

## NURTURING YOUR FAITH:

PART THREE  
*The Possibilities  
of Forgiveness*[lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies)

Welcome back to *Nurturing Your Faith: Forgiveness*. In this session, *The Possibilities of Forgiveness*, we'll look at how forgiving others is an issue touching us all. Previously, we've seen how God's forgiveness is complete and eternal (see 1 Peter 3:18; Ephesians 1:7). But what about the forgiveness we offer? How do we treat sins against us or those we love? How do we offer real and lasting forgiveness—with no conditions and “no strings attached”—like Jesus?

Or does our forgiveness hinge on secret conditions like “You're forgiven if list your requirements here take place”? Do we forgive, or do we simply *soldier on*—secretly clinging to the person's sin because we won't let go? And, sadly, are we happy to leave it at that: a wound that never heals because we're too busy nursing the grievance? These are some of the questions we will consider in this session.



Watch video introduction with Rev. Dr. Chad Lakies, LHM's regional director of North America, at [lhm.org/studies](http://lhm.org/studies).



## TREACHEROUS BROTHERLY BETRAYAL

In the Old Testament, the life of Joseph is a narrative of forgiveness and reconciliation (see Genesis 37-50). Early in the story, we see Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, was held in contempt by his jealous brothers. To prove the point, they sold him to Midianite traders, heading to Egypt. While they figured this was the last they'd see of him, Joseph's story was only beginning. Living in Egypt, he experienced a meteoric rise to unimaginable heights of power, becoming second in authority only to Pharaoh himself (see Genesis 41:37-45). Indeed, all was well for Joseph. But time and famine would change that. Hard times in Canaan brought Joseph's brothers back to Egypt in search of food—and to meet again their long, lost brother.

As Egypt's governor, Joseph managed the country's food supply. Thus, when ten of his brothers arrived from Canaan, hungry and looking for grain, Joseph was the point man. Recognizing them, though going undetected in his disguise, he had them where he wanted—if he meant to retaliate. After some character testing and not a little subterfuge, the brothers are embraced by a weeping Joseph who forgives their heartless sin years earlier. He tells them, “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” (Genesis 45:7-8).

God works through our circumstances no matter how dreadful they might appear—even when we're left for dead as Joseph was. In the end, Joseph was reunited with Jacob, and with the family's move into Egypt, the stage was getting set for God's later work through Moses.

How would you feel getting sold into slavery? Could you pardon such an offense? What do you think motivated Joseph to extend forgiveness to his brothers?

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Consider an event in your life (or someone you know) that feels “too big” to be forgiven. What barriers stand in the way of reconciliation?

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How does one get past the lingering resentment of having been wronged, especially in a big way?

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## WANDERING SON RETURNING HOME

In Luke 15:11-32 we have Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. The younger of two sons, he demanded his share of the estate (before his father’s death) and, in the process, shunned his family, exposing them to public ridicule by his brash behavior. Adding more salt to the wound, he went to “a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living” (Luke 15:13b). In short, he blew his bankroll partying with the Gentiles, was destitute when a famine settled in, and ended up slopping swine to get by—a stinging blow to his ego and Jewish upbringing! Then the light went on! Why not return home, confess his sins, and seek his father’s mercy, doing work as a hired hand?

With his father’s estate in view, the penitent son probably still had misgivings. But what choice did he have? As awkward as returning home was going to be—and it would be awkward—the son was at wits’ end. If there was a shred of forgiveness left in his father, the wandering son hoped he would find it. He was not disappointed. Now “while he was still a long way off,

his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” At the son’s repentance, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” the father welcomed him home with gifts and food and celebration. All was forgiven.

But regrettably this joyous reunion was marred by the bitter taste of resentment and unforgiveness. The prodigal’s brother was not pleased with junior’s arrival—and understandably so. With a famine in full swing and resources scarce, what’s with the merrymaking, the hoopla, the slaughter of a fattened calf!? Why!? For this returning tramp? The father’s pleas to his elder son to rejoice (and be merciful) may have fallen on deaf ears. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:31b-32).

We don’t know if the elder son came around or not. Unforgiveness can work that way. Unlike Joseph’s thrill at seeing his brothers, the prodigal’s brother may have preferred to never see his brother again.

Has anyone ever forgiven you for a major blunder? Why? How has that grace impacted your life and your attitude towards those who have done you wrong?

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Do you agree with the father’s gracious forgiveness of the errant son? Should there be conditions— some sort of payback for his selfish squandering— before forgiveness and restoration? If so, what would you suggest? If not, how do you prevent the same thing from happening again?

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Was the older son justified in his response toward his brother? Do you think they ever reconciled?

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## MINISTRY THROUGH CRITICISM

Acting on Jesus' teachings to forgive had to be tough for the earliest believers. The hardships Paul and his companions faced in their ministry dogged them constantly. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul speaks of "false apostles" who are unsettling believers in Corinth by trying to vilify his character with personal attacks and ridicule. "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:13). It wasn't enough to deal with the world's wicked resistance to the Gospel; Paul had to work through these things, too.

These imposters, like others Paul dealt with in positions of religious authority or political power, brought him much grief—and physical pain. He was a veteran of abuse, suffering "far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned." Added to this was "danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles ... danger from false brothers" (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Forgiving such torments would seem impossible unless the forgiver knew himself to be guilty of similar atrocities, or even greater. Paul writes, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (2 Timothy 1:15).

Now, following his Savior's lead, Paul could forgive even as he himself had been forgiven.

Insults and unjust criticisms are hard to take, especially when trying to do good. How can you be a forgiving person in such circumstances?

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How does one suffer physically for the Christian faith, stay enthused with sharing the Gospel, and extend forgiveness to those who do such things?

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How much do you think Paul was motivated to forgive others when he looked back at his own pre-Christian life? How has God used your past to shape you into who you are today?

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Chances are slim that any of us have been sold into slavery, but we may have had a child come home after a period of reckless living, or endured gross mistreatment by others. Jesus set the measure of our forgiveness when He prayed on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34b). With these words, Jesus asks the Father’s mercy for all who have put Him to death—including you and me. How much more are we to forgive those who do wrong to us?

But this is what we are called to do in Christ. Paul wrote, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13).



## PRAY

Heavenly Father, by Your Holy Spirit may we become people who joyfully forgive those who sin against us—even as we have been forgiven by You. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.