and are making ourselves vulnerable again. As C. S. Lewis famously wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."¹

This book is written for those who are stuck on the difficult journey of forgiveness or for those who are walking alongside a friend who is stuck. For that reason, we won't view forgiveness as a lovely idea but, rather, as a hard journey. In reality, forgiveness is both beautiful *and* difficult.

The base metaphor we will use to define forgiveness is *canceling a debt*. Forgiveness means a loan of trust was given, which allowed us to be hurt. Whether we choose to extend another loan after canceling the debt is a matter of *trust* (another theme explored here), not forgiveness.

This book is written for those who are struggling to move forward on the road of forgiveness. It is not a memoir looking back from the end of the journey with all the luxuries hindsight affords.

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), p. 115.

This book describes a process that is not “neat” because life in a broken world is not “tidy.” Relationships are hard. Simplistic relational formulas only serve to discourage us as we strive to gain our bearings.

My aim in this book is to articulate what we often think but feel bad saying out loud. Our pain and confusion won’t be resolved with silence, which only allows pain to echo. If we’re going to find resolution, we have to be honest about what makes forgiveness hard.

Most important, forgiveness ultimately only makes sense in light of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice, rather than making forgiveness easy, is the foundation that can support the emotional weight of forgiveness.

No one can get far on the road of forgiveness without being vulnerable. Use this resource to invite a few friends with you along the way and help them understand what makes the terrain hard.

To be invited to walk alongside you and have your trust is an honor. I pray that what you read here will reward that trust. Thank you for allowing me to walk a piece of this journey with you.

Section 1: Definitions and Misunderstandings

We often resist hard things because we don't feel understood or because we don't understand what is (and isn't) required of us. We hesitate to talk to a friend because they haven't been through what we have. We pull back from accepting a new role because we're not sure what will be asked of us and we're afraid it will be too much. But pulling back doesn't make life easier; it makes life lonelier and heavier.

The goal of this first section is to remove obstacles to understanding the journey of forgiveness. If after reading it, you can say, "He gets it" or "I feel safe talking about why this is hard," then this first section has been a success. If you feel a sense of relief because misconceptions about forgiveness have been removed, that will be a significant step forward on your journey.

Chapter 1

REMEMBER, FORGIVENESS BEGINS WITH PAIN

When a friend talks about needing to forgive someone, what do we know about them? We know they're hurting. Whatever journey God has for them will start with understanding their pain. When God was going to lead Israel out of Egypt, he said to Moses, "I have surely *seen the affliction* of my people who are in Egypt and have *heard their cry* because of their taskmasters. *I know their sufferings*" (Exodus 3:7, emphasis added).

God sees, God hears, and God knows. God repeats himself to emphasize the importance of being known when cultivating trust. If we don't take the time to understand, our friend will feel more like a problem to be solved than a person to be heard. Rushing to the remedy undermines trust. No one wants an orthodontist who promises to align their teeth in six weeks. The process would be too painful no matter how "right" the outcome.

EASY DOES IT

Often, we forget that good conversations begin where someone is rather than where they should be. When we're excited about the destination and rush the journey, we do not serve our friend well.

Forgiveness may be one of the subjects where Christians are most prone to rush one another.

Notice the connection between understanding and trust building portrayed in Hebrews 4:15–16:

For we do not have a high priest [Jesus] who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Because Jesus deeply understands our life challenges—temptations and weaknesses—we are compelled to draw near to him with confidence. This is what it looks like to be “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). We embody this priestly role of identifying with the pain of our friend in order to cultivate courage to take the steps ahead. Jesus built relational capital to cultivate trust and motivation. Our conversations about forgiveness should do the same. This occurs through compassionate questions and patient listening.¹

If you are the person needing to forgive and yearn for someone to hear you, give someone you trust a copy of this chapter and ask, “Would you be this kind of friend for me?” Every journey is easier with a companion.

If you are the companion, here are some questions that could help you get to know where someone is on their forgiveness journey. Every situation is different, so some of the questions may be more or less relevant.

- *What happened?* Allow your friend to tell their story.

1. If you struggle to be a patient listener, consider my fifteen-minute video overview of good listening skills: “The Pastor as Counselor Lesson 4: Incarnational Ministry—Listening and Empathy,” bradhambrick.com, January 28, 2020, <http://bradhambrick.com/PastorAsCounselor4/>.

- *What cultivated the trust that made this offense more hurtful?* Broken trust magnifies pain. Often pain is as much a function of the trust violated (think, gunpowder) as is the offense (think, fire). If we only assess the size and heat of the fire, we miss the point.
- *What is missing from your life as a result of the offense?* The consequences of an offense can be as disruptive as the primary offense itself. If we don't know the "dominos" of the offense, our friend is likely to feel like we just don't get it.
- *What other relationships are compromised because of the strain?* Our relationships tend to be like threads in a spider web. Changing one distorts the shape of the others.
- *What emotions do you cycle through as you deal with this offense?* Often anger gets all the attention when forgiveness is relevant. Don't neglect hearing fear, grief, confusion, and other relevant emotions.
- *What steps have you taken to make things better, and how did that go?* Talking to you is likely not the first proactive step they've taken. Before making suggestions, encourage them by affirming the wise things they've already done.
- *What steps are you considering?* Understanding what your friend thinks is next helps you get to know where they are on their journey.
- *Who else do you have supporting you, and how understood do you feel?* The less understood your friend feels, the more weight they will put on your relationship. You should be aware of this dynamic.
- *What question do you wish I'd ask?* This is an open-ended question to help make sure you're not missing something important.

Initially, the focus is on getting to know the person and their experience. This engagement builds trust and provides clarity about what other conversations may be helpful.

Notice what we did *not* ask first: “What log do you need to remove from your own eye?” (see Matthew 7:3–5). Is this an important question? Absolutely. Is it a first question? Usually not. Jesus’s point in the Sermon on the Mount was twofold. First, when taking steps toward reconciliation, we need to model the kind of ownership of our personal failings we want the other person to display. Second, we have more control over our actions than another person’s actions—hence, the difference in size between the log and speck.²

Notice, Jesus was *not* saying, (1) “Your actions are more important than the actions of the person who offended you,” (2) “You are ready to take steps toward reconciliation,” or (3) “The other person is ready for you to take steps towards reconciliation.”³ When we jump too quickly from our friend’s anger to Matthew 7, we inadvertently put these words in Jesus’s mouth.

When we listen well and build trust, we will arrive at Matthew 7 when it is a “word fitly spoken” (Proverbs 25:11). Like the punch line of a good joke, applicable counsel becomes less effective when it’s given too soon.⁴ If you are the person needing to forgive, and advice from well-intentioned friends (even advice you agreed with) was hard to receive, it may have been premature.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Think of a time when you needed to forgive. How would it help you to have a friend hear you in the ways this chapter describes?
2. For more on how Matthew 7:1–6 applies to chronically broken relationships, see “Series: Marriage with a Chronically Self-Centered Spouse,” bradhambrick.com, October 15, 2012 (particularly articles 3, 4, and 5), <http://bradhambrick.com/selfcenteredspouse/>.
3. If the relational offense is abusive, then reconciliation is not the next step. It is recommended that you consult <https://churchcares.com> for guidance on next steps based on the type of abuse that is involved.
4. If you are prone to arrive at needed advice prematurely (before your friend is ready for it), consider this brief reflection on the timing of truth in counseling: “On Counseling and Comedy,” bradhambrick.com, July 13, 2013, <http://bradhambrick.com/on-counseling-and-comedy/>.

2. Can you think of times when you were willing to do what needed to be done next (whether forgiveness or another response) but feeling rushed created a sense of resistance within you? How did feeling rushed and misunderstood become a setback for you?