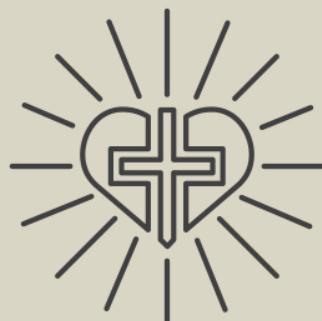




SURVIVING BETRAYAL: TRUSTING GOD WHEN PEOPLE FAIL YOU



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Introduction

Mark gave everything he had to his company for over 20 years, including many nights and weekends away from his wife and children. One Friday afternoon, Mark's boss walked into his office and told him that his position was being eliminated as a cost-saving measure, effective immediately.

Sarah loved and respected her pastor. He had led the church Sarah attended since she was a small child, and he had baptized her recently. Last Sunday, one of the elders stood before the congregation and announced that the pastor had resigned due to a moral failure and would no longer be serving the church body.

Ryan loved his wife and their three children. Friends regularly told him that they wished their family life were as happy as theirs seemed to be. Yesterday, Ryan's wife confessed that she had been having an affair with a co-worker for the past nine months.

Christine seemed to have it all—a great career, an extensive network of family and friends, and a great church community. On the outside, she seemed happy and fulfilled. But on the inside, she harbored deep resentment against her parents, whose standards she could never seem to meet.

You may or may not have been hurt in the same way as Mark, Sarah, Ryan, or Christine. But my bet is that you've been hurt. I say this because hurt is part of life in a fallen world with fallen people. If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, you know that you are called to trust God at all times. *But how do you trust God when you've been hurt?*

In the Bible, there are many examples of hurt people. Aside from Jesus himself, there may be no one who was hurt more often or more deeply than the prophet Jeremiah, who described himself as a gentle lamb led to the slaughter (Jer. 11:19). His life was one of almost unending sorrow:

- He was beaten and put into the stocks by a fellow religious leader (Jer. 20:2)
- He was arrested and threatened with death (Jer. 26:8-11)
- He was falsely accused of deserting to the enemy and thrown into prison, where he was left for a long time (Jer. 37:14-16)
- He was falsely accused of treason, thrown into the cistern of Malkijah, and left there to die (Jer. 38:1-6)

As if all this weren't enough, Jeremiah had no family to share his grief and comfort him during his many trials. At one point, Jeremiah was so hurt that he cried out to the Lord, saying that he wished he had died in his mother's womb (Jer. 20:13-18). And yet, somehow, Jeremiah trusted God to the very end of his life.

How did he do that? How does anyone do it?

Many people refuse to acknowledge their hurt, choosing instead to suppress what they feel. They become bitter, ruminating on what happened to them and adopting the mentality of a victim. They don't seek reconciliation with those who hurt them, choosing instead to hold their sins and failures against them. They close themselves off from healthy relationships in an attempt to avoid getting hurt all over again.

You can make those same choices. Like so many solutions to the problems of life in this world, that might feel like the safest and best choice. In the short run, it may feel good and even seem to work okay. But in the long run, you can't be happy, healthy, or holy by taking the path of ignorance because it is not the path of faith that leads to blessing.

So, how do you trust God when you've been hurt? In this life skill guide, we will cover four faith-based principles:

- Acknowledge Your Hurt
- Fight Bitterness
- Seek Reconciliation
- Choose to Love Again

Each section of this book will cover one of the four principles and end with discussion questions to use in the context of a mentoring relationship. Trusting God when you've been hurt is a difficult thing to do. But by God's grace, it is something that you can choose to do, and it is a choice that will set you free from the bitterness and isolation. Let's get started.

Part 1: Acknowledge Your Hurt

You're probably familiar with David from the Bible. Even if you didn't grow up in church, the story of David slaying Goliath is as popular a story as any around. But did you know that David experienced lots of hurt throughout his life? Saul (his father-in-law) spent years trying to hunt him down and kill him. David's first wife, Michal, mocked him for worshiping God. Perhaps hardest of all, his own son Absalom led a treasonous rebellion against him.

During that difficult season, David cried out to God in prayer. He wrote in Psalm 3:1, "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, 'There is no salvation for him in God.'"

David was hurt. Like him, you've also been hurt. You might have been hurt by a complete stranger or by someone very close to you. The hurt might have happened recently, or it might have happened many years ago. You may feel (or you may have been told) that what happened to you was no big deal. Maybe you know that it was a very big deal.

Whatever the facts may be, you've been hurt, and you want to trust God in the midst of it. But you feel confused and conflicted. You might have had thoughts like these...

- I'm making a mountain out of a molehill; I just need to get over it.
- If I had more faith, I wouldn't feel this way.
- They didn't mean to hurt me. After all, I've hurt people before, too.
- When I got hurt as a kid, my parents would tell me, "You're fine, brush it off."
- Doesn't the Bible say I should forgive and forget?

Before you can begin to assess whether those statements are true and whether they apply to your particular situation, there's something else you need to do first. You need to acknowledge that you've been hurt.

Acknowledge Your Hurt

That sounds so simple, doesn't it? To say to yourself, "This person did this to me or said this to me, and it hurt." But for many people, acknowledging they've been hurt is one of the hardest things to do. Why might that be?

For some people, acknowledging that they've been hurt seems to require a lack of faith. They might reason that God is good (Gen. 18:25) and is working all things together for good (Rom. 8:28). Since those

things are true, acknowledging that someone hurt them feels like they are questioning God's goodness or his good purposes in their lives.

For others, it's a matter of pride. They want to appear strong, unflappable, incapable of being negatively influenced by the words and actions of others. They don't like the idea of others having power over their thoughts and feelings; it seems to take away their autonomy, their agency. So, when others ask if they're hurt - even if the person who hurt them asks if they're hurt—they deny what they know to be true.

And some have simply never been taught from the Bible how to deal with their hurt. From a young age, many adults have taught children to brush off their hurt. After a conflict, a parent may bring one sibling to another and command the offending child, "Say you're sorry for what you did." Then, after the first child says they are sorry, the parent tells the offended sibling, "Now you say, 'That's okay. I forgive you.'"

These are just a few reasons why acknowledging that you've been hurt may be hard to do. But acknowledging that you've been hurt is essential because you can't trust God with something that you refuse to acknowledge even exists. David sets an example of acknowledging hurt for us in Psalm 6:6-7:

I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
My eye wastes away because of grief;
it grows weak because of all my foes.

David didn't equate acknowledging his hurt with a failure to trust God. He didn't pridefully pretend that he wasn't hurt. And he didn't cover his pain with platitudes, telling himself and others that it was no big deal.

Instead, David acknowledged his pain. He was weary from crying himself to sleep night after night because of what his foes had done to him. He sat down and wrote out exactly how he was feeling and why he was feeling that way.

You may think about doing the same thing. Even if you don't normally write out your thoughts and feelings, this is often the most helpful way to begin to acknowledge your hurt. Writing forces you to get specific, to drill down and name what hurt you and why it hurt you.

Acknowledge Your Hurt to God

Once you've acknowledged that you've been hurt, you need to acknowledge your hurt to God. You might think to yourself, "But God knows all things, so he already knows I'm hurting. Why do I need to tell him something he already knows?"

Think of it this way—good earthly fathers are pictures of our perfect heavenly Father. Many times, good dads already know when their children are hurting. They can see it in their faces; they can hear it in their words; they can read it in their body language.

But good earthly fathers want their children to come and talk to them when they are hurting because they care about their children, because they understand what it is like to be hurt, and because they can help. Your heavenly Father is like this—except that he is perfect.

First, your heavenly Father cares about you. The apostle Peter instructs us to cast all our anxieties on God "because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). If a child doesn't believe that his father cares about him, he won't share his hurt with him. An uncaring father might ignore a hurting child, or worse yet, mock a hurting child, adding hurt on top of hurt. But your heavenly Father is perfect. He won't ignore you or mock you when you're hurt because he cares for you.

Second, your heavenly Father understands your hurt. God understands your hurt better than anyone—even better than you, because he knows everything. And God's omniscience isn't the only reason he is able to understand your hurt. He understands your hurt because, in Christ, God took on flesh and experienced human hurt firsthand. Jesus' enemies misunderstood him, slandered him, mocked him, and falsely accused him. All of his closest friends deserted him. One of his closest friends betrayed him. Your family members and friends have also been hurt, and at some level, they understand what you're going through. But God understands your hurt perfectly because he is omniscient and because he has experienced hurt firsthand.

Third, your heavenly Father can help. In Psalm 34:17-18, David writes,

When the righteous cry for help,

the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

This is one of the many places in Scripture where God promises to help those who cry out to him. God is all-powerful. He can do all things, and he is in control of all things. Other people may want to help us when we're hurting, but they can't do everything, and they aren't in control of everything. They are limited in what they can do to help us. But God isn't limited. He can and will help you if you cry out to him.

So, what does it look like to acknowledge your hurt to God?

Many people struggle to express themselves to God in prayer on good days, so they find it difficult or impossible to find the right words when they're hurting. Perhaps that's been true for you in the midst of your own hurt. Thankfully, God has already given us the perfect words to pray when we're hurting.

The Book of Psalms was written to be used in individual and corporate worship as songs, prayers, or both. Many of these Psalms—more than 60 of the 150—are classified as “laments,” where the author is expressing deep sorrow, pain, or distress. Sometimes the author is speaking as an individual; sometimes he is speaking on behalf of God’s people.

But in every case, the Psalms of lament are inspired by God to give us words when we’re hurting. Consider, for example, the words of Psalm 31:11-12, which David wrote when he was hurting from the way he was being treated by his enemies:

Because of all my adversaries, I have become a reproach,

especially to my neighbors,

and an object of dread to my acquaintances;

those who see me in the street flee from me.

I have been forgotten like one who is dead;

I have become like a broken vessel.

When you pray the Psalms of lament, you’re not just praying the Word of God; you’re praying the words God divinely inspired to be used when you’re hurting. You can pray the words of Psalm 31, or any of the other Psalms of lament, which may better convey how you’re feeling to God (consider Psalm 3, 6, 13, 22, 25, 31, 38, 42-43, 51, 55, 71, 88, 102, and 130).

Part of trusting God when you’re hurting is acknowledging you are hurt in the first place—first to yourself, and then to God. After you’ve acknowledged your hurt, then you can move on to the second step of trusting God, which is fighting bitterness. We’ll cover that topic in the next section.

Reflection Questions:

1. To this point, have you acknowledged your hurt to yourself? Or have you bottled it up and pushed it down, refusing to acknowledge it?
2. Have you acknowledged your hurt to God? If so, what did that look like? If not, what has kept you from doing that?

3. In this section, we looked at Psalm 34 as a model for acknowledging hurt to God. How might David's example encourage you as you acknowledge your own hurt to God?
4. What is one thing you can do this week to put into practice what you have learned?

Part 2: Fight Bitterness

Naomi had a hard life. During a famine, her husband moved their family from the land of Judah in Israel to Moab, a foreign country filled with people who didn't share their beliefs. Not long after they arrived, Naomi's husband died. Her two sons married Moabite women, and then both of her sons also died. Within a short period of time, Naomi's life had been turned upside down. She was hurting, and she acknowledged it. Naomi told her daughters-in-law, ". . . the hand of the Lord has gone out against me" (Ruth 1:13), and she lifted up her voice and wept with them.

When Naomi returned to the land of Judah, a group of women came out to greet her, saying, "Is this Naomi?" But Naomi replied,

"Do not call me Naomi [which means *pleasant*]; call me Mara [which means *bitter*], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21)

Naomi openly acknowledged to her daughters-in-law and to the women of Judah that she was hurt. She wasn't suppressing her feelings or pretending that she was okay. But Naomi was starting to give in to the temptation that we all face when we've been hurt. *She was becoming bitter.*

Bitterness is feeling angry, hurt, or resentful because of bad experiences or a sense of unjust treatment from God or other people. Like all temptations, the temptation to become bitter is common to everyone who has been hurt (1 Cor. 10:13). The problem is that harboring bitterness toward someone else is sin. In Ephesians 4:31, Paul writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

We must remember that our enemy, Satan, aims to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). One way that he can destroy us is by tempting us to define ourselves by our hurt and to lock ourselves in a prison of bitterness. In that prison, we begin to believe, "I am what someone did to me."

But that is not true. You are not defined by your hurt, no matter what happened to you. You may be a victim, but you do not have to adopt a victim mentality. God commands us to put away all bitterness because it is a deadly poison, spreading in our hearts and minds until they are consumed. Bitterness is like cyanide; there is no safe amount to have inside you. *So how do we put away bitterness?*

Examine the Fruit of Bitterness

First, examine the fruit of bitterness. We've all known people who experienced hurt and allowed bitterness to take root in their lives. You might be able to picture a friend or relative who enjoyed life and was an enjoyable person to be around. But something happened—an illness, a financial setback, the

death of a loved one, a disappointment at work—and it really hurt them. They've never been the same. Once, they were like a beautiful garden, filled with life. But after they got hurt, bitterness took root, and then took over, like a vine that got out of control and choked out all the beauty and life in the garden.

In Hebrews 12:15, we read, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.” God warns us about allowing a root of bitterness to grow because roots produce fruit. And the fruit of bitterness is not good. So if you want to put away bitterness, you need to examine the fruit of bitterness in the lives of others, and say, “I don’t want that bad fruit in my life.”

Listen to the Gospel Preached Regularly

The second way to root out bitterness is to listen to the Gospel preached regularly. This means, at a minimum, you must prioritize gathering with other Christians in a healthy local church each week. In a healthy church, you’re going to hear the Good News that Paul proclaimed: “...that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

Every time you hear the Gospel preached, you are reminded that you are the biggest sinner you know. Someone may have sinned against you and hurt you deeply. You know about that sin (and perhaps others) that someone else committed. But you know the many sins you commit against God and others each day, and thus you know how badly you need the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Hearing the Gospel preached regularly protects us from minimizing our own sins and adopting a self-righteous attitude that believes others need forgiveness more than we do.

Preach the Truth to Yourself

Third, you must preach the truth to yourself. If you’re hearing the Gospel preached regularly, then you are being equipped with the tools to preach it to yourself when feelings of bitterness arise in your heart.

For the crime of preaching the Gospel, Paul was dragged through the Roman court system for years. In those days, it was dangerous to associate with criminals—especially those who were suspected of undermining the Roman emperor, as Paul was suspected of doing. Near the end of his life and ministry, Paul wrote to Timothy and said, “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them” (2 Tim. 4:16).

How discouraging! Out of all the people Paul had served, loved, taught, and helped, no one came to stand by him when he made his first defense. I would have to think Paul was tempted to become bitter. But Paul was able to pray, “may it not be counted against them,” because he understood that all of Jesus’ friends deserted him, too. And guess what? Jesus forgave them. Hearing the Gospel preached and then preaching it to ourselves helps us guard against bitterness.

Surround Yourself with Christians Who Encourage You

Fourth, surround yourself with Christians who will encourage you to trust God in the midst of your hurt. In Hebrews 3:12-13, we read, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

When we’re hurt, we can easily fall into the trap of believing that God does not love us, that he is not in control, that he cannot be trusted. Those false beliefs, and similar ones, can lead us to fall away from the living God. We need other Christians who will exhort us (or “plead earnestly with us”) to go on trusting God so that we will not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

After all, that is just what happened in the Garden of Eden. Satan suggested to Adam & Eve that God could not be trusted, that he was holding out on them, that real freedom was found not in obeying God’s command, but in disobeying it.

When you’re hurt, you’re tempted to believe the same thing—that freedom will be found not in fighting bitterness, but in giving into it. Satan will try to convince you to coddle bitterness inside of you, telling you the lie that it won’t produce bad fruit in your life. But it will. Bitterness always produces bad fruit in your life because bitterness is sinful. It takes your focus off of God, off your need for mercy and grace, and off of others and how we can love and serve them. Bitterness demands that your focus be on yourself, on what happened to you, and on the negative effects it has had in your life.

So after acknowledging hurt to ourselves and to God, we must fight against bitterness by examining the fruit of bitterness, by listening to the Gospel preached regularly, by preaching the truth to yourself, and by surrounding yourself with Christians who will encourage you to trust God in the midst of your hurt. Then you’ll be in a place where you can seek reconciliation with the person who hurt you.

Reflection Questions:

1. Since you have been hurt, how have you felt tempted toward bitterness?
2. If you were to allow a root of bitterness to spring up and cause trouble, what negative effects do you believe it would have on your life?
3. Do you have Christian friends in your life who encourage you to trust God? How could you help them to help you when you are feeling bitter and discouraged because of your hurt?
4. What is one thing you can do this week to put into practice what you have learned?

Part Three: Seek Reconciliation

When you've been hurt by someone, you want to pull away—sometimes for a while, sometimes forever. You may even desire to end the relationship entirely. In cases of abuse—physical, sexual, financial or verbal—ending a relationship may be the only wise and safe course of action. If you've been abused (or if you suspect that you've been abused), meet with a trusted friend or pastor and share what happened to you. They can help you decide what steps you may need to take.

In most cases, the people who hurt us aren't dangerous, which means we need to seek reconciliation with them. You might think to yourself, "Seek reconciliation? Why should I seek reconciliation with someone who hurt *me*? I didn't do anything wrong! If our relationship means anything to them, they need to come to *me*!"

From a worldly perspective, that makes sense. After all, when you've been hurt, the last thing you want is to be hurt again. Keeping a safe distance feels like a good, even wise decision. But that is not how God dealt with us. He did not wait for us to pursue reconciliation; he took the initiative to pursue reconciliation with us.

We see this almost immediately in the Bible. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sinned against God by breaking his command. God is the offended party. But God didn't sit back and wait for Adam and Eve to come to him; instead, he pursued reconciliation with them by calling to the man and asking, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) Then, God initiated a conversation about what had happened. He asked Adam, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen. 3:11).

God pursuing reconciliation with the people who sin against him is one of the major themes of the Bible. In Romans 5:6-8, Paul summarizes the good news of the Gospel message in this way:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-8).

We see that God did not wait for sinful people like you and me to come to him. God sent his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to live, die, and rise again for us "while we were still sinners." Even when we had no desire for reconciliation with God, he pursued reconciliation with us.

For Christians who have been hurt, sitting back with our arms crossed and our hearts closed is simply not an option. Once you have acknowledged your hurt to yourselves and to God, and once you have begun the fight against bitterness, trusting God means that you must seek reconciliation with the person who hurt you. This includes preparing to forgive, sharing your hurt and your hope, and absorbing the cost of sin.

Prepare to Forgive

The first step in seeking reconciliation is preparing to forgive. In Luke 17:34, Jesus commanded his followers,

“Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

Notice that this is a command, not a suggestion. Jesus doesn’t say that if your brother sins against you and repents, you *should* forgive him—he says you *must* forgive him. Without confession and repentance from the offending party, there cannot be true reconciliation. However, you cannot control the person who hurt you; the only person you can control is yourself. So, as far as it depends on you, you need to be at peace with all men (Romans 12:18), which means you must be ready to forgive.

What does it mean to forgive? In his book *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller writes,

“Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did...You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death” (page 196).

When you’ve been hurt, there is a cost to be borne. The only options are to bear that cost yourself or to make the other person bear that cost somehow. You can do to them what they did to you, or you could do something worse to try to make them pay for what they did. But nothing you can do to them will undo the hurt that you’ve experienced. The only way to begin to heal is to forgive, which means that you must choose to bear the cost yourself instead of trying to find a way to make the person who hurt you bear the cost themselves.

You prepare to forgive, to absorb the cost of your hurt, by meditating on the Gospel. You have offended God—not once, but over and over. Yet God chose to bear the cost of your sin himself instead of making you pay for it. You have been forgiven much, so you must count the cost and prepare to forgive.

Share Your Hurt and Your Hope

Once you’ve prepared yourself to forgive, the next step is to share your hurt and your hope with the person who hurt you. This is a very hard thing to do because it requires vulnerability, and you run the risk of rejection. Our natural inclination is to protect ourselves, so when you’ve been hurt, the last thing you want is to be hurt again—especially by the same person who hurt you in the first place!

You will be tempted to do nothing, believing the adage “time heals all wounds.” Time does heal some wounds, but time heals wounds that aren’t very serious. If you scrape your knee, it will heal completely in a week or two, even if you don’t do anything to treat the wound. But if you cut through your hand

with a kitchen knife, time alone will not heal it—you must treat it properly. Sharing your hurt with the person who hurt you is choosing to treat the wound properly rather than wrongly assuming that time alone will heal your hurt.

You've already done the hard work of acknowledging your hurt to yourself and to God. You've put into words (and probably onto paper) what hurt you and why it hurt you. Now you must share those things with the person who hurt you. In some cases, the person who hurt you will be unaware that you were hurt by their words or their actions, so do not assume that they know they hurt you, or even that they did it on purpose. In other cases, the person who hurt you knows what they did, and they may have even done it on purpose.

In either case, your task is to share with them what hurt you and why it hurt you, along with your hope for reconciliation with them. That's all you can do. Now the ball is in their court, and they must decide whether they will acknowledge that they hurt you, and whether they will ask for your forgiveness.

Absorb the Cost of Sin

Assuming that the person who hurt you asks for forgiveness, the final step in seeking reconciliation is to forgive them. When you say, "I forgive you," you are saying, "I choose to bear the cost of what you've done to me. I will not make you bear the cost in any way. Your debt has been paid, and I have paid it myself."

Choosing to forgive someone who hurt you isn't a one-time decision. It's a decision you make over and over again—maybe for weeks, maybe for years, maybe for the rest of your life. Depending on the nature of the hurt, your personality, your history, and a host of other factors, you might be tempted to think about your hurt even many years after you have chosen to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving someone does not mean the pain goes away immediately. To some extent, the pain may last forever.

That is why it is critical to remember the Gospel—that God has chosen to absorb the cost of all of our sins and never hold them against us. It was the costliest decision in the history of the universe, because our forgiveness cost the life of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

And in the Book of Revelation, God promises that in the new heavens and the new earth, Jesus—the one who absorbed the cost of our sin—will comfort all those who have chosen to absorb the cost of the sins of others against them. The Apostle John writes, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

What a glorious day that will be when every tear will be wiped away from our eyes—including the tears we have shed seeking reconciliation with those who have hurt us. Even though seeking reconciliation is always painful, it is what God calls us to do, and in the end, he will comfort us perfectly and eternally for the pain we have caused and the pain we have endured in this life.

Once you've acknowledged your hurt to God, fought against bitterness, and sought reconciliation, you are ready to put the final principle into practice, which is choosing to love again.

Reflection Questions:

1. To this point, how have you responded to the person who hurt you? Do you believe your response has been godly or worldly?
2. We defined forgiveness as absorbing the cost of someone else's sin. Would you say that you are currently prepared to forgive the person who hurt you? Why or why not?
3. What fears do you have with respect to sharing your hurt and your hope with the person who hurt you?

What is one thing you can do this week to put into practice what you have learned?

Part Four: Choose to Love Again

He wasn't a bad kid. Immature? Definitely. A little cocky? Sure. Careless with his words? No question about it. Anybody who knew him could see that he had grown up coddled and that he could use a little tough love. But Joseph certainly didn't deserve the treatment that he got from his ten older brothers.

Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery for a mere twenty shekels of silver. Joseph was taken to Egypt, where he was falsely accused by his employer's wife and thrown into jail. He helped a fellow prisoner who promised to help Joseph when he was released, but he forgot about Joseph for two whole years. Eventually, Joseph was called upon to help Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He was released from prison and promoted to governor of Egypt, the second-highest position in the land. He married and had two children, but he longed for his family. He hadn't seen any of them since the day his brothers sold him into slavery.

And then one day, totally out of the blue, his brothers showed up in Egypt, looking for food to buy because of a famine. They didn't recognize Joseph. After all, many years had passed, and the last thing they would have expected was to find Joseph governing the most powerful nation on earth. At this point, Joseph had a very difficult choice to make—just like you and just like every other person who has been hurt—it is choosing whether you will love again.

Love is risky for two reasons. First, loving anything in this fallen world is risky because eventually you'll lose it. People, animals, plants, and trees die. Your favorite possessions wear out, rust out, or get eaten by moths. Seasons come and go. When you love anything in this world, it will eventually be taken from you. And the more you love something, the harder it is gone.

The second reason that love is risky is that when you love anything, you open yourself up to the possibility of being hurt—especially when you choose to love people. That is why some people choose not to get married, or to have children, or to do much of anything that puts them into contact with other people. They have either been hurt by others or they are scared of being hurt by others.

But if we are going to be people who trust God when we've been hurt, then we must choose to love again—and that includes loving the person who hurt us. But what does that mean?

Release the Person Who Hurt You

The first step in choosing to love again is releasing the person who hurt you. This is the natural outflow of forgiveness, where you choose to absorb the cost of someone else's sin or wrongdoing. When you forgive, you are releasing the person who hurt you from needing to make restitution of any kind.

Joseph is a model of releasing his brothers, the people who hurt him so deeply. In one of the most moving exchanges in the Bible, Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers by speaking these words to them:

And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty (Gen. 45:5-11).

Joseph could have done anything he wanted to his brothers, but he chose to release them from the debt they owed him. In the same way, choosing to love again means that you must release the person who hurt you from the debt they owe.

This doesn't mean that you don't hold people accountable for their actions or that there won't be consequences for certain wrongs. But when you release those who hurt you, it means that you don't hold on to what they did to you in your heart, you don't bring it up in conversation with them or with others, and you don't use it as a weapon against them in future conflict.

Pray for the Person Who Hurt You

The next step in choosing to love again is to pray for the person who hurt you. While there is no direct evidence that Joseph prayed for his brothers, it is safe to assume that a person who spoke of God and spoke to his brothers like Joseph did certainly prayed for them.

Even if we do our best not to hold the sins of others against them, praying for them is actively petitioning God for their good—and that's a difficult thing to do when you've been hurt. But look at what Jesus taught:

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them (Luke 6:27-31).

For Jesus, these weren't just the empty ideals of an ivory tower philosopher. He perfectly lived out what he taught. As he hung on the cross, struggling to breathe, he prayed for those who crucified him, "do not hold this sin against them." (Luke 23:34) His disciples then followed his example. Stephen prayed almost the exact same prayer as he was stoned for his testimony about Jesus (Acts 7:60). Paul also offered a similar prayer for those who deserted him in his hour of need (2 Tim. 4:16).

When we pray for those who have hurt us, we are obeying the command and example of Jesus Christ. Prayer is a tangible way that we fight against bitterness and continue to release those who have hurt us. It is very difficult to hold a grudge against someone that you pray for on a regular basis!

What should you pray for someone who hurt you? First, pray that God would forgive them for what they have done to you. As someone who has received forgiveness from God for the sins you have committed, you should desire that others receive that same forgiveness from a gracious God.

Second, pray that God would help them to walk in repentance and faith.

Third, pray that they would experience the grace of God through your own forgiveness. When you speak the words of forgiveness to them, and when you treat them as forgiven, you are a tangible reminder that we serve a God who forgives even the worst sins.

Finally, pray that God would guard you against bitterness, and that he would give you the faith to do them good—to bless the one who hurt you.

Bless the Person Who Hurt You

After he forgives his brothers, Joseph doesn't just release them from what they have done to him. He goes to extreme lengths to bless them in every possible way:

- He encourages them not to be distressed or angry with themselves (Gen. 45:5)
- He promises to provide materially for them, their children, and their children's children (Gen. 45:11)
- He kissed all of them and talked with them (Gen. 45:15)
- He worked with Pharaoh to provide first-class travel arrangements to return to Canaan, then back to Egypt (Gen. 45:16-24)
- He instructed them in how to speak to Pharaoh so they would receive the best piece of land for raising animals (Gen. 46:31-47:6)
- He reassured them of his forgiveness after the death of their father (Gen. 50:19-21)

Sometimes when people have been hurt, they say that they have forgiven the one who wronged them. But their lives tell a different story. Even if they aren't actively hostile, they are cold and distant toward the one who wronged them. They stop talking to them, and they avoid being around them. If they have to be in the same room, they avert their eyes and make sure to stay as far away as possible.

But that's not what Joseph did to his brothers, and not what we are commanded to do in Scripture. Many people who hurt us are not our enemies, but friends or family members who love us. With that in mind, consider Paul's teaching in Romans 12 on how to deal with our enemies:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17-21)

When we've been hurt, it's not enough to release the person who hurt us and avoid doing evil to them in return. It's not enough to fight bitterness or to pray for them. We must actively seek to bless them, to do them good in tangible ways. We look for opportunities to feed them when they are hungry, to give them something to drink when they are thirsty, and to bless them in any way we can.. If it's hard to hold a grudge when you pray for someone who hurt you, it's nearly impossible when you're spending time, money, and energy to tangibly bless them.

When you've been hurt, making the choice to love again is very hard because you are opening yourself up to the possibility of being hurt again. But choosing to love again through releasing, praying for, and blessing the person who hurt you is how we trust God when we've been hurt.

Reflection Questions:

1. How are you encouraged and challenged by Joseph's story in Genesis 37-50?
2. What might it look like to release the person who hurt you, while still holding them accountable for their actions in some way?
3. In what ways could you bless the person who hurt you in this next season?
4. What is one thing you can do this week to put into practice what you have learned?

Conclusion

Without the grace of God, we wouldn't just be hurt in this world; we would stay hurt, with little or no hope for healing. But thanks be to God, there is hope for healing in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He told the disciples that in this world, we would have trouble, but that we could take heart, because he has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Friend, when you've been hurt, your ultimate hope cannot rest in anything, including even the biblical principles outlined in this book. Your ultimate hope for healing must rest in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who overcame the world and all of its trouble caused by our sin. He is a very present help in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1), and he will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5). Jesus promises that he will never cast out anyone who comes to him (John 6:37) but will save all who call upon his name (Rom. 10:10-13).

So if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ, do it today. He died and rose again for those who hurt others, and for those who have been hurt by others. Praise God because that is every one of us!

Once you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, fix your eyes on him. By his grace and through the power of his Holy Spirit, he is able to help you acknowledge your hurt, fight bitterness, seek reconciliation, and choose to love again—which he himself modeled for us perfectly in his own life.

May God bless you and keep you as you seek to trust God in the midst of your hurt.