

FINDING HEALING THROUGH FORGIVENESS

Looking Back: Clearing Away the Trash We Regret

Joel 1:2–20; 2:12–27



LET'S BEGIN HERE

God designed our souls to thrive when we connect in loving ways with other people. The psalmist delights in the beauty of healthy community:

How wonderful and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in harmony! (Psalm 133:1 NLT)

Conversely, how miserable it is when people live in discord—people like the family members who haven't spoken in years or the spouses who bicker incessantly. When our relationships suffer, the beauty of God's design fades like a rose that turns brown and brittle when cut from its stem.

For a moment, survey the landscape of your closest relationships. Do you see a garden thriving with affection and mutual encouragement? Or maybe you see thorns of unresolved offenses and angry words choking the once healthy relationships.

This series is designed to help you examine your relationships from all angles—looking back, ahead, within, and around—and then apply the principles gleaned from God's perspective. He is the Master Gardener who knows best how to restore relationships to their intended beauty. His Word contains the keys to a flourishing garden, and the first key is *repentance*.



DIGGING DEEPER

When studying the Scriptures, a helpful first step is to gather resources that will guide you in your study. Make certain you have handy a Bible dictionary and a concordance, as well as a reliable commentary on the book of the Bible you're studying. For this study, we recommend you get a copy of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* and *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. You'll find a description of that and other resources in the "Bible Study Tools" section of our online store.

When we've blown it in a relationship, the right response is repentance, which usually isn't our first response. Many times, we'd rather sweep our mess under

Quotable

*Repentance is
complete when your
life is an open book
before the one you
have wronged.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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the rug or blame our trash on someone else. To repent we must deal with our sin honestly and be willing to bear the pain of regret and guilt—like David did when he dug through the debris of his past sins.



Searching the Scriptures Study Tool

To clarify a biblical concept, such as repentance, a helpful study tool is to see it modeled in Scripture and then draw principles from the person's example. David's repentance is on display in Psalm 31:9–16. Read these verses, and note some of the characteristics of true repentance.

From David's example, what feelings are associated with repentance (Psalm 31:9–10)?

David took ownership of his sin, “my iniquity” (31:10 NASB). What characteristic of repentance can you draw from his example?

What consequences did David endure (31:11–13)?

Finally, to whom does a repentant person turn for help (31:14–16)?



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Consolidate these points in a description of true repentance. From David's example, repentance involves . . .

David didn't move on with his life hoping his sins would be forgotten; he stopped. He looked back. He admitted his wrongs. And he took responsibility for the trash that littered the roadside—the splintered trust, dashed promises, and rotting pile of problems that his sin caused. Most important, rather than hide from the Lord as did Adam and Eve in their shame and regret, he drew close to the Lord to receive mercy.

Our acts of repentance—confessing our sin, taking responsibility for the consequences, and drawing near to God for mercy—please the Lord with the sweet aroma of heartfelt sacrifice (Psalm 51:16–17). The Lord longs for our repentance because He longs for a closer relationship with us. The process of *confession*, *forgiveness*, and *restoration* deepens our devotion to Him and bonds us with others like nothing else can. Shame separates us, but repentance connects and restores.

So vital is repentance to the health of our soul and our relationships that the Lord will do whatever it takes to produce its fruit—as He did to the nation of Judah in the days of the prophet Joel.

A Divinely Designed Disaster

Calamity struck the farming culture of Judah in three waves of natural disasters. Can you identify them in Joel 1:5–7, 12, and 19–20?

These disasters were devastating, but the most destructive was the locust plague that stripped the spirit of the people as bare as the landscape, leaving them in complete ruin. Write down the descriptions of locusts in Joel 1:4, and then note the catastrophic impact to the food source in Joel 1:10, 16–18.



Further Study

For an explanation of the shocking effects of a locust swarm, read the description under the heading “Locust” in the Animal Kingdom article in *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. A copy of this classic Bible study resource can be obtained at the Insight for Living Ministries Web store. What strikes you about the devastation of a locust plague?

In chapter 2, Joel compares the locust swarm to an army of soldiers who “leap along the mountaintops” (Joel 2:5 NLT) and “break through defenses without missing a step” (2:8). As they charge, “the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars no longer shine” (2:10). It’s an apocalyptic scene, and who is leading the advance?

The LORD is at the head of the column.
He leads them with a shout.
This is his mighty army,
And they follow his orders.
The day of the LORD¹ is an awesome, terrible thing.
Who can possibly survive? (2:11)

Why was the Lord’s discipline so severe? What does the extent of the discipline say about the severity of the people’s sin?

Only a heavy battering ram could break through the defenses of the people’s stubborn will. God’s purpose, however, was not to destroy but to call His people to repentance and set them on a new path of restoration.



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*Joel 1:2–20; 2:12–27***Three Principles of Restoration**

After God's judgments comes the hope of restoration, which descends like refreshing showers on a parched landscape. What blessings does Joel describe in 2:23–24, culminating with this wonderful promise: "The LORD says, 'I will give you back what you lost to the swarming locusts'" (Joel 2:25)?

Have the locust-like consequences of sin stripped some of your relationships to barren stalks of terse, bitter exchanges? God can breathe new life into these damaged relationships as you apply three principles from Judah's example.

Start Immediately without Rationalization

Read Joel 2:12, and notice that the Lord urged the people to repent right away and be genuine: "Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead" (Joel 2:13).

Don't put off your repentance, and don't rationalize the wrong. Get specific in your confession. Have you been selfish, stubborn, prideful? Has a demanding tone laced your words? Have you been more willing to point blame than show grace? List the sins and how they've harmed others.

Return Completely without Reservation

Reread Joel 2:13 for the second principle. God's complete mercy is available in exchange for complete repentance. As Chuck says:

No hidden clauses. No inner reservations. No closed doors. No carefully kept secrets. Repentance is incomplete when there are areas that are held back or protected or left unaddressed and unaccountable. Repentance is complete when your life is an open book before the one you have wronged.



Opening your heart and life to the one you've offended often begins with a frank conversation with a trusted confidant. Whom can you talk to about your secrets, and when can you schedule a meeting?

Repent Openly without Hesitation

The urgency of repentance rings like a freedom bell in Joel 2:14–17. Read these verses, and write down the expressions of repentance. What do you learn from Judah's openness to guide your repentance process?



Bring It Home

Specifically, resolving offenses in our relationships includes this process:

- Sit down with the individual or individuals you've injured because of your behavior, and work through the list of wrongs one by one.
- Confess your sin and own the consequences.
- Describe your new course of change and accountability.
- Ask the person to forgive you.

Granting forgiveness may take time . . . which Chuck discusses in his next message. For now, we've done our part to clear away the trash and sow seeds of repentance in anticipation of a beautiful garden!



Close this study by writing a prayer asking the Lord for His forgiveness and receiving His grace, for He is “merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love” (Joel 2:13).



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I will not rationalize my sin but ask Your Spirit to do a work in my heart, to restore joy in my home, and to rebuild broken relationships. Give me the integrity and courage to come to terms with the things that require attention. May good come from my repentance. Relief. Freedom. Deliverance. And the free flow of peace. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Joel's theme of “the day of the Lord” echoes through the canyons of prophetic literature in various forms until its complete expression when Christ returns in judgment at His second advent (Revelation 19:11–20:15).





LET'S BEGIN HERE

In the school of life, all of us must take a course on forgiveness. No one has the option to bypass this class, because we all need to forgive someone or to seek forgiveness from someone we've offended. The only student who might opt out of Forgiveness 101 is the one who has never hurt anyone or been hurt by anyone—and because that person doesn't exist, everyone must enroll!

Our teacher is the world's leading expert on forgiveness. No one has more experience in forgiving than Him. His exams can be tough when we're asked to put into practice what we've learned; however, when we pass the test, the feeling of relief that follows is healing to the soul.

Let's join our teacher, Jesus, on the hillside by the Sea of Galilee where He is starting His first lecture on the topic of *seeking forgiveness*.



DIGGING DEEPER

“So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.” (Matthew 5:23–24 NLT)

Seeking Forgiveness from Those We've Offended

This teaching comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). For the immediate context, read Matthew 5:21–22, in which the subject is relationship conflict. What infractions did Jesus say were just as much a violation of God's law as murder?

Quotable

There are not many things that we all have in common, but I can tell you one: we all have someone we need to forgive.

— Charles R. Swindoll



Friction between individuals may smolder as resentment or flame up as anger, spark as name-calling or ignite as out-of-control rage. Regardless the degree of heat, Jesus said the fire must be doused immediately, both in our heart where sin begins and with our feet as we rush to make amends.



Searching the Scriptures Study Tool

Let's study Matthew 5:23–24 using our *Searching the Scriptures* skills of observation, interpretation, correlation, and application. Imagine yourself as the person making an offering at the temple. List the action words that you *observe* in Jesus' teaching.

Next is *interpretation*. What is the meaning of Jesus' teaching regarding (1) the priority of reconciling with people before reconciling with God; (2) the urgency of not waiting; and (3) the importance of taking responsibility for an offense?

Go a little deeper into interpretation by using a concordance to explore the meaning of the Greek word for "be reconciled." First, look up the word *reconciled* in the *Zondervan NASB Exhaustive Concordance*. Beside Matthew 5:24, you'll find the number 1259, which is the key to the Greek word. Look up this number in the back of the concordance to find the root Greek word *diállassō* and its meaning "change, exchange" and the number of times the word occurs in the New Testament.¹ Interestingly, it appears only once—here, in this verse.

Now use the online tool, *Lumina*, at lumina.bible.org. Locate Matthew 5:24 in the NASB, then click "Greek" on the right panel. Slowly move your cursor over the words in the Greek text of this verse. An explanation of each word appears below in a box. Find the Greek word for *be reconciled* and its definition, which is "1) to change 2) to change the mind of anyone, to reconcile 3) to be reconciled, to renew friendship with one."



Fascinating! Reconciliation includes *change*. Chuck Swindoll offers his explanation of being reconciled: “to go through the process of bringing about a change [in the relationship].” Hostility changes to friendship. Based on your study, how would you explain *diállassō*? How does this meaning enhance your understanding of Jesus’ command?

Now, *correlation*. Paul applies the concept of reconciliation to our relationship with God in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21. Read these verses in comparison with Jesus’ teaching on reconciliation. Both are in the passive voice, “be reconciled.” We seek forgiveness, but reconciliation requires a response from the other party. Reconciliation must be *received* to be complete. Although we seek reconciliation, a person may rebuff our *diállassō* attempt. God, however, will always welcome us with open arms.

Through Christ, we can be certain of our reconciliation with God. How does this security stabilize you as you seek reconciliation with others who may not be as willing or able to forgive?

Finally, *application*. Are you in conflict with anyone? Is God leading you to seek reconciliation? Listen to Cynthia Swindoll’s testimony, and note the steps that she took when seeking reconciliation with her father and mother-in-law. How can her actions be a guide for you?

Forgiving Those Who’ve Offended Us

Jesus’ next lesson, *offering forgiveness*, is prompted by Peter’s question about the frequency of forgiving: “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus’ answer shocked Peter, “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!” (18:22).



Peter viewed forgiveness through the narrow lens of human limitations. Figuring that our capacity to forgive runs out sooner or later, he sought permission to limit forgiving to no more than seven times.

Jesus, however, broke down all limitations! Rather than restrict forgiving to a certain number, he set us free to forgive anytime in any relationship. For Jesus, the issue wasn't frequency but freedom, and the measure wasn't a human standard but the limitless grace of God—as illustrated in the following story, which contains three parts.

First, read Matthew 18:23–27 about the king's forgiveness of the servant's tremendous debt—"millions of dollars" (Matthew 18:24 NLT). Second, read Matthew 18:28–30 about the servant's lack of forgiveness toward his companion and his small debt. Third, read Matthew 18:31–35 about the king's response when he finds out.²

What does the magnitude of the debt forgiven say about the heart of the king who forgave it? Likewise, what does the small debt that the servant refused to forgive say about his heart?

Summarize Jesus' point about forgiving.



Bring It Home

Let's wrap up Jesus' teaching on forgiveness with two principles on asking for forgiveness:

- *Immediate obedience honors God.* Jesus said plainly, "Go and be reconciled" (Matthew 5:24).
- *Vulnerable confession heals others.* Sincere apologies soften those we've offended and restore broken relationships.



And two principles on forgiving those who have offended us:

- *To refuse to forgive is hypocritical.* How can we not forgive the sins of others when our King has freely forgiven us?
- *To refuse to forgive inflicts inner torment on the offended.* A lack of forgiveness makes our bad situation worse; it multiplies the pain of the offense with the torment of bitterness.

Let's close this study by drawing near to our teacher Jesus. If you need to reconcile a relationship, ask Jesus for the *courage* to seek forgiveness. Or if someone has injured you, ask the Lord for the *grace* to extend forgiveness.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, sleepless nights and restless days are the plight of the tortured soul that will not forgive. I submit myself to the authority of Your Word that marks the path to healing. Help me to seek forgiveness from those I've offended. Help me to forgive, even as I have been forgiven by Christ. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Reuben A. Olson, and others, eds., *Zondervan NASB Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1520.
2. What does “handed him over to the torturers” mean (Matthew 18:34 NASB)? Chuck explains it as the torment of unforgiveness: “It is an accurate description of gnawing resentment and bitterness. The awful gall of hate or envy. It is a terrible feeling. We cannot get away from it.”



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Looking Back: Finding Healing through Forgiveness with Cynthia Swindoll's Testimony

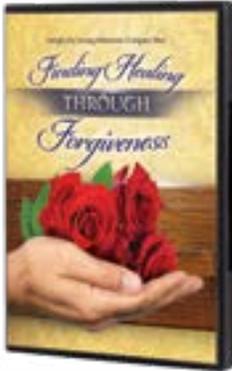
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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

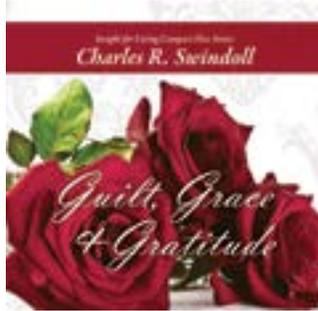
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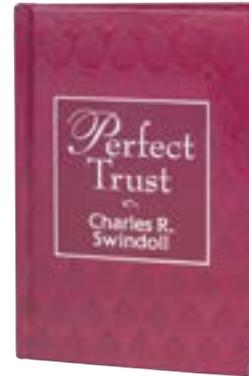
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For the 2017 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by the Pastoral Ministries Department in collaboration with Mark Tobey, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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