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YOU

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LYSA TERKEURST

FORGIVING

WHAT

YOU

CAN'T

FORGET

DISCOVER HOW TO MOVE ON, MAKE PEACE
WITH PAINFUL MEMORIES, AND CREATE A LIFE
THAT'S BEAUTIFUL AGAIN



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Dedicated in loving memory to
Brian Hampton and his beautiful family . . .
Karen Hampton, Ben Hampton,
and Caroline Hampton Cole.
Brian's fingerprints are all over
everything I've written in the past ten years
and this book is certainly no exception.
I heard his gentle wisdom, gracious challenge,
and brilliant creativity as I typed these words.
I miss him so much. He smiled the
biggest and brightest when
he talked of each of you.

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INTRODUCTION

I Still Cry Over What Happened

DO YOU EVER FIND yourself defining life by before and after the deep hurt? The horrific season. The conversation that stunned you. The shocking day of discovery. The stunning call about the accident. The divorce. The suicide. The wrongful death so unfathomable you still can't believe they are gone. The malpractice. The breakup. The day your friend walked away. The hateful conversation. The remark that seems to now be branded on your soul. The taking of something that should have been yours. The brutality unleashed on the one you love. The email you weren't supposed to see. The manipulation. The violation. The false accusation. The theft. The fire. The firing. The day everything changed.

That marked moment in time.

Like your own personal BC and AD, which usually mean Before Christ and *Anno Domini*. This dating was intended to indicate a turning point in history—the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. When we have personal marked moments in our own history it can feel like Before Crisis and After Devastation.

It's a line in time. One that's so sharply drawn across your reality, it not only divides your life, it splits open your memory bank and defiles it. Pictures of the past are some of our most priceless treasures, until they become painful reminders of what no longer is. And when your phone randomly sends those memory movies of what happened on this same day four years ago, it stops you from breathing.

Life before. Life now. Is it even possible to move on from something like this? Is it even possible to create a life that's beautiful again?

Some part of what you loved about your life exploded in that moment and marked you with this unwanted reference point of before and after. Grief is devastating no matter how it comes. But when there's a person or people whose choices struck the match igniting the grief? It's only natural to clench your jaw when you think of what happened.

And maybe it seems like you think of what happened all the time. Or at least so much of the time you wonder if you'll ever, ever stop having that deep-aching, off-kilter feeling. That throbbing heartbreak bubbling with an equal mix of anxiety, unanswered questions, and suspicion that really no one in the world is truly safe anymore.

People are all around you at work, in the coffee shop, at your kid's school, and even at church just trying to live their lives, completely unaware that at any moment there could be a triggered memory so painful you'll feel as though the world has no more oxygen to breathe. But you are the only one affected. You're gasping, sweating, and being asked to please get on with it or get out of everyone's way.

All you can do is stare at the pictures that just popped up, taken just before everything changed, desperate to go back to that moment and warn your former self to redirect . . . change course . . . avoid . . . escape . . . turn . . . and maybe, maybe this wouldn't have ever happened.

Then, surely, you wouldn't be here. In the mess of the aftershock and fallout. Grief and panic. Feeling as fragile as the tiniest twig but as stuck in this place as a hundred-year-old stump.

I understand all of that.

Like you, I wish I didn't have such an intimate understanding of those feelings. But I do. If you read my last book, *It's Not Supposed to Be This Way*, you know of the shattering discovery of my husband's affair and the long road of uncertainty I was still walking at the end of that book. The four years of hellish heartbreak that followed the discovery did eventually take an unexpected turn toward reconciliation. I'm grateful, but I have not been spared the slow and grueling work of finding my way again after experiencing something that forever marked my life.

I cried again today. It wasn't because something is wrong in my marriage. Restoration is a gift for which I'm so very thankful, but that's not what this book is about. It's about figuring out what to do when you can't forget what happened and *forgiveness* feels like a dirty word.

I'll raise my hand here. That's why I cried today. If you relate to this, then you know how awful it is to define one's life with the words *before* and *after*. And if no one else in this world has been kind enough to say this, I will. I'm so, so sorry for all that's happened to you.

Whether this was an event or a collection of hurt that built over time because someone wasn't who they were supposed to be, didn't do what they were supposed to do, or didn't protect you like they should have protected you, your heartbreak deserves a safe place to be processed. Whoever "they" are in your story, their actions hurt you, took from you, and set off a chain of events still greatly affecting you. And that was wrong.

This isn't a judgment against them. I don't know all the facts

of what happened. And I'm not qualified to be their judge, but I can be a witness for your pain.

Your pain is real. And so is mine. So, if no one has acknowledged this with you, I will.

But, friend, can I whisper something I'm learning?

Staying here, blaming them, and forever defining your life by what they did will only increase the pain. Worse, it will keep projecting out onto others. The more our pain consumes us, the more it will control us. And sadly, it's those who least deserve to be hurt whom our unresolved pain will hurt the most.

That person or people—they've caused enough pain for you, for me, and for those around us. There's been enough damage done. They've taken enough. You don't have to hand over what was precious and priceless to you and deem all the memories as hurtful. You get to decide how you'll move forward.

A few years ago when my marriage imploded, I didn't think I had a say-so in keeping memories that were precious to me. I thought my marriage was over; therefore, my life had to be edited both going forward and backward. I went through the entire house and removed all pictures of "us." I packed up some of my most favorite family mementos. I tried to untangle my life from anything that reminded me of what once was, because, well, because I didn't know what else to do. But completely sterilizing my life from the physical presence of reminders didn't remove the pain. You can't edit reality to try and force healing. You can't fake yourself into being okay with what happened. But you can decide that the one who hurt you doesn't get to decide what you do with your memories. Your life can be a graceful combination of beautiful and painful. You don't have to put either definitive label on what once was. It can be both-and.

Maybe that's part of what's hard about moving on: the letting

*The more
our pain*

CONSUMES

*us, the more
it will*

CONTROL

us.

go. But what if it's possible to let go of what we must but still carry with us what is beautiful and meaningful and true to us? And maybe this less-severe version of moving on is what will ease us to a place of forgiveness. There's been enough trauma. So, because I don't want anything else ripped or stripped away, I need to decide what stays and what goes.

This is what I need. This is what I want.

I want to look at my wedding album with joy again, even though an affair would be an eventual horrific reality for us. That day was still real and beautiful and completely worth treasuring.

I want to remember that vacation we took that we all loved without zeroing in on the fact that it's also when I didn't know what was going on. We were still making incredible memories full of laughter, sharing inside jokes, crazy competitive games, silly dances, and long dinner conversations. It was real and it was lovely. And I'm not willing to deny what I authentically experienced.

I want to look at that Christmas card we sent—with all of us dressed up and smiling—and not cringe, feeling like a fool or a fake. The family closeness we captured that day was real and so precious and completely true to me.

I want this for you too. However this translates within the context of your pain, those pictures, those memories, those times of togetherness . . . if they were a joy to you, they are yours to keep.


Other memories that are excruciatingly painful are yours to release.

And those that are a tangle of both are yours to sort out into piles of keep and toss. It is necessary for you not to let pain rewrite your memories. And it's absolutely necessary not to let pain ruin your future.

CHAPTER 1 •

forgiveness,

THE
DOUBLE-EDGED
WORD



IN THE EARLY DAYS and months of my marriage devastation, I remember wishing I could be put to sleep like when you have surgery. Why is it they only call in the anesthesiologists when you are surgically cut open? When you are being ripped open emotionally, it's no less painful.

The shock and heartbreak and relationship implosion impacted every level of my life. Nothing was left untouched or undamaged. And I felt the harsh realities every single day. Each morning I woke up to something else devastating. My kids were struggling. My health was failing. My finances were a mess. I was getting letters from attorneys I never dreamed we'd need. And each night the only way I could sleep was to lie to myself that tomorrow would be better.

Days turned into months. Months turned into years. And slowly I turned into someone I didn't recognize. My strong but normally carefree spirit became a confusing mix of anxiety, panic attacks, and soul-blinding pain so intense I thought I'd never feel healthy or regain a sense of normalcy again. And because I'd been through so much that was so hard to process, a darkness started to cloud my outlook that used to be so optimistic.

Relationships were reduced to attempts at managing what I feared about them rather than enjoying what I loved about them. Laughter felt fake. Fun felt careless. And people's imperfections were like neon lights screaming that they were just another high-risk opportunity for me to get hurt again. Daily issues all seemed like worst-case scenarios. Small aggravations like

emotional chaos. And losses big and small were like terminal assaults.

A heaviness settled in that I couldn't explain or pinpoint exactly. I'm not sure how to properly describe it, except to say on different days it crept up with varying personas that seemed to hold me together and rip me apart simultaneously.

Cynicism dressed like a security guard, making me believe that if I hoped for less, it would protect me and prevent more pain. In reality, though, it was a thief in disguise, out to steal every bit of closeness between me and those I love. And, even worse, authentic intimacy between me and God.

Bitterness masqueraded like a high court judge, making me believe I must protect the evidence against all those who hurt me so I could state and restate my airtight case and hear "guilty" proclaimed over them. In reality, though, it was a punishing sentence of isolation, out to starve my soul of life-giving relationships.

Resentment cloaked itself in a banner marked with the word *vindication*, making me believe that the only way to get free of my pain was to make sure those who caused it hurt as badly as I did. In reality, though, it was a trap in disguise, with dagger teeth digging into me deeper and deeper, keeping me tortured and, even worse, unable to move forward.

Delay snuck in like a theater attendant, offering popcorn and a comfy chair made of my sorrow and sadness, making me believe it was just fine to stay there, playing old movies of what happened over and over. And that, by doing so, I'd one day understand why it all happened. In reality, though, I was in a torture chamber, with each replay only ratcheting up the pain but never providing the answers I kept thinking would come.

And, lastly, *trust issues* disguised themselves as private investigators on stealth missions, making me believe they would

help me catch everyone out to hurt me and prove no one was truly honest. In reality, trust issues were toxic gas that, instead of keeping away the few who shouldn't be trusted, choked the life out of everyone who got close to me.

These were the soldiers of unforgiveness waging war against me.

The soldiers of unforgiveness waging war right now against every hurting person.

I am a soul who likes the concept of forgiveness . . . until I am a hurting soul who doesn't.

So it would seem strange that I am the one to pen the words of this book. But if this were easy for me, if I didn't struggle with forgiveness, I'm not sure it would be written with the angst a message like this deserves.

Left to my own deep, deep woundedness, forgiveness can seem offensive, impossible, and one of the quickest ways to compound the unfairness of being wronged. I cry for fairness. I want blessings for those who follow the rules of life and love. I want correction for those who break them.

Is that too much to ask?

And it's that exact spot where I like to park, stew, focus on everyone else's wrongs, and rally those who agree with me to join in and further help me justify staying right there.

But that's like the time in college I stayed in the parking lot of a beautiful vacation spot just to make a point. A small offense happened with my friends on the drive up. When we got to our destination, they all piled out of the car, skipped through the entry, and spent hours playing fun games on the beach, jumping in the refreshingly cool waves, eating a picnic lunch, and making incredible memories together. All the while, I walked around the parking lot with vigilante strides in the sweltering heat, letting my anger intensify with every passing hour.

I relished the idea of teaching my friends a lesson by staging this solo protest.

But, in the end, I was the only one affected by it. I'm the only one who missed out. I'm the only one who stayed hungry. I'm the only one whose wrong actions were talked about that day. And then I'm the one who rode home in silence, knowing no one had been punished by my choices but me.

The soldiers of unforgiveness whooped and hollered at their victory that day. And I was just another lonely soul crying herself to sleep, feeling embarrassed and defeated. The only memory I made that day was a sour one.

That was a silly day with a pretty insignificant offense that kept me all bent out of shape. Please know, I want to acknowledge and absolutely recognize that much of the pain you and I have been through is way more serious and complicated and devastating than that day at the beach. But that parking lot is such a good visual of what holding on to offenses does to us and where the cruel soldiers of unforgiveness will always lead us: to isolation . . . to the emotional darkness of broken relationships . . . to spiritual darkness with heaped-on shame . . . and to a darkened outlook where we are unable to see the beauty that awaits just beyond the parking lot.

What if I'd been able to release the offense and move forward that day at the beach? What if I could do that now?

The ability to see beautiful again is what I want for you and for me. Forgiveness is the weapon. Our choices moving forward are the battlefield. Moving on is the journey. Being released from that heavy feeling is the reward. Regaining the possibility of trust and closeness is the sweet victory. And walking confidently with the Lord from hurt to healing is the freedom that awaits.

That's what this book is. A journey where you'll discover new ways, healthy and helpful ways, to process your pain.

Now let me assure you what it isn't.

It is not a message that diminishes what you've been through or makes light of the anguish you've cried a million tears over. It is not a message that justifies abuse or abandonment or affairs that are all wrong no matter how it's flipped or framed by others. It is not a message that refuses to acknowledge how powerful feelings are and how powerless you can feel when you get flooded by pain, triggered by memories, ignored by those who were supposed to love you, or brushed aside by those who should have cared for you.

This isn't a message that demands you excuse the cruelest and most horrific crimes committed against you or those you love.

Nor will it nod in the direction of forgiveness demanding all relationships work out with all people—sometimes that's neither possible nor safe. In fact, in these pages, we will do the work of untangling the erroneously commingled ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation.

And this message definitely isn't something that will be preached at you with pointed fingers and accusatory tones. I can't pick those messages up, so I definitely won't be laying a message like that down. But while it will offer truckloads of grace, it is fueled with God's truth. After all, grace gives us the assurance that it's safe enough to soften our fearful hearts, but it is the truth that will set us free (John 8:32). Grace and truth are kept together throughout Scripture (John 1:14, 17). If I only offered you grace, I would be shortchanging you on what it truly takes to heal. While the truth is sometimes hard to hear, God gives it to us because He knows what our hearts and souls really need. It is His truth that sets us free.

Forgiveness is possible, but it won't always feel possible.

Forgiveness often feels like one of the most maddening instructions from the Lord.

It's a double-edged word, isn't it?

It's hard to give. It's amazing to get. But when we receive it freely from the Lord and refuse to give it, something heavy starts to form in our souls.

It's the weight of forgiveness that wasn't allowed to pass through. And for me, that's mainly because I've misunderstood something so incredibly profound about forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't something hard we have the option to do or not do. Forgiveness is something hard won that we have the opportunity to participate in. Our part in forgiveness isn't one of desperation where we have to muscle through with gritted teeth and clenched fists. It isn't fighting through the irritation and wrestling down the indignation. It isn't sobbing through the resistance of all our justifications to stay angry and hurt and horrified by all they did.

This is what I once thought.

But when I wrongly think forgiveness rises and falls on all my efforts, mustered-up grit, conjured maturity, bossed-around resistance, and gentle feelings that seem real one moment and fake the next, I'll never be able to authentically give the kind of forgiveness Jesus has given me.

My ability to forgive others rises and falls, instead, on this: leaning into what Jesus has already done, which allows His grace *for me* to flow freely *through me* (Ephesians 4:7).


Forgiveness isn't an act of my determination.

Forgiveness is only made possible by my cooperation.

Cooperation is what I've been missing.

God knew we couldn't do it on our own. He knew that full well, right from the very moment the crunch of the forbidden fruit became sin's first sounds. And then came the hiss of the enemy's accusations and the pounding footsteps of a terrified man

Forgiveness isn't an act of my determination. Forgiveness is only made possible by my cooperation.



and woman. Adam and Eve ran to the darkness as blame and shame reverberated with echoes we still hear coming out of our mouths today. Then, they hid.

As soon as sin was their choice, the cover of darkness became their preference.

And please be patient as I type these next words. It's not just when I do something wrong that I find myself running and hiding in the darkness. It's also when I do the very opposite of what I should in reaction to someone who sins against me, wrongs me, hurts me, or even just inconveniences me. My first inclination most of the time isn't to bless them. Or to be patient with them. Or to be all things Romans 12 and give them a Happy Meal and a chocolate milkshake.

Nope.

My first inclination is to do the very thing I'm so critical of them doing. I let my justifications for retaliation draw me in, and I make sure I hurt them the way they hurt me. And when sin is my choice, the cover of darkness is my preference. But make no mistake . . . it isn't just what covers me. It's also what hovers over me with that maddening heaviness.

Human hearts are so very prone to want to cover things up. We all have that place we run to where it is dark rather than risk what may come out in the light. We want freedom but are resistant to simply do what God says to do.

God knew all of this.

So He made a way not dependent on our strength. A forgiving way. A way to grab on to Jesus' outstretched arms, bloody from crucifixion and dripping with redemption. He covers and forgives what we've only been able to hide. He forgives what we could never be good enough to make right. And makes a way for us to simply cooperate with His work of forgiveness—for us to receive and for us to give.

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

But please never confuse redemption with reunion. Reunion, or reconciliation, requires two people who are willing to do the hard work to come back together. Redemption is just between you and God. God can redeem your life, even if damaged human relationships don't come back together.

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

Those who cooperate most fully with forgiveness are those who dance most freely in the beauty of redemption.

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

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

WHAT YOU GET: the freedom to move on.

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

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

And you'll see . . . those who cooperate most fully with forgiveness really are those who dance most freely in the beauty of redemption.

I'll just let that statement sit right there without requiring anything from you.

I certainly don't mean that you should quickly get over all you've been through and move on from here. Deep emotions come to us in a rush but don't leave at the same pace.

It takes time. That is exactly what I wish to give you as we move slowly through this message. Before we walk through the steps of forgiveness, we're first going to process our coping mechanisms and the reasons we resist forgiveness. And, even more importantly, we are going to make the decision that we will survive all of this by taking away the power from the ones who hurt us. Our healing can't rise or fall on their efforts, especially if they can't or won't change. Yes, this will take time, but it can happen.

And pressing on toward forgiveness will require other important components as well.

Those who
cooperate
most fully with

FORGIVENESS

are those who
dance most freely
in the beauty of

REDEMPTION.

It takes understanding. That is the reason I'm sharing both the brutal and the beautiful realities of my own deep pain.

It takes insight. That is what I'll give you based on my study of God's Word, my own admissions of resistance, and my imperfect progress.

It takes divine intervention. That is exactly what God will provide you personally and profoundly, not through my words but His, woven throughout this book.

And, lastly, it will take openness. That's the invitation. I'm not requiring this from you but rather offering you a place in this discussion for your own revelations from God to gently and beautifully emerge. And the best part is . . . we can do this together.

WELCOME
TO THE

CHAPTER 2

table



I WROTE THIS MESSAGE sitting at a gray wooden table.

Many days it was just me, my computer, my tears, my Bible, and my own struggles with forgiveness. Other days I invited in friends I work with, who each brought in their own life experiences through which to process this message.

That's the thing about writing a book that's complicated and wonderful and hard some days. Life doesn't stop for a message. New things happen during the writing process that force me to ask the question, "Does this message really work in the midst of everyday life? In this new hard thing that is happening?" Life just keeps placing opportunities to forgive in front of us all.

So we kept pulling up our chairs to the gray table and opening up our hearts to the teachings in the Bible and in this book. Some of us looked back at unforgiven things in our pasts that were affecting us today more than we ever dared to admit before. Others didn't really have epic hard things, but anything painful that we keep revisiting in our thoughts over and over again is worth addressing. Sometimes things just collect. A hurtful situation here. A painful conversation there. And then others of us had more defined hurts happening in real time.

One of us had an ex-boyfriend who got engaged. She thought she'd dealt with the death of the dreams she had when that relationship ended very suddenly. She'd moved on. But the engagement stirred up hurt feelings not yet forgiven.

One of us had a lifelong friendship that started to unravel because of choices his friend was making that made no sense at

all. Boundaries needed to be drawn. Hard conversations turned into silence that turned into the deafening reality of a friendship ending.

Another of us had no idea that this message was preparation for the most horrific situation his family would face. Just before I finalized the manuscript, he got a call that his college-age cousin had been murdered. The next time we pulled up chairs around the gray table, he had just gotten home from her memorial service where they'd played a slideshow of her smiling and laughing and just being her delightfully beautiful self. "How in the world could something like this happen? My family and I are just in shock."

So we each wrestled through our own questions about forgiveness in the midst of the gritty, tearful, desperate experiences we brought to the table. And, though you didn't know it, we always had an extra chair for you.

Here, your questions are safe. Your heartbreak is tenderly held. Your thoughts don't need to be edited. Your soul's need for truth will be tended to. And your resistance is understood. Welcome to the gray table, friend.

I know what it feels like to have been hurt so deeply that forgiveness feels like a command too cruel for you to consider. Or, it's a spiritual theory you might think about one day after a lot more time has passed. Or, it's a topic you've been avoiding and don't care to discuss.

I get all of that. I really do. I think if I were invited to this table, I'd have some version of all of that combined.

There have been seasons in my life when I, personally, had many differing reactions to the mention of the word *forgiveness*. Guardedness. Defeat. Anger. Hurt. Fearfulness. Frustration. Confusion. That's why I want to assure you of something vitally important.

I know what it's like to look around a room, eyes glassy with pain, and feel so very alone. Friend, you aren't alone here. And you won't be judged as you wrestle through this message.

I don't want someone who can't possibly understand how deeply my heart has been broken to boss me around as if forgiveness should be easier. Nor do I want someone to shame me for being so hesitant or, worse yet, try to burden my brain with a teaching I'm just not ready to hear.

I haven't waltzed my way through the writing of this message. I've wrestled with it. I've felt defeated by it.

In all the research I've done on forgiveness, I've found many legitimate feelings feeding the resistance that holds many of us back. See which of these resonates with you:

- ✿ I fear the offense will be repeated.
- ✿ Hanging on to a grudge gives me a sense of control in a situation that's felt so unfair.
- ✿ The pain I experienced altered my life, and yet no one has ever validated that what I went through was wrong.
- ✿ Forgiveness feels like it trivializes, minimizes, or, worse yet, makes what happened no big deal.
- ✿ I can't possibly forgive when I still feel so hostile toward the one who hurt me.
- ✿ I'm not ready to forgive.
- ✿ I still feel hurt.
- ✿ They haven't apologized or even acknowledged that what they did was wrong.
- ✿ Being back in relationship with this person isn't possible or safe. Furthermore, it's not even reasonable for me to have a conversation with the person who hurt me.

- ✦ I'm still in the middle of a long, hard situation with no resolution yet.
- ✦ I'm afraid forgiveness will give them false hope that I want to reestablish the relationship, but I don't.
- ✦ It's easier to ignore this person altogether than to try and figure out boundaries so they don't keep hurting me.
- ✦ What they did is unchangeable; therefore, forgiveness won't help anything.
- ✦ The person who hurt me is no longer here. I can't forgive someone I can't talk to.
- ✦ I don't think any good will come from forgiveness now.

When your heart has been shattered and reshaped into something that doesn't quite feel normal inside your own chest yet, forgiveness feels a bit unrealistic.

At first, we say it's too soon.

And then years go by, and we say it's too late.

I knew as a Christian I was supposed to forgive. I may have even whispered a faint prayer using the word *forgiveness*. But truly understanding how to forgive? I wasn't sure. And isn't it odd that, though forgiveness is a major part of the Christian faith, most of us have never been taught much about it?

We know God commands us to do it. But how? Why? When? And are there exceptions?

After more than one thousand hours of studying this topic in the Bible, I can't say all my questions have been answered. Nor can I promise this is easy. But I can tell you the Bible offers the truth about forgiveness that our souls desperately need. And, best of all, God Himself modeled how to do this even when it feels so very impossible.

God's Word offers forgiveness with skin on. Sinless Jesus, absolute divinity and complete humanity, was afflicted and rejected, beaten and humiliated, spit upon and devalued on every level. Enduring it all so we would never have to endure one minute of our suffering alone.

He came for us with forgiveness pulsing through the very blood He would one day shed. He wouldn't allow forgiveness to be shoved away with human justifications. For in the very instance we think we have landed on the forgiveness limitation, Jesus blows it apart with His multiplication (seventy times seven) and His declaration that we must not entertain unforgiveness when we have been so very forgiven by God Himself.

Forgiveness is a command. But it is not cruel. It is God's divine mercy for human hearts that are so prone to turn hurt into hate.

And what about that saying, Forgive and forget? That's actually not in the Bible. You can still forgive even if you can't forget. We are instructed to let go of what's behind us so we can move forward without the weight of bitterness, resentment, anger, and unforgiveness. But forgetting? The only place that's mentioned in the Bible is connected to God forgiving us of our sins: "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12 ESV).

Also, you can sigh with relief that abuse is not to be tolerated. Where the limitless grace of God provides a way for all to be forgiven, the truth of God provides appropriate parameters so that wrong behavior can be addressed. And boundaries can be established with equal measures of mercy and tough love.

I've taken an honest look at deep pain when unchangeable wounds feel so very unforgivable. I've wrestled through the unfairness. I've turned forgiveness inside out, examining it

theologically, morally, ethically, relationally, rationally, and, maybe even best of all, through the irrational but infinitely beautiful actions of Jesus Himself.

There are complexities that must be considered. There is no way to position forgiveness as simple when it is supposed to apply to instances that span the range of offense, from an inconvenience to a brutal murder. The cost of one is so minuscule in comparison to the magnitude of the other. And yet, the invitation to cooperate with the forgiveness of God spans across them both.

Yes, consequences stay tied to the severity of the sin. And God's mercy is not void of His justice. But the command for us to forgive rings too crystal clear to avoid or refuse.

Please know, though, as a soul who has resisted seeing forgiveness as possible while weeping in my own seat of suffering, I don't say any of this lightly. I will not shame you for your struggle or blame you for your skepticism.

One of the ways I learned to acknowledge what was holding me back from healing was letting a counselor talk to me about what she saw me doing to cope with all the pain I was in.

I was in a therapy group where I was honestly feeling pretty good about the progress I'd been making. Everyone there seemed to have a plethora of things they turned to when their pain felt unmanageable. Drugs and drinking were the most common choices. But Netflix and casual sexual encounters were also mentioned. And there I sat with my Bible in my lap. My counselor must have picked up on my overestimation of how well I was doing.

"And, Lysa, let's talk about your coping mechanism."

I smiled, because I fully expected her to give me a pass on this round of therapy.

She did not. Instead she said, “You hyperspiritualize what you’ve been through to the point where you deny your feelings rather than actually deal with your pain.”

Ouch. No pass on this round. I wanted to glare at her and dismiss her. But honestly, she was right. Her statement peeled back all my posturing and positivity and pretending.

Eventually, here’s what I had to ask myself: Am I processing life through the lens of the way I want it to be or the way it actually is?

Coping mechanisms, like being overly positive or hyperspiritual or using substances to numb out, may get us through the short term. But in the long run they don’t help us cope; they keep us stuck at the point of our unhealed pain. At some point we must stop:

- ✿ Replaying what happened over and over.
- ✿ Taking what was actually terrible in the past and tricking ourselves into thinking it was better than it was.
- ✿ Imagining the way things should be so much that we can’t acknowledge what is.

We can’t live in an alternate reality and expect what’s right in front of us to get better. We can only heal what we’re willing to acknowledge is real.

I’ve been deeply affected by what I’ve been through. And though I’m really good at decorating the words I’ve used to assure those around me that I’m good and even convince myself I’m better than I am, I think it’s time to pack the decorations away and deal with what’s really there.

I’m both terrified of the stripped-down version of my reality and slightly intrigued by the uncluttered nature of being able to

see what's really there. Then, I can better assess what state I'm really in and decide with great intentionality what parts of my heart still need healing before I can truly move on.

So my counselor wisely pointed out some hyperspiritual statements I've made to give the appearance that my heart is more healed than it actually is:

- ✿ I'm good. I'm fine. I've just decided to move on.
- ✿ Their loss for walking away from me.
- ✿ God will eventually make everything all right.
- ✿ As a Christian, I know I should forgive, so I have.
- ✿ What's in the past is in the past. I'm just walking forward. No big deal.
- ✿ There's so much to be thankful for, so I'm just choosing to be grateful.
- ✿ Who has the time or energy to unpack why this happened and how it affected me? Let's just move on.
- ✿ I'm mature enough to say, "It is what it is," and get over it.

You may be thinking, "Wait a minute . . . those statements aren't bad." Well, I agree, unless you are using them and they are *keeping* you stuck in a bad place. Putting on a smiling face while filled with unhealed hurt inside is a set up for an eventual blow up.

Sometimes it seems easier to deny my pain than to do the hard work to deal with and heal what's really there. C. S. Lewis wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."¹

Whether you're knee-deep in pain and resonate with the list of resistance feelings described at the beginning of this chapter or denying your pain as in the list just above, let me assure

you: forgiveness is possible. And it is good. Your heart is much too beautiful a place for unhealed pain. Your soul is much too deserving of freedom to stay stuck here.

Forgiveness is not adding on top of your pain a misery too great to bear. It is exchanging bound-up resentment for a life-giving freedom, thus making the mystery of the workings of God too great to deny.

On earth we usually only get to see people operating in the flesh. It is expected that kindness is repaid with kindness. And no one is surprised when anger is repaid with anger. We see it every day.

It seems if we have a pulse, we also have stories of when we've been injured, hurt, wronged, and brokenhearted by the choices of another. Unhealed hurt often becomes unleashed hurt spewed out on others. It's so very common to be so very offended.

Even with Christians. Even in churches. Even with friends who used to pray together. And even in families that have Bibles in every room of their houses.

And even with me. When the pain is so deeply personal, it's hard for my reactions to stay biblical. It's hard not to eventually lose it when hurt just keeps getting added onto hurt.

But I can also tell you something I've seen with my own eyes that's more astonishing than what I can possibly express through pixelated letters on a printed page.

When someone, by the power of the Spirit of God, overrides the resistance of the flesh and the pull of unforgiveness, it's shocking.

It's one of the rarest moments in the lives of everyone looking on.

It's when you get to see with your physical eyes evidence of the Spirit of God as real as if you can touch it. It is a moment no one forgets.

UNHEALED

hurt often becomes

UNLEASHED

*hurt spewed
out on*

OTHERS.

When this world—so saturated with flesh resenting flesh, hearts hating hearts, fists slamming fists, pride rising against pride—suddenly sees someone dropping their sword and daring to whisper, “I forgive” . . . IT STOPS ALL.

In the split second of that utterance, evil is arrested, heaven touches earth, and the richest evidence of the truth of the gospel reverberates not just that day but for generations to come. While salvation is what brings the flesh of a human into perfect alignment with the Spirit of God, forgiveness is the greatest evidence that the Truth of God lives in us.

And none who sees this can walk away unaffected.

I’m so glad I saved you a seat at this table.