

The Forgiveness Formula

It's not as easy as 1+1

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About the Author



Roberta Fish is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who has supported people in their healing work for over twenty-five years. She has authored a book, “Ministering Hope to the Hurting Heart: A Guide for Christians.” The book gives an overview of the stages of healing from abuse and how Christians can support survivors as they heal. Her vision is for every church to be a healing place for adult survivors of physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse. Roberta travels nationally and internationally as a speaker and facilitates training for churches on how to minister to abuse survivors.

She has served God through a variety of careers: registered nurse, pastor’s wife, business entrepreneur, psychotherapist, campus chaplain, pastor, and author. Most recently, she retired as a professor of religion and psychology at Adventist University of Health Science in Orlando, FL.

Roberta says, “I love writing. Words have been a significant part of my life. As a nurse, I loved empowering patients by teaching them self-care. As the Administrative Director of Psych Services, I mentored lots of staff. As a psychotherapist, coaching was a big part of my work with clients. As a Professor of Religion and Psychology, most of my time was spent teaching young adults who were passionate about learning and growth. As a Pastor, teaching the Word is delightful and transformative.”

Besides writing, Roberta enjoys playing the piano, singing, cooking, and reading. She is currently writing a book, “Women of the Good News: A Readable Bible Commentary on the Gospel Women.”

She lives in the Chattanooga, TN area with her chaplain husband, Howard Fish, of 50 years. She has three amazing red-headed sons, three beautiful daughter-in-loves, seven brilliant grandchildren, three delightful grand-daughter-in-loves, and five darling great-grandsons.

Roberta regularly blogs at www.robortafish.com

Preface

“There’s a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read, ‘Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you, your Father.’ On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.”¹

The world is starved for forgiveness. It is filled with hurt and offended people. After all, who has not—however inadvertently—offended or hurt someone, oftentimes the ones we love the most? Likewise, who has not been hurt or offended by those closest to them?

Popular culture often gives a message of retaliation. Movies, television, and books focus on resentment and revenge. Hungry hearts long for the assurance of forgiveness. Hurt hearts long for peace.

How many families have members that are estranged? Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and children who may even live in the same town, but have not spoken for years.

The church is not exempt from resentment and revenge. Members come week after week, but avoid certain people, or they may interact with a polite aloofness. Their smoldering bitterness about an incident keeps them from the power and joy of being a follower of Christ. Their inability to let go of anger separates them from relationships with God, others, and themselves.

Many have left the church because of a destructive experience. Often, this circumstance has not been addressed or resolved. They still feel offended and hurt about the incident and cannot seem to let it go.

Bitterness and resentment suck the life out of people. Their knapsack is full of grudges and hatreds they cannot seem to shed. The malignancy of spitefulness saps their soul of serenity and delight.

Why are there so many living in the prison of unforgiveness? What keeps us stuck in this painful space? Here are several reasons:

¹ “Bits & Pieces”, October 15, 1992, p. 13.

1. We may misunderstand what forgiveness is. Lies about forgiveness are plentiful. These must be cleared up if we are to move toward the freedom of forgiveness.
2. Forgiveness is not easy. If it was, forgiveness would proliferate. It is hard and challenging, but the rewards are well worth the effort.
3. We do not understand the terrible emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences of an unforgiving spirit.
4. We do not comprehend the amazing whole-life blessings of forgiveness.
5. There are steps to forgiveness, and these have been hidden in the fog of well-meaning but ill-informed Christians. People can quote the Word, but misinterpret the meaning God intended.
6. We have not fully embraced the awesome grace of God. Grace and forgiveness are related. They live together in our hearts and minds. Understanding grace will empower us to forgive and be forgiven.
7. Often we don't realize what it means to live a life of ongoing forgiveness.

Each of these reasons can keep us stuck in the pain of an unforgiving spirit. This Bible Study Guide will address these issues. We will learn the true definition of forgiveness—what forgiveness is and isn't. We will be able to examine the research about the blessings of forgiveness and the consequences of unforgiveness. Steps to forgiveness will be explained in detail so we can walk in newness of life as a forgiving and forgiven person. We will see the extravagant grace of God poured out for us. We will get a vision of what it means to live a life of forgiveness.

My own experience with forgiveness is part of the reason I'm writing this Bible Study Guide, and throughout our study I will share some of my story.

Growing up, I was taught never to get angry. It wasn't Christian. It was a sin. So, instead of learning how to be honest about my anger, to deal with it, and take it to God for His changing power, I stuffed it. I lied to myself about it. I denied it. Forty years of denying resentment about childhood issues meant an immense mountain of bitterness. Twenty years of sweeping things under the carpet in my marriage got pretty messy.

When, through the power of the Holy Spirit I became clear about my rage, I had an enormous amount of work to do. Step by step, I moved toward

forgiveness. It came slowly, but surely, with a great many fits and starts. But, praise God, I am free of the stifling prison house of resentment and guilt.

Another part of my experience as a licensed clinical social worker and pastoral counselor has been working with clients, many of whom are survivors of abuse. Forgiveness is a huge part of healing. The work of forgiveness transforms people. I will share some of their stories and reveal how they moved from surviving to thriving, through the gift of forgiveness.

My desire is for us to be free of anger, bitterness, and resentment. My desire is that our relationship with God, others and ourselves be healed and whole. I know this is God's longing for us too.

May we be enfolded with God's rich blessings as we make the journey through this Bible study guide to a rich, grace-filled life.

This is my prayer for us. May "the Holy Spirit produce this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."²

² Galatians 5:22-23 NLT

Chapter One

The Truth about Forgiveness

One spring day in my therapy office, Amy was rehearsing some painful experiences. She had been in an abusive and destructive 30-year marriage that was ending. The litany of hurt and anger was intense. This had been her typical session for several months. There had been many repressed and unprocessed experiences. She was grieving the lost years. Through her tears, she looked at me and said, “I will never forgive him. How can I? He doesn’t deserve it. What he did was wrong. I can’t forgive him.” .

Over the next several weeks we talked about forgiveness—what it was and what it wasn’t. She needed to challenge and change many false beliefs about forgiveness. Her new understanding helped her to go through the process of forgiving Jim. Then she could, and did, move on with her life.

Another client, Wendy, declared, “I will never forgive him for what he did.” She spoke these words through clenched jaw. Her tense shoulders and tight fists further emphasized her words. Her father had molested her as a child over a number of years and she was furious. After years of making excuses for him, she had finally broken through her denial. She was accepting the truth of what he had done and all the years of buried feelings were surfacing.

As her therapist, I believe this was a good place for her to be.

You may wonder how, as a Christian counselor, I can say that. Aren’t we supposed to forgive others? The subject of forgiveness is getting a lot of press. We are told we need forgive by friends, therapists, teachers, and pastors. We are told by those who have hurt us that we need to let it go. Even Jesus is pretty clear about the need to forgive. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “If we forgive those who sin against us, our heavenly Father will forgive us. But if we refuse to



ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT

- “Today we noted that the disciples’ initial forgiveness data set was rather small (7 times). Jesus tried to raise the maximum number with his “70 times 7” (7 squared times a power of ten). Someone noted that it was “more forgiveness than you can imagine.” How do you do your forgiveness math? What kind of forgiveness data set do you have? Is it a fixed, finite data set? Or is it a divine, near infinite data set? How do you implement Forgiveness Math in your life?”
- Harry Banks, “Fuzzy Logic and Forgiveness Math,” *Adventist Today*, January 23, 2014
 - “When you forgive you are more like Jesus than you may be at any other time in your earthly life.”
- Dick Tibbits, *Forgive to Live Devotional*, p. 32
 - “I remember, as a child, I once recounted to my mother my newly acquired mathematical ability and proudly announced that I should forgive my pesky little brother 490 times, and after that I could get even with him. My mother said just four words: “Wouldn’t you lose count?” Indeed, this describes the essence of Christ’s reply: there can be no end to our Christian duty to forgive. In fact, if we try to keep a record of the times we have forgiven, we have not forgiven at all.”
- Colin Richardson, “Forgiving: An Essential in Christian Life,” *Ministry Magazine*, March 2009
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forgive others, our Father will not forgive our sins.”¹ It seems pretty clear, doesn’t it?

Sometimes it’s hard to find our way through the forest of voices talking about forgiveness. When someone says, “You need to forgive,” what questions come to your mind?

1. Do I let the person off the hook and not hold them accountable for what they did?
2. Does “I forgive you” take away the consequences of their behavior?
3. Do I condone what they did if I forgive them? Do I say what they did was alright?
4. Does forgiving someone mean I must forget what they did to me?

¹ Matthew 6:14-15



INSPIRED THOUGHTS

- “He who is unmerciful toward others shows that he himself is not a partaker of God’s pardoning grace. In God’s forgiveness the heart of the erring one is drawn close to the great heart of Infinite Love. The tide of divine compassion flows into the sinner’s soul, and from him to the souls of others. The tenderness and mercy that Christ has revealed in His own precious life will be seen in those who become sharers of His grace.”
- Ellen White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 251
- “We are dependent upon the pardoning mercy of God every day and every hour; how then can we cherish bitterness and malice toward our fellow sinners! If, in all their daily intercourse, Christians would carry out the principles of this prayer, what a blessed change would be wrought in the church and in the world! This would be the most convincing testimony that could be given to the reality of Bible religion.”
- Ellen White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 5, p. 171
- “When the debtor pleaded with his lord for mercy, he had no true sense of the greatness of his debt. He did not realize his helplessness. He hoped to deliver himself. “Have patience with me,” he said, “and I will pay thee all.” So there are many who hope by their own works to merit God’s favor. They do not realize their helplessness. They do not accept the grace of God as a free gift, but are trying to build themselves up in self-righteousness. Their own hearts are not broken and humbled on account of sin, and they are exacting and unforgiving toward others. Their own sins against God, compared with their brother’s sins against them, are as ten thousand talents to one hundred pence--nearly one million to one; yet they dare to be unforgiving.”
- Ellen White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 245

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5. If I forgive them, do I have to be bosom buddies? Do I have to trust them again?
 6. Do I have to forgive immediately? What if I’m not ready? What do I do then?
 7. What if I don’t want to forgive them at all? Will God reject and abandon me?
 8. How do I become willing to forgive?
 9. What if I’ve done something wrong? How do I seek forgiveness? What do I need to do to be forgiven?
 10. What about self-forgiveness? Is there such a thing? I have done some bad things, and I can’t seem to let them go even though I’ve asked God for forgiveness and I think He’s forgiven me.

11. What is the truth about forgiveness and what lies do people tell about it?

So, what does it really mean to forgive? Forgiveness is a very misunderstood concept. Rightly understood and practiced it is a beautiful experience, but it can be used as a club, a cop-out, or a cover-up.

In this first chapter, we will recognize the lies and truths of forgiveness, define forgiveness, and delve into the Word so we can grasp God's reality about genuine forgiveness.

Sixteen Lies about Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness means what the person did was OK.
2. Forgiveness is immediate—an instant happening. It comes all at once.
3. Forgiveness is a single act, a one-time decision.
4. Forgiveness means taking away the consequences of the person's behavior.
5. The person we are forgiving needs to know about our decision.
6. Forgiving includes forgetting what the person did to hurt us.
7. Forgiveness means we must reconnect to the person who hurt us and go back to the relationship.
8. Forgiveness means letting people off the hook.
9. Forgiveness means all negative feelings about the experience of hurt are gone.
10. There is a limit to how much we can and should forgive.
11. We can forgive without reliving the pain of what happened.
12. When we forgive, we will know immediately we have forgiven them.
13. Forgiveness requires the other person to be sorry.
14. Forgiveness is weakness.
15. Forgiveness is letting the offender win.
16. Forgiveness is easy for Christians.

Are you surprised about some of these statements being in the “lie” category? Circle those you have questions about.

Now let's look at the truths about forgiveness.

Sixteen Truths about Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness is a gift.
 - God gives the gift. Whether it's God's forgiveness of us or our ability to forgive others, it's always a gift from God.
 - It is a gift for the forgiver and the person who is being forgiven.
2. Forgiveness is a personal choice—intentional and voluntary.
 - Forced forgiveness is NOT forgiveness. The very center of the word “forgiveness” is “give.” If it's not freely given, it's not forgiveness.
 - Forgiveness is entirely our decision.
 - Forgiveness is a powerful choice we can make which leads to greater well-being and better relationships.
3. Forgiveness is a natural resolution of the grief process.
 - When we experience a loss, we must grieve.
 - Any time we have been hurt, there is a sense of loss—loss of safety, loss of trust, loss of intimacy, loss of reputation, loss of money, etc. The list is long. Loss is always associated with hurt.
 - Forgiveness is always necessary when we've been hurt, so the grief process will always be associated with forgiveness.
4. Although reconciliation may follow forgiveness, it is possible to forgive without reestablishing or continuing the relationship.
 - Reconciliation is two people coming together in mutual respect. Reconciliation requires both parties working together.
 - We may also choose not to reconcile, perhaps because we have no reason to believe that a relationship with the other person is healthy for us or our family.
 - Forgiveness does not mean putting ourselves in a position to be harmed again. We can forgive someone and still take healthy steps to protect ourselves and our loved ones, including choosing not to reconcile.
5. We may forgive the person who harmed us without their knowledge or presence.
 - Sometimes the person who harmed us is not part of our life now. They could live at a distance. We may have lost contact with them. Perhaps they died. That does not mean we can't forgive.



RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- “Learning forgiveness is also unlearning, for each person must unlearn something in order to forgive. We all carry false, internalized narratives about what constitutes forgiveness. They are beliefs that unduly complicate things as we try to forgive or accept forgiveness.”
- Janet L. Ramsey, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, 2007
 - “Some Christians have found solace in the thought that, if all else fails, they can “heap coals of fire” on the head of their offender. That is, they have the option of “nice-ing” their enemy to death. It’s what I call a “vegetarian vengeance” – no blood, no carnage, no signs of violence or any other activity for that matter. Just a quiet seething payback on which no one can put their finger. A little jab here, a put-down there; a smirk here, a withering silence there – and the vengeance goes on and on and on.”
- Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson, *I Forgive You, But. . .*, p. 87
 - “Forgiveness can be research, dissected, analyzed, and defined, but when it all boils down, it is something that can’t be humanly understood. It is truly a work of God on the heart. God influences the heart of a person by beauty, love, and even adversity to produce forgiveness.”
- Larry Yeagley, *Beyond Anger: Finding the Freedom of Forgiveness*, p. 115
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6. Forgiveness is a process which involves acknowledging to ourselves the wrong done to us, reflecting on it, and deciding how we will think about it and what we will do about it.
 - Forgiveness does not deny the harm or the feelings that the injustice produced.
 - Forgiveness is not repressing our true feelings and playing the victim, or saying it’s okay in spite of the hurt. It is not gritting our teeth and pretending we are not hurt. We don’t use the grin and bear it approach.
7. Forgiveness has taken place when we can remember the wrong that was done without feeling resentment or the need for revenge.
 - When someone hurts us, we feel they have stolen from us—our safety, our peace, our joy, etc. We believe they owe us something. They have hurt us and they are going to pay.
 - Forgiveness releases the debt. They no longer owe us something. The debt is paid in full.
8. When we have forgiven someone, we can still feel moments of anger and sadness about what they did to us.



OTHER VOICES

- “Forgiveness is the giving, and so the receiving, of life.” - George MacDonald
- “Forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note, torn in two and burned up, so that it can never be shown against the man.” - Henry Ward Beecher
- “Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.” - Corrie Ten Boom
- “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” - Mahatma Gandhi
- “Forgiveness is giving up hope for a better past.” - John A. MacDougall
- “Forgiving and being forgiven are two names for the same thing. The important thing is that a discord has been resolved.” - C. S. Lewis
- “I think it means...putting yourself in the position of the other person, and wiping away any sort of resentment and antagonism you feel toward them.” - Jimmy Carter
- “We think that forgiveness is weakness, but it’s absolutely not; it takes a very strong person to forgive.” - T. D. Jakes
- “Forgiving is an act of mercy toward an offender. We are no longer controlled by angry feelings toward this person.” - Robert D. Enright

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- There can be anger after forgiving. Anger and forgiveness can live side by side.
 - The deep wound we have experienced is a fact of our lives. We can relinquish the need to get even AND the consequences remain in our lives. “The dead stay dead; the wounded are often crippled still. The reality of evil and its damage to human beings is not magically undone and it can still make us very mad.”²
9. Forgiving is letting go of asserting self-righteous moral superiority or playing God.
- Saying, “I forgive you,” and then adding, “I realize you are

² Smedes, Lewis B. *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. 108.

- too immature to understand what you did,” is self-righteous superiority. It is not forgiveness.
- Forgiveness relinquishes the role of playing God.
 - Forgiveness gives love and care to the offender, rather than looking down our long nose at them.
10. Forgiveness is a process that takes time, especially if the hurt is deep and/or perpetrated by someone significant in our lives.
 - The process can be long and drawn out. We may struggle and forgive slowly.
 - Often we can’t remember the actual time when we forgave; it sneaks up on us. We know we have forgiven because we find ourselves wishing the offender well.
 11. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing. Forgiveness does not rationalize or justify the wrong that was done.
 - We call sin by its right name. Denying, minimizing, or white-washing a person’s behavior is harmful to us and to the person who did the wrong.
 - We do not say that what they did was acceptable, insignificant, or “not so bad.” It was bad, it hurt, and it was wrong.
 - The Lord forgives all our sins and condones none of them.
 12. Forgiveness requires us to have some understanding of the other person and why they did what they did.
 - If we understood everything, we could excuse what they did and we don’t want to do that.
 - If we can understand some of what was going on for them and what could have influenced them, we might find it a bit easier to move toward forgiveness.
 - In understanding, however, we remember they had a choice and they chose to hurt us. Understanding does not excuse them.
 13. Forgiveness requires courage and strength.
 - Forgiveness is not for cowards. It takes courage to confront and face the hurts done to you.
 14. Forgiveness does not mean we forget the hurt.
 - Nowhere does Scripture require you to have amnesia about your own sins or sins committed against you. In fact, focusing on forgetting a wrong might lead to denying or suppressing

- feelings about it, which is not the same as forgiveness.
- Forgiveness has nothing to do with forgetting. For instance, what would happen if you burned your fingers on the stove, and you forgot the pain and how you got it? Remembering the experience helps us prevent repeats. We do remember, but in a different way. We do not hold the hurt against the person.
 - Scripture doesn't say God forgets our sins. It says He will not remember them. What's the difference? To forget something is to have no memory of it. God is omniscient. He has not lost His memory of our transgressions. Rather, He refuses to call them to mind. He promises not to bring them up. The same is true for us. When we forgive we promise not to bring the offense up to God, to the person, to others, and to ourselves.
15. Forgiveness and justice are two distinct concepts. It is certainly easier to forgive someone who genuinely apologizes and makes things right. However, justice—which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation—is separate from forgiveness.
- We may pursue justice with or without forgiving someone. And if we don't receive the justice we desire, we can still choose whether or not to forgive.
 - There is nothing about genuine forgiveness that keeps us from holding people accountable for their actions.
16. Forgiveness is an act of obedience to the Lord.³
- We remember that when God commands something, He gives us the power to fulfill it.

Definitions of Forgiveness

There are hundreds of definitions of forgiveness. Some are short, some are long, some are complicated, and some are simple. But each definition involves choice, and giving up or letting go, and is not based on the person's deserving forgiveness. Below is a simple story told by a nine-year-old named Julie to help illustrate.

“One day my friend, Karen, got angry with me. She yelled and shouted at me. She called me names. For two weeks I was angry with her. At the end of the

³ Colossians 3:13

first week, she asked me if I wanted to walk to school with her. I said no. Then one day I prayed and asked Jesus if He would help me not be angry. The next week Karen asked me again if I would walk with her, but I still said no. The third time she asked me, I said yes. I wasn't angry, and we walked together from then on."

1. Choice—forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision. Moving from one way of thinking to another is an unforced, chosen, intentional process. Julie made a decision to say no, to pray, and then to say yes.
2. Giving up or letting go—of resentment, blame, anger, and bitterness. There is a shift in thinking toward the person who has wronged us. We give up our resentment and our right to hurt them, for hurting us. Julie let go of her anger. To forgive is to choose to live with the moral scales unbalanced. We surrender the right to get even. We relinquish the desire for revenge and move to grace.
3. Not based on the person's deserving forgiveness - instead, it is an act of love, mercy, and grace. It happens even if there is no apology or ownership of the offense. The number of times someone hurt us, or whether they deserve forgiveness is not the issue. Apparently Julie's friend did not apologize. Julie forgave her anyway. We don't forgive someone for giving us money, fixing our car, or helping our grandmother cross a busy street. We forgive them when they abuse us, when they betray us, and when they hurt us or someone we love. We forgive, whether or not the offense is, or ever could be, rectified by the offender.



The Quintessential Parable on Forgiveness in Matthew 18:24-35

Read Matthew 17:24, 18:21

Where was Jesus and who was He with as He told this parable? What was the situation?

Read Matthew 18:21-22

Why do you think Peter asked how many times he needed to forgive someone?

What was Jesus' answer?

Do you think Peter was surprised at Jesus' answer?

What point do you think Jesus was trying to make?



As part of Jesus' answer to Peter, he told a parable.

Read Matthew 18:23-25

What does the king in the parable decide to do?

How much did the servant owe?

What did the king decide to do to the servant?

Even if his possessions, wife, and children were sold, would this have settled his debt?

Read Matthew 18:26

What did the servant do and what did he ask for?



BIBLE STUDY

What was the king's reaction? What is your reaction to the king's generosity?

Read Matthew 18:28-29

This section of the parable is identical in structure to the first part.

Where did the forgiven man go when he left the king?

How much did the servant owe him?

What did the forgiven servant do to the servant who owed him money?

What did the servant that owed money say to the forgiven servant?



Was it possible that he could pay the debt over time?

What did the forgiven but unforgiving servant do to him?

What is your response to the forgiven but unforgiving servant?

Read Matthew 18:31-34

What was the reaction of the other servants who witnessed or heard about this experience?

Who did the servants tell?

What did the king say and do? State verse 33 in your own words.



BIBLE STUDY

What is your reaction to what the king said and did?

Jesus said that when we refuse to forgive, we set ourselves up to be turned over to tormentors. Have you ever felt tormented by the results of unforgiveness? If you are willing, share what that torment looked like in your life.

Read Matthew 18:35.

What does Jesus say will happen if we don't forgive?

What does it mean to forgive from your heart?

In your own words what did Jesus want to teach in this discussion with Peter and in telling the parable?

Final Reflections

Imagine yourself in the parable that Jesus told to his disciples. Choose one of the characters: the king, the forgiven servant, the fellow servant, or the servant who witnessed the act of unforgiving behavior. As you imagine yourself in the story, what are you thinking and feeling? Who did you choose? What did you learn from this experience?

Based on your study of this chapter, what is your definition of forgiveness?

What one thing in this chapter had the most meaning to you? What does it inspire you to do?

Prayer

Lord, thank You for Your willing forgiveness of my sins. My debt is large and You have forgiven it freely. Lord, I choose to obey You. Be with me in the rage and pain of my woundedness. Slow Your pace to walk with me. Help me to be willing to forgive. Travel with me in the process and bring me to complete freedom in You. Amen.