

Contents

HOW TO USE *THRESHOLD BIBLE STUDY* *vii*

Suggestions for individual study	<i>ix</i>
Suggestions for group study	<i>x</i>

INTRODUCTION 1

Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 1	11
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LESSONS 1–6

1. Joseph Forgives His Brothers (<i>Genesis 50:15–21</i>)	12
2. God Forgives Iniquity, Transgression, and Sin (<i>Exodus 32:30–34; Exodus 34:1–10</i>)	15
3. A Sin Offering for God’s People (<i>Leviticus 16:2–22</i>)	19
4. Moses Pleads for God’s Forgiveness of the Israelites (<i>Numbers 14:10–23</i>)	23
5. Nathan the Prophet Brings King David to Repentance (<i>2 Samuel 12:1–15</i>)	27
6. Solomon Pleads for God to Forgive Israel’s Sin (<i>1 Kings 8:30–40, 46–50</i>)	31
Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 2	35

LESSONS 7–12

7. A Song of Confession and Forgiveness (<i>Psalms 32</i>)	36
8. Pleading for the Grace of Forgiveness (<i>Psalms 51</i>)	40
9. Waiting with Confidence in the Lord’s Forgiveness (<i>Psalms 130</i>)	44
10. Isaiah Exhorts Contrition for Social Sin (<i>Isaiah 1:15–20; Isaiah 6:1–8</i>)	47
11. God Will Forgive Their Iniquity (<i>Jeremiah 31:31–34; Jeremiah 33:6–9</i>)	51
12. Daniel Pleads for the Lord’s Forgiveness (<i>Daniel 9:4–19</i>)	55
Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 3	59

LESSONS 13–18

13. Forgive Before Making an Offering to God (<i>Mark 11:24–26; Matthew 5:23–24</i>)	60
14. Learning to Pray for Forgiveness (<i>Matthew 6:7–15</i>)	63
15. The Authority to Heal and Forgive (<i>Matthew 9:2–8</i>)	67
16. The Unforgivable Blasphemy (<i>Matthew 12:22–32</i>)	70
17. Forgive Ceaselessly (<i>Matthew 18:21–35</i>)	74
18. Poured Out for the Forgiveness of Sins (<i>Matthew 26:26–29</i>)	78
Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 4	81

LESSONS 19–24

19. The Relationship of Forgiveness and Love (<i>Luke 7:36–50</i>)	82
20. The Forgiving Father and His Two Sons (<i>Luke 15:11–32</i>)	86
21. Jesus Forgives His Persecutors (<i>Luke 17:3–4; Luke 23:32–43</i>)	90
22. Neither Do I Condemn You (<i>John 8:2–11</i>)	94
23. The Ministry of Forgiveness (<i>John 20:19–23</i>)	97
24. Peter Experiences the Lord's Forgiveness (<i>John 21:4–19</i>)	100
Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 5	104

LESSONS 25–30

25. Forgiveness and Reaffirming Love (<i>2 Corinthians 2:4–11; 2 Corinthians 5:14–19</i>)	105
26. Forgive As God in Christ Has Forgiven You (<i>Ephesians 4:17–32</i>)	109
27. New Practices for a New Life (<i>Colossians 3:1–17</i>)	113
28. One Offering for the Forgiveness of Sin (<i>Hebrews 10:1–18</i>)	117
29. Confess Your Sins to One Another (<i>James 5:13–20</i>)	121
30. Admitting Our Sins and Seeking the Truth (<i>1 John 1:5–10</i>)	124
Suggestions for Facilitators, Group Session 6	127



**Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.**

SIRACH 28:2

Forgiveness

There is nothing natural, instinctual, or easy about forgiveness. It can be one of life's most difficult challenges. Yet we know from Scripture, psychological research, and human experience that refusing to forgive does no one any good. It can bind us in depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. That's why studies, articles, books, and courses on forgiveness are plentiful. Practicing forgiveness is good for our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. That's why Jesus said we must forgive over and over those who hurt us—seventy-seven times, to be exact. And throughout his life, he showed us the way to forgive.

If forgiveness is such a good thing, then why is it so hard? The reasons are many. When we have been emotionally wounded by another—a spouse, parent, trusted friend, a person with authority or responsibility over us—our instinctual response is usually anger and resentment, which are addictive. As our injuries fester, we may be filled with thoughts of retribution or revenge. Or we learn to self-identify as a victim, a character trait that is difficult to overcome. Our moods may become increasingly bitter, and new relationships may become hard to form. Our inability to resolve our situation makes us feel trapped in our negative emotions, leading at times to self-destructive behavior.

Because our wounds go deep, forgiveness often requires a difficult process of grieving and healing, a route that looks and feels different for everyone.

The core of that process is forgiveness itself, the letting go of a grievance or judgment held against someone else. When we forgive, we also let go of feelings of resentment, bitterness, and vengeance, allowing ourselves to heal and work toward wholeness. But while this may sound good in theory, in practice forgiveness can sometimes feel impossible.

Because we are human and live in a sinful world, every person gets hurt—some more than others, some worse than others. And after the wrong and the initial wave of emotions have passed, we are all presented with the question of whether and how to forgive the offender and let go of the pain, the emotional misery, the prison that is holding us back from all the potential of the future. Those who choose forgiveness will gradually move beyond the pain and open themselves to hope again; those who choose not to forgive might dwell in the bitter feelings for the rest of their lives.

Reflection and discussion

- What are some of the best reasons to practice forgiveness?
- Why do people sometimes find it impossible to forgive?

Understanding the Dynamics of Forgiveness

We are fearful and hesitant about forgiveness because we don't understand it. We think that by forgiving we are letting the other person get away with

wrongdoing or opening ourselves up to be hurt again. We think that forgiveness means forgetting the offense or pretending that nothing significant happened. But genuine forgiveness implies none of these.

Before we can come to understand forgiveness, we must know what it is not:

Forgiveness does not deny the wrong or the injustice done. In fact, before forgiveness can be effective, we must acknowledge that we have indeed been wronged and that we have a right to be angry, to grieve our losses, and to feel our emotional pain. We are certainly not excusing the wrongs done to us. Rather, we are finding ways to engage deeply with our history, learn through the hurt, and begin again with greater wisdom.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. We can't help but remember painful experiences. Remembering helps us avoid similar experiences in the future. We must not brush aside wrongs done to us as if they never happened. The process of forgiveness does not produce amnesia, but it enables us to remember without being emotionally bound by the past. We're not saying that everything is now okay and that we have no more feelings about the harm; we are saying that we have discovered a way past the wrong and its pain.

Forgiveness is not just acceptance of a past reality. Some claim that forgiveness is merely a therapeutic technique for ridding oneself of painful memories and feelings. But genuine forgiveness involves a relationship between persons. The wrong occurred in an interpersonal context: one person wrongs another. Hence, forgiveness is directed toward the person who offended; it is a voluntary gift of mercy from the one who has been offended.

Forgiveness is not a moment but a process. Forgiveness takes time, and we should not attempt it until we feel we are ready. There is no prescribed time frame, no generalized benchmark for the forgiveness process. It takes as long as it takes. But through the process, we learn more about

ourselves, our boundaries, and our needs. We change and become more emotionally and spiritually mature.

Forgiveness does not necessarily lead to reconciliation. We mistakenly imagine forgiveness involves saying “I forgive you” to our offender, followed by a hug or a gesture that all is absolved. This may happen sometimes, but it is not the norm. Forgiving another does not mean that we have to continue including the other person in our life. Relationships that involve continuing abuse must be abandoned. And forgiving another does not imply that we necessarily have to communicate our forgiveness to the other. We can forgive people we should best not see again and even those who have died. Forgiveness does not mean reconciling the relationship. A restored relationship, for those who choose it, is a further process beyond forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an intentional and voluntary process. We cannot be forced to forgive another or be shamed into it. It isn't something we do for the person who wronged us. Our initial motivation for beginning the process of forgiveness is to stop our own pain. We want to be able to heal and move on. We are the first beneficiaries of the change in attitude and perspective we experience when we decide to forgive. The release of toxic anger and bitter resentment we experience makes us feel better. These changes then have their effect on all our other relationships and activities.

The emphasis on forgiveness throughout Scripture is due to the fact that it is good for us. We are healthier and happier when we forgive. Because forgiveness doesn't come easily or innately, God's word instructs us on how to practice it. Texts throughout the Bible underscore God's forgiveness of his people, showing us that when we forgive others, we are imitating God, living in the divine image. Our offender may not deserve our forgiveness, just as we may not deserve God's forgiveness. We may not want to forgive, but God requires it of us and offers us the grace to accomplish it.

Deciding to forgive is the first step on a mysterious, divine journey. The way is not a straight line; usually it feels more like a spiral, experiencing over and over again feelings of anger, relief, confusion, comfort, anxiety, and release. Like the way of the exodus, when God made the Israelites his

own people, the journey feels painful, but it brings freedom. As time goes by, unbearable memories dissipate and a life of peace and wholeness comes into view.

Although we know we can't change the past, we can change our attitudes toward past injustices and suffering by integrating them into the larger context of our lives. Did the experience make me stronger, more empathic of others, more courageous? Did others somehow gain through what I endured and how I matured? When we're angry, bitter, and self-absorbed, we cannot be creative and open to new experiences, but finding meaning in the painful experiences of the past leads us to deeper acceptance. Scripture helps us find this meaning and purpose in the forgiveness process.

As forgivers we must gradually give up resentment and replace it with compassion, the recognition that we all suffer together. Compassionate people are able to discover the faults and flaws of others within themselves. The sins we see so easily in others are our sins too. As compassionate people, we understand that everyone shares this suffering world together.

At some point in the process of forgiveness, we must move from a focus on ourselves to a focus on the offenders, coming to realize that they are flawed because all human beings are flawed, that they speak and act from distorted ideas and understandings, and that they struggle like the rest of humanity. Eventually, we must decide to give to the offenders the gift of forgiveness, even though they don't deserve it. Then, paradoxically, we begin to heal in the process of offering this compassion. Through the process of forgiveness, we give up our right to seething anger and hostility, replacing them with mercy toward the wrongdoers, and relationships are changed through human compassion and divine grace.

A clear sign that forgiveness is taking its course is our lack of resentful feelings, negative thoughts, and harmful behaviors toward the offenders and their replacement with goodwill and kindness. Jesus taught us to live in love, whether it be toward our neighbors or toward our enemies. Forgiveness is an act of love toward God, our offenders, and ourselves. Loving others, while protecting ourselves from harm, is a sign of the transformed life we receive through faith in him.

Reflection and discussion

- How is my misunderstanding of forgiveness being corrected?

- What new insights about forgiveness am I gaining?

Forgiveness in, with, and through the Word of God

The source of the Christian understanding of forgiveness is the revelation of God, who is willing to bear the cost of forgiveness in order to redeem humanity and bring us to the fullness of life. In response to this divine forgiveness, God calls us to embody forgiveness through practices like repentance, confessing our sins, showing compassion, repairing brokenness, and forgiving others. So, forgiveness is not just a word spoken, a feeling felt, or an isolated action performed, but a tangible practice and way of life in imitation of God.

The centrality of forgiveness in divine revelation and Christian practice prevents us from thinking about forgiveness as merely a private transaction between God and an individual or between two persons. We forgive, not in isolation, but only with the grace of God in the context of community. We become more forgiving of others when we simultaneously learn to experience what it means to be forgiven—by God and by others.

As people baptized into Christ, we learn that forgiveness requires a dying and rising—dying to our old selves bound to past sin, and being raised in newness of life. God's forgiving grace gives us a new perspective on our histories of betrayal and being betrayed. Living as the body of Christ in the world, we practice forgiveness by unlearning patterns of sin and struggling for healing wherever there is brokenness. By forgiving and being forgiven,

we become a sign of God's kingdom, the kingdom that Jesus announced and enacted, by offering new life in the face of evil and sin.

The call to Christian discipleship always implies a call to share in the work of forgiveness and to bear the Christlike suffering involved in that work. As disciples of Jesus, we realize that forgiveness is not simply a release from the past but a commitment to the future. Costly forgiveness requires that we transform the patterns of our relationships with God and with one another. Living a cruciform life means that we do not possess our lives; we give them over to Christ, and in doing so our lives are transformed as we share in his divine life.

Discerning precisely how we ought to practice forgiveness in specific social circumstances and individual situations involves the work of the Holy Spirit. We learn how to practice this discernment well through holy exemplars, especially the saints, whose lives testify to the difficult and often heroic work of forgiveness. Costly forgiveness requires such practices as confronting sin, love of enemies, and works of mercy.

God's forgiveness is both the first and final word of the Christian life. In this time between Christ's first and final coming, we must prepare the way for God's ultimate judgment and forgiveness. Experiencing God's forgiveness now sets us on mission to the larger world. Preparing the way for the Lord's coming entails specific practices that enable people to hear and receive the ultimate message of God's forgiveness and healing grace. Studying Scripture, receiving the sacraments, practicing contemplative prayer, engaging in Christian witness, and living the communal life—all prepare the way for the full realization of God's kingdom.

Commitment to the future means helping to create a culture of forgiveness on a community level and in our society. Many refuse to embody God's forgiveness and remain trapped in histories and habits of evil and sin. We know that vengeful anger over injustices can transfer to entire groups of people and can be transmitted from one generation to another. Revenge creates more victims, and the angry victims then demand revenge. Social movements are emerging throughout the world in which forgiveness is a central component of helping people heal from hatred, violence, and war. Education in forgiveness and experiments in personal practices of forgiveness equip people to respond with mercy and break the cycles of retaliation and victim-

ization. People who are taught how to forgive learn how to overcome anger and hurt, become more optimistic and self-confident, and begin to practice compassion and forgiveness in a variety of situations.

Truthfulness in communities and societies is only possible where wrong has been uncovered and forgiven. And when people experience a state of truthfulness through acknowledgment of their own wrongs, they are not afraid or ashamed to tell the truth wherever it must be told. Forgiveness is possible even under the most brutal and unfair circumstances. The revelation of our God teaches us that no act, no matter how terrible, is unforgivable. Holiness requires prophetic action directed at situations where people's lives are being diminished and destroyed, and forgiveness is an essential dimension of the necessary healing for life to flourish again.

Reflection and discussion

- What is the meaning of the phrase, "To err is human, to forgive divine," by the poet Alexander Pope?
- Why is forgiveness necessary on both an individual and societal level?

Experiencing Scripture's Transforming Power

Genesis ends with the beautiful scene of Joseph forgiving his brothers for their terrible wrongs against him. This scene of forgiveness leads into all the other books of the Bible, because it allows for the preservation of the sons

of Jacob and God's rescue of their descendants from the slavery of Egypt. In Israel's Torah, God is shown to be a personal God, rich in mercy and forgiveness, as Moses pleads for the people during their journey through the wilderness. King David, too, learns how to admit his sin and turn to God for forgiveness, teaching his son Solomon how to intercede on behalf of God's people in their sin. Although God's forgiveness does not remove the consequences of Israel's sins, it does enable them to begin again and look to the future whenever they turn to God with repentance.

The psalms teach God's people how to speak the truth about their wrongs, turn back to God, and open their lives in confidence to God's forgiveness. The prophets plead for God's forgiveness, teaching the Israelites to await the complete forgiveness that God promises in the new covenant. As we read the word of God spoken through the ancient Torah, prophets, and psalms, we realize that God is speaking to us, the spiritual descendants of the Israelites. God always longs to confer forgiveness on his people, and our ancestors in the Old Testament teach us how to release our hearts to receive it.

The gospels demonstrate that God's forgiveness is proclaimed and enacted through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, persistently breaking barriers and showing that forgiveness is available for all. He teaches forgiveness in his parables and warns that those who do not forgive others are unable to experience God's forgiveness. He asks forgiveness for those who crucify him even though they are ignorant of what they are doing. The gospels help us recognize that sin is a reality that pervades our lives and relationships. We are not only those on whom hurts are inflicted; we are also people capable of horrible evil, including the violence that nailed Jesus to the cross.

After the resurrection, Jesus sends his disciples into the world to proclaim the good news of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The New Testament, then, underlines the many ways that Christian communities embody this forgiveness as they live out their mission. The focus of forgiveness shifts from the temple and its sacrifices to the church and its ministers who are authorized by Jesus to forgive in his name. This global community of forgiven and forgiving people becomes the living sign of God's kingdom, fulfilling the purpose and destiny of humanity through its loving communion with God and with one another.

The Scriptures demonstrate that Christ's forgiveness takes different forms in every circumstance. Although the Lord's death is the definitive sacrifice for the sin of the world, the Holy Spirit guides us as we reflect on the Scriptures and discern how to embody Christ's forgiveness in specific practices in many diverse circumstances. The Spirit, who gives the Scriptures their transforming power, works powerfully within us as we reflect on the sacred texts and open our lives more fully to God's living word. Let us implore the Spirit to work deeply in our hearts so that we may become instruments of divine forgiveness in the world.

Reflection and discussion

- How might God's word in Scripture broaden my understanding of forgiveness?
- In what way do I desire God to transform my life through this study of God's word?

Prayer

Creator and Redeemer of your people, who sent your Son to embody the forgiveness you desire for all people, send your Holy Spirit to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I begin this study of your inspired Scriptures. Let these sacred texts so transform my mind and heart that I may reflect your image in the world and become an instrument of your forgiveness. Make me compassionate so that I may suffer with others by recognizing the sins I see in others within my own heart. Give me hope for a renewed world, and help me devote my energies to the difficult work of creating a culture of forgiveness and a civilization of love.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide name tags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
 - What drew you to join this group?
 - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
 - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of forgiveness. You inspired the biblical authors to express your word as manifested to the people of Israel and most fully in the life of Jesus. Motivate us each day to read the Scriptures and deepen our understanding and love for these sacred texts. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don't feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week's group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.