

LYSA TERKEURST

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Uninvited*

FORGIVING  
WHAT  
YOU  
CAN'T  
FORGET

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



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# INTRODUCTION



## *I Still Cry Over What Happened*

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

That marked moment in time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I understand all of that.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The more  
our pain*

CONSUMES

*us, the more  
it will*

CONTROL

*us.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other memories that are excruciatingly painful are yours to release.

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

CHAPTER 1

# forgiveness,

THE  
DOUBLE-EDGED  
WORD





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These were the soldiers of unforgiveness waging war against me.

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

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

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

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

Is that too much to ask?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Now let me assure you what it isn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is what I once thought.

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

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


Forgiveness isn't an act of my determination.

Forgiveness is only made possible by my cooperation.

Cooperation is what I've been missing.

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

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

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

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

Nope.

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

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

God knew all of this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**WHAT YOU GET:** the freedom to move on.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those who  
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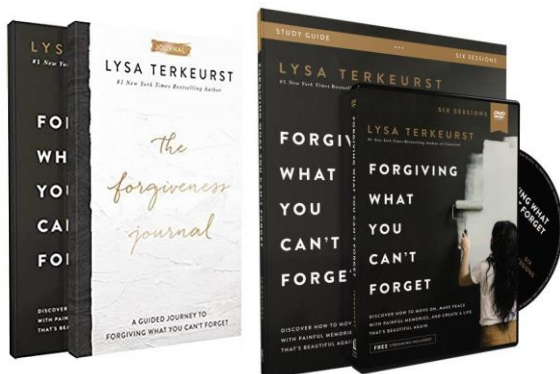
REDEMPTION.

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

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

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

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



# FORGIVING WHAT YOU CAN'T FORGET

by **LYSA TERKEURST**

**Why should I have to be the one who forgives when I'm the one who has already suffered the most?**

We know God commands us to forgive. But **how**, when the hurt plays over and over in our mind? And **why**, when we have already suffered so much? And, **are there exceptions**, such as when the other person keeps inflicting pain?

Lysa TerKeurst has walked this journey, carrying so many wounds that felt unforgivable, that she at first refused to write this book! But after more than 1,000 hours of theological study, Lysa has discovered that Scripture not only offers the truth about forgiveness that our souls desperately need, but practical ways to let go of our bound-up resentment and finally heal.

If you have felt stuck in a cycle of unresolved pain, or resistant to forgiving people who aren't willing to make things right, you need the life-giving freedom that comes with learning how to *forgive what you can't forget*.

**LEARN MORE**