

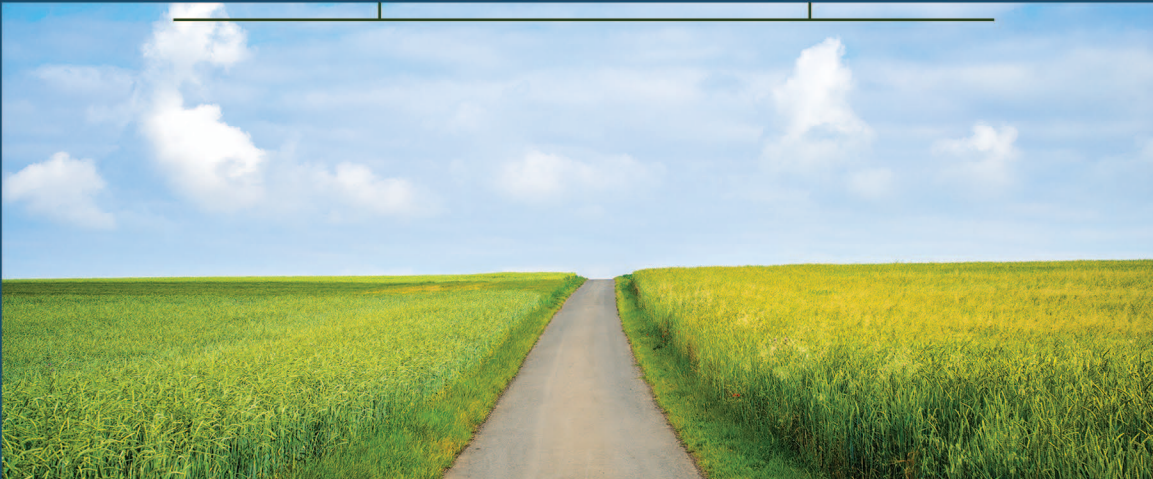
REVISED & EXPANDED

CHARLES F. STANLEY BIBLE STUDY SERIES



EXPERIENCING FORGIVENESS

ENJOY THE PEACE OF
GIVING AND RECEIVING GRACE



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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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INTRODUCTION

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON FORGIVENESS

Each of us has a perspective on the world and on life—a way of looking at things, of judging things, of holding things in our memories. We need to recognize that our perspective is something we have learned, and we need to recognize we may have adopted a wrong understanding about certain things.

I have found in my years of ministry that a wrong perspective is very common when it comes to the matter of forgiveness. Many of us have misconceptions about why God forgives us, who God forgives, what it means to be forgiven, and how we are to go about being forgiven and forgiving ourselves and others.

For the right perspective on forgiveness, we must go to God's Word and stay there. The Bible is God's foremost communication to us on this subject. It is the reference to which we must return continually to compare what is happening in us with what should be happening in us. Our perspective is wrong anytime it doesn't match up with God's eternal truth.

This book can be used by you alone or by several people in a small-group study. At various times, you will be asked to relate to the material in one of the following four ways.

First, what new insights have you gained? Make notes about these insights as God reveals them to you, recording them in your Bible or in a separate journal. As you reflect on these new understandings, you are more likely to see how God has moved in your life.

Second, how do you relate to the material? You approach the Bible from your own unique background . . . your own particular set of understandings about the world that you bring with you when you open God's Word. For this reason, it is important to consider how your experiences are shaping your understanding and allow yourself to be open to the truth that God reveals—even if it isn't necessary what you expect. As you do this, you allow God's Word to be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (see Psalm 119:105).

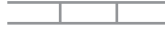
Third, how do you feel about the material presented? While you should not depend solely on your emotions as a gauge for your faith, it is important for you to be aware of your feelings as you study a passage of Scripture and have the freedom to express your emotions to God. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit will use your emotions to compel you to look at your life in a different or challenging way.

Fourth, in what way do you feel challenged to respond? God's Word may inspire you or challenge you to take a particular action. Take this challenge seriously and find ways to move into it. If God reveals a particular need He wants *you* to address, take that as His "marching orders." God will empower you to *do* something with the challenge He has just given you.

Start and conclude your Bible study sessions in prayer. Ask God to give you spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear. As you conclude your study, ask the Lord to seal what you have learned so that you will never forget it. Ask Him to help you grow into the fullness of the stature of Christ Jesus.

Again, I caution you to keep the Bible at the center of your study. A genuine Bible study stays focused on God's Word and promotes a growing faith and a closer walk with the Holy Spirit in each person who participates.

LESSON 1



GOD HAS A PURPOSE FOR EVERYTHING

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What exactly is forgiveness?

Growing: How can I stop being an unforgiving person?

“Forgive me? How could God ever forgive me? You don’t know what I’ve done.” “Forgive that person after what she did to me? You’ve got to be kidding!” “I can’t believe I’ve done such an awful thing. I can never forgive myself for doing that.”

These are confessions I hear often as a pastor. They are the confessions of people who have godly parents, have grown up in church, and have heard sermons about forgiveness all their lives. Yet they persist in believing there is something unique about their situation that puts them beyond God’s forgiveness. The result is bondage.

This bondage of living in guilt and unforgiveness stifles their ability to love and receive love. It stunts the growth of their marriages and friendships. It keeps them from entering into all the Lord might have for them in the way of ministry or outreach. It keeps them from enjoying the full abundant life that Christ promised to those who believe in Him (see John 10:10). Bondage is never the desire of God for His children.

God's desire is that you be free in your spirit—free to embrace the blessings, challenges, and joys He has for you now and in your future. God's desire is for you to experience *complete* forgiveness, which is forgiveness of your sins, a full restoration in your relationship with Him, forgiveness of others who have wronged you, and forgiveness of yourself.

Limited forgiveness will never do. Complete forgiveness on your part is required if you are to know personally and fully that God is your loving heavenly Father—and if you are ever to reach your personal destiny in this life.

1. When are times in your life that you struggled with issues of forgiveness and unforgiveness?

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2. Have you experienced God's forgiveness in your life? Have you experienced forgiveness from someone else? Explain.

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WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES NOT MEAN

At the outset of this study, we must define what forgiveness is not. *First, forgiveness does not mean, “It didn’t matter.”* If you have been hurt by someone, or if you have committed a sin, it *does* matter. There is no justification for sin that stands up in God’s presence. If you have sinned, you need to recognize your sin is a blot on your soul—one that you can’t and therefore shouldn’t attempt to sweep under the rug or ignore. Sin matters. Hurt, pain, bondage, and guilt come in the aftermath of sin, and you are unwise to deny their reality.

Second, forgiveness does not mean, “I’ll get over it in time.” The memory of a particular incident or action may fade with time, but it never disappears. If you have committed a sin before God, the effects of that sin remain in your life until you receive God’s forgiveness for it. You may not immediately feel the consequences of your sin—which can cause you to think God has overlooked your sin or it has been resolved in some way—but the consequences of sin will manifest themselves. They lie as dormant “bad seeds” in your life.

The same holds true for a wrong that another person commits against you. You may think that time will heal, but time by itself won’t heal anything. Only the Lord Jesus Christ and His forgiveness working in and through your situation can heal the hurt that you have felt. A wrong you attempt to bury will only rot in your heart and can easily turn into bitterness, anger, and hatred. All of these are destructive emotions to the person who harbors them as well as the root of destructive behavior that may affect others.

Third, forgiveness does not mean, “There will be no penalty.” Some people believe God skips over certain sins when He surveys the hearts of people. This is usually the response of those who hope God will make a detour around their sin and they’ll get away with it.

There are other times, however, when we are fearful God will forget to discipline those who have wronged us. They may even seem to be prospering, and we feel a need to hold on to our unforgiveness

until we are certain that they will be punished in some way. We hold on to the prerogative of vengeance “just in case” God has forgotten about the incident or intends to do nothing about it. At other times, we know we deserve to be punished, but God doesn’t seem to be taking any action against us, so we refuse to forgive ourselves as a form of self-punishment.

These definitions don’t hold water when they are subjected to the truth of God’s Word. Sin matters. It *always* matters. Sin and the effects of sin don’t disappear over time of their own accord. Sin *always* has consequences. It always bears with it the ultimate penalty of death.

- 3.** What are some misunderstandings you’ve had in the past about forgiveness? What is the danger in thinking “you will just get over it in time” if someone hurts you?

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- 4.** Why is it important to remember that God doesn’t just “skip over” another person’s sin? Why is that important to remember in regard to your own sins?

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WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES MEAN

What then is forgiveness? *Forgiveness* is the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you. It involves three elements:

- *An injury.* A wrong is committed. Pain, hurt, suffering, or guilt is experienced (consciously or unconsciously).
- *A debt resulting from the injury.* There is a consequence that is always detrimental and puts someone into a deficit state of some kind.
- *A cancellation of the debt.* Forgiveness involves the conscious act of choosing not to hold the obligation against the other person.

We will be looking at each of these elements in greater depth in this study. All three are involved in forgiveness of all types—forgiveness by God, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of self.

5. “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8). What kind of “debt” does Paul say is acceptable for believers in Christ to have toward others?

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6. “Now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed” (Romans 13:11). What reason does Paul state here for choosing to cancel our debts toward others and walk with Christ?

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UNFORGIVEN PEOPLE

People who haven’t received God’s forgiveness are in pain. There is a festering wound in the soul. There is a wall in the spirit that keeps them imprisoned. They may not recognize they are in a state of unforgiveness, but many people who feel frustrated, burdened, impatient, angry, jealous, or bitter are victims of unforgiveness.

There are many people today who go through life in a state of bitterness, anxiety, and resentment. I’ve even met a few people who have gone through several years in their life of unforgiveness only to discover the person whom they thought wronged them was not the offender. Imagine that! Look what they carried with them. How many years of resentment, hostility, and anger did they harbor toward someone else—only to find they had the wrong person in mind! In the end, who suffered? *They* suffered. It doesn’t make any difference if we have the right person or the wrong person. We always suffer when there is unforgiveness.

When we refuse to forgive, we break fellowship with God. This is why the Scriptures command that we lay our grievances down and

lay them aside. “There we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us” (Hebrews 12:1). We need to make a determined decision that we will not allow into our lives anything that will keep us from becoming the people God wants us to be.

There are many people in this life who have built their own barrier to progress. They have built their own barrier to prosperity. They have built their own barrier to love, because they refuse to surrender what is poisoning their life. As a result, they go through life wanting to blame somebody. Sometimes they just want to blame society—“Well, it’s the fault of this country I live in,” or, “It’s because of these people.” All that blame doesn’t get them anything but frustration, anxiety, anger, and more unforgiveness.

As we will discuss in this study, we can’t make unforgiveness “fit” anywhere in our lives as believers in Christ. We can never come to the point where we just stop forgiving because God’s Word tells us there is no point where we can stop forgiving. Furthermore, if we stop forgiving, we will suffer the consequences—we will become one of these bitter and resentful people I’ve just mentioned. You say, “But suppose they continue on in their hurtful behavior?” What do we do? We must continue on forgiving. Otherwise, we suffer the consequences.

- 7.** What are some of the by-products of unforgiveness that you have seen in others’ lives?

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8. “Let us lay aside every weight . . . and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). How do bitterness and unforgiveness get in the way of us running the “race” that God has set before us with endurance?

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THE FRUIT OF UNFORGIVENESS

The author of the book of Hebrews provides us with a great overview of what happens when a person refuses to be forgiving:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears (Hebrews 12:14–17).

In the Greek, the word translated as *looking* in verse 15 means, “concentrate on this, don’t overlook this, make it your business.”

To do what? To see that no root of bitterness springs up in our lives that would cause trouble. The author says, “by this many become defiled,” which simply means we can’t keep bitterness to ourselves.

And bitterness is a choice that each of make. If somebody hurts us, we have a choice to be bitter, resentful, hostile, angry, and to retaliate against that person. It’s a choice we make. If we choose to sow those seeds, we will reap a harvest of the fruits of bitterness. All kinds of negative things grow up out of bitterness. All of them are negative in their effects upon us.

Take for example a glass of crystal-clear water. It doesn’t take but one drop of dark blue ink to turn the whole thing blue. The whole glass is affected by it. Bitterness is a destructive attitude, and it’s an attitude that *overflows*. Bitter people cannot keep it to themselves.

You say, “Well, I’m a private kind of person. Nobody knows that I’m bitter.” Oh yes, they do. You can’t keep it to yourself, because that’s the nature of it. Bitterness is a destroyer, and it’s nature is to destroy the people around you. People lose their jobs because their unforgiving and bitter spirit. They lose their family because of their bitterness. They lose close relationships with their children because those children can’t stand that kind of bitterness and mistreatment from their parents. There is a price to pay for an unforgiving spirit.

Sadly, many people have believed the devil’s lie that they can keep bitterness and unforgiveness to themselves and it won’t hurt them or anyone else. “Look at you. You’re just fine. You’re doing well.” Well, you cannot live long with bitterness before it begins to show up in a fashion that you don’t want. Bitterness yields a bitter harvest. As Paul states, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like” (Galatians 5:19–21).

But forgiveness brings with it a harvest of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, self-control” (verses 22–23). Therefore, in the following lessons, we will explore what it means to be forgiven and what we need to do to experience God’s complete forgiveness in our lives.

- 9.** “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). How does this verse apply to sowing seeds of bitterness? How does it apply to sowing seeds of love and forgiveness?

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- 10.** “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7). From where does all forgiveness originate? How can you tap into this “source”?

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TODAY AND TOMORROW

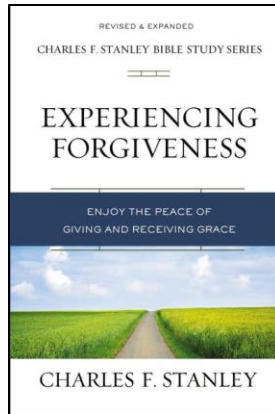
Today: Sin does matter, but forgiveness is the only solution to sin's damages.

Tomorrow: I will ask the Lord to show me areas where I need forgiveness and where I need to forgive.

CLOSING PRAYER

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Lord Jesus, thank You for loving us. Thank You for giving Your life on the cross so we could receive the forgiveness of sins. Today, we pray the Holy Spirit would surface in our hearts and minds and root out any seeds of unforgiveness that are within us—even seeds we do not realize that we have planted. We want to produce a harvest of Your fruit of gentleness, kindness, and love and not the fruit that our bitterness will inevitably yield. Please begin the healing process of restoration and reconciliation within us. We pray in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.



EXPERIENCING FORGIVENESS

by Charles F. Stanley

True freedom is found in forgiveness.

God wants us to experience His complete forgiveness and the freedom to embrace all of the blessings, challenges, and joys that He has for us—both now and in our future. Unfortunately, many of us live in bondage to guilt and unforgiveness that stifle our ability to love and receive love.

In *Experiencing Forgiveness*, Dr. Charles Stanley identifies the components of forgiveness and teaches us how to forgive others, accept God's forgiveness of sins, and find the freedom and blessings of a full and abundant life.

The **Charles F. Stanley Bible Study Series** is a unique approach to Bible study, incorporating biblical truth, personal insights, emotional responses, and a call to action. Each study draws on Dr. Stanley's many years of teaching the guiding principles found in God's Word, showing how we can apply them in practical ways to every situation we face. This edition of the series has been completely revised and updated, and includes two brand-new lessons from Dr. Stanley.

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