

*LifeChange*

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing  
encounter with God's Word*

# **FORGIVENESS**

*Followers of Jesus model His posture of  
forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation.*

OVER 3 MILLION SOLD

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A NavPress resource published in alliance  
with Tyndale House Publishers

*Forgiveness: A Bible Study on Releasing Wrongs and Restoring Relationships*

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Written by Cassia Glass

The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor; Elizabeth Schroll, Copyeditor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Sarah Susan Richardson, Designer

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# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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## Objectives

The topical guides in the LifeChange series of Bible studies cover important topics from the Bible. Although the LifeChange guides vary with the topics they explore, they share some common goals:

1. to help readers grasp what key passages in the Bible say about the topic;
2. to provide readers with explanatory notes, word definitions, historical background, and cross-references so that the only other reference they need is the Bible;
3. to teach readers how to let God's Word transform them into Christ's image;
4. to provide small groups with a tool that will enhance group discussion of each passage and topic; and
5. to write each session so that advance preparation for group members is strongly encouraged but not required.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take forty-five minutes to complete.

## Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of forgiveness. The key to interpretation for each part of this study is content (what is the referenced passage *about*?), and the key to context is purpose (what is the author's *aim* for the passage as it relates to the overall topic?). Each lesson of the study explores an aspect of forgiveness with a corresponding passage from the Bible.

## Kinds of Questions

Bible study provides different lenses and perspectives through which to engage the Scripture: observe (what does the passage *say*?), interpret (what does the passage *mean*?), and apply (how does this truth *affect* my life?). Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God's Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, *Lord, what do You want me to see here?*, *Father, why is this true?*, and *Lord, how does this apply to my life?*

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember what you're learning.

## Study Aids

Throughout the guide, there are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from commentaries, and word studies. These aids are included in the guide to help you interpret the Bible without needing to use other, outside resources. Still, if you're interested in exploring further, the full resources are listed in the endnotes.

## Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. The other versions cited are *The Message* and the *New English Translation*.

Use any translation you like for study—or preferably more than one. Ideally you would have on hand a good, modern translation such as the New International Version, the English Standard Version, the New Living Translation, or the Christian Standard Bible. A paraphrase such as *The Message* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

## Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return

to the passage as often as you can during the day for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

## For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other-sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and workplace Bible studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per meeting. This guide is formatted so you will be able to discuss each of the questions at length. Be sure to make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all the background and discussion questions to be covered. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray for one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another resist temptation, assure each other that each person's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. If you wish, you can spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons and discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow your time of sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down what others have shared, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about what they shared at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Taking notes during discussion will help you remember to follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and have clarity on an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating.

Some best practices for groups:

1. If possible, come to the group discussion prepared. The more each group member knows about the passage and the questions being asked, the better your discussion will be.
2. Realize that the group leader will not be teaching from the passage but instead will be facilitating your discussion. Therefore, it is important for each group member to participate so that everyone can contribute to what you learn as a group.
3. Try to stick to the passage covered in the session and the specific questions in the study guide.



4. Listen attentively to the other members of the group when they are sharing their thoughts about the passage. Also, realize that most of the questions are open-ended, allowing for more than one answer.
5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion—especially if you are the leader. Allow time for everyone to share their thoughts and ideas.
6. As mentioned previously, throughout the session are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from commentaries, and word studies. Reading these aloud during the meeting is optional and up to the discussion leader. However, each member can refer to these insights if they found them helpful in understanding the passage.

## **A Note on Topical Studies**

LifeChange guides offer a robust and thoughtful engagement with God's Word. The book-centric guides focus on a step-by-step walk through that particular book of the Bible. The topical studies use Scripture to help you engage more deeply with God's Word and its implications for your life.

# INTRODUCTION

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## Forgiveness

### WHY DO WE FORGIVE?

Forgiveness means releasing those who have wronged us from the relational debt they have created. But the very idea runs counter to what we think should happen when someone causes harm. When a victim's family extends forgiveness to a violent criminal, such after the 2015 Emanuel AME Church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, we wonder whether forgiving means compromising justice or delaying healthy grief.<sup>1</sup> When we see those in genocide-ravaged Rwanda choosing to lay aside hatred and work toward not only forgiveness but also reconciliation, we wonder if that kind of restoration is even possible.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, something in us knows that forgiveness makes room for healing and restoration and helps us exchange spiritual turmoil for peace. Even medical science shows us this: Practicing forgiveness, even after deeply traumatic events, helps protect the cardiovascular system, improves mental health, and extends life expectancy.<sup>3</sup>

Forgiveness is both counterintuitive and compelling. First-century audiences must have also wrestled with this reality when Jesus talked about forgiveness in His Sermon on the Mount: the revolutionary call to love and pray for enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to forgive others (Matthew 6:14). The apostle Paul also challenged the family of the Lord Jesus Christ to be characterized by a posture of forgiveness: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

So why do we forgive? Paul's answer emphasizes a form of the term *forgive* three times in a scant few words. We forgive because Jesus Himself exemplified such a posture, forgiving humanity's debt of sin through His sacrificial death on the cross.

To be identified with Christ, then, is to look and act increasingly like Him through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, right down to His forgiving nature. Scripture shows us that forgiveness is an integral part of God's character. In this LifeChange guide, we will trace the concept of forgiveness across both the Old and New Testaments to discover more about the God who forgives and examine how He empowers us to forgive others.



# FORGIVENESS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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## Matthew 6:5-15

IN 1947, CORRIE TEN BOOM, a Dutch Christian who had been interned in Germany's Ravensbrück concentration camp for hiding Jews from the Nazis, reentered the country where she had been brutally treated and her dear sister died. Her reason? To tell Germans gathered at a Munich church about the God who forgives. "When we confess our sins," she declared, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

As she prepared to leave the church, she recognized a face in the room: "I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones."

The man was her former guard from the concentration camp. "I have become a Christian," he said. "I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein*, will you forgive me?"

Corrie recounted, "I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. 'If you do not forgive men their trespasses,' Jesus says, 'neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.'"

Corrie realized in that moment that she could call on Jesus to help her forgive: to make a choice, a decision to follow the One who called her rather than to respond out of emotion. She took the man's outstretched hand, and as she later recounted, "This healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes." She was able to forgive him with her whole heart.<sup>1</sup>

Corrie's dilemma is ours: We may believe in theory that we should forgive others when they sin against us, but the gulf between theory and application widens as

we feel the weight of the harm. But as Corrie noted, Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) does not seem to offer exceptions. Instead, His teaching points to a way forward in our dilemma—the “how” of forgiveness—while also orienting us to ask why forgiveness matters so much in God's Kingdom.

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1. Read Matthew 6:5-15. Verses 9-13 are perhaps the most often quoted prayer of all time. What details stand out to you as you read the Lord's Prayer within the larger context of the passage?

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2. What contrasts do you notice between the model prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and the prayers described in Matthew 6:5-8? What do these contrasts reveal about the relationship between the ones praying and God?

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New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener explains: “Having summarized Jesus' message as repentance in view of the coming kingdom (4:17), Matthew now collects Jesus' teachings that explain how a repentant person ready for God's rule should live. Only those submitted to God's reign now [in their present lives] are truly prepared for the time when he will judge the world and reign there unchallenged. This sermon provides examples of the self-sacrificial ethics of the kingdom, which its citizens must learn to exemplify even in the present world before the rest of the world recognizes that kingdom (6:10).”<sup>22</sup>



5. In Matthew 6:14-15, what do you discover about the relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven by God? How might this relate to the larger discussion of hypocritical or pagan prayers in Matthew 6:5-7?

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Michael J. Wilkins suggests, “[Matthew 6] does not teach that humans must forgive others before they can receive forgiveness themselves; rather, forgiveness of others is *proof* that that disciple’s sins are forgiven and he or she possesses salvation (cf. 18:21-35). Disciples are to forgive those who have wronged them to maintain a joyful experience of our salvation (cf. 6:14-15). Doing so serves as evidence that a person has truly been forgiven his or her debt of sin. If we don’t forgive, it is evidence that we haven’t experienced forgiveness ourselves. . . . Salvation does not rest on human merits but only on the grace and mercy of God. Once disciples have received forgiveness and salvation, they are to forgive with the same forgiveness with which they have been forgiven.”<sup>4</sup>

6. In Jesus’ day, people viewed the religious elite (the Pharisees and the teachers of the law) as the epitome of righteousness because of how strictly they kept the religious laws and traditions. However, one of the themes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is that entering the Kingdom of Heaven requires a righteousness that “surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” (Matthew 5:20). How might Jesus’ warning about withholding forgiveness prompt His listeners to look beyond themselves for the power and righteousness to be forgiven and to forgive?

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9. Consider a time when you had difficulty feeling that you were forgiven by God. What obstacles made it difficult to approach God or accept God's gift of forgiving your debts? How might you use the Lord's Prayer as a model to ask the Father for help in receiving forgiveness?

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10. Now consider a time when you had difficulty forgiving another person. What obstacles made it difficult to forgive your debtors? How might you use the Lord's Prayer as a model to ask the Father for help in forgiving others?

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