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Discover
**THE POWER OF
FORGIVENESS**



LEADER GUIDE

LEADER GUIDE

Discover
**THE POWER OF
FORGIVENESS**



by Edith Bajema



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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ISBN 1-56212-804-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

To the Leader	4
Introduction.....	6
Editor’s Note to Leaders	8
Glossary of Terms.....	9
Lesson 1	
The Power of God’s Forgiveness	10
Lesson 2	
The Response of the Forgiven Heart	18
Lesson 3	
How Many Times?	26
Lesson 4	
The Hidden Power of Forgiveness.....	34
Lesson 5	
Stories of Forgiveness	43
Lesson 6	
The Good News: Receiving and Giving Forgiveness	51
What Shall I Say?	60
Evaluation Questionnaire	

To the Leader

Prepare the Lesson

This leader guide is meant to assist small group leaders, not to substitute for your own personal work. Always answer the study guide questions first, using the suggested basic steps of preparation. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage.

Do not take the leader guide to the Bible study group. You do not want to give the impression that you have an answer book. The answers are in the Bible; you are a guide to help your group find the answers in God's Word.

Prepare thoroughly before each group session so that you can lead without frequent references to your notes. This will leave you free to concentrate on your leadership responsibilities. You will also be able to keep better eye contact and listen more carefully.

Get Ready to Lead

Learn to think in questions. As you prepare the lesson, ask yourself questions and discover your own answers. There is no better way to prepare yourself to anticipate the group's questions and help others discover truths from God's Word.

Lead with Questions

Use questions to direct the discussion. Draw out positive contributions with questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions with smaller, concise questions. Respond to wrong answers or problems with questions. If you learn to lead others to the truth by questions, you will be a good Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can be used too.

Help to Apply

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God's message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of those who are not yet applying these truths. It's the Spirit's work to apply God's Word to the hearts of men and women. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying it in your heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit's work in others.

Keep application low-key. Be careful not to put any personal pressure on group members to apply the truths. Simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Avoid the use of direct pronouns in application. For example, instead of asking, "What does this

mean to you?” ask, “What does this mean in our lives?” or instead of asking, “What will you do?” ask, “What action does this passage suggest?”

Leadership Training

If there is more than one group, leaders are strongly encouraged to meet regularly for discussion of the lesson, for prayer, and for mutual support. Every leader should have a copy of the *Coffee Break Evangelism Manual with Director's Handbook*. This book is a basic “how-to” for establishing and leading a Bible discovery group. Reread the book or portions of it periodically and review it at the beginning of each season. *Leading with Love* in the Coffee Break Core Values series is another important tool for leadership development. Leaders will also find it helpful to attend one of the many leadership training workshops offered each year. For more information on materials or training, write to Discover Your Bible, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560 or P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8, or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org.

Introduction

Someone has done you wrong—perhaps a deep wrong. You have been hurt more than you care to admit, even to close friends. The memory of that hurt feels like a bruise on your spirit, a crushed area that remains tender and bleeding, even though weeks, months, or even years have passed.

You try not to think about it too much, because it makes you feel sad or angry. You may forget about it for days on end. Life may seem to go on as it did before—until you see that person again. Suddenly all the hurt and anger come to the surface, and the memory of your hurt is as fresh and painful as on the day it happened.

Against that person, your heart remains angry and bitter and confused. How could your friend or coworker or family member or neighbor have wronged you like that? What can you do to show that person how his or her actions made you feel? How can you teach a lesson in return? How can you pay back a little of what you received?

So a root of bitterness springs up. It may be just a little root, or it may be large—but it finds a place to grow in the soil of your heart.

Sometimes this root of bitterness, this unforgiving spirit, will grow until it kills a relationship that once was loving. Sometimes it grows large enough to kill the spirit of the person who harbors it. It becomes a prison, and those caught in it are unable to free themselves.

There is a key that will open the prison and free your spirit. It is the key of forgiveness. It will let you out of the small, dark place that your spirit has been trapped, and bring you out into the light, into the open spaces of God's love. You will find healing—and will find that others are unexpectedly blessed by the change in your heart.

Come and sit by God's side for a while, and look into the deep places of his forgiving heart. Listen to Jesus talk to his friends about forgiveness. Eavesdrop on how members of the early Christian church were taught to get along with each other in spite of their differences.

Then open your heart to discover the healing power of forgiveness in your own life.

—*Edith Bajema*
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Recommended Resource

It will be clear by the end of this study, if it is not already clear, that a six-lesson study on forgiveness can only begin to answer some of the tough questions on forgiveness. One excellent resource is Lewis Smedes's *The Art of Forgiving* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). You may find it helpful to read Smedes's book side by side with this study, as it expands on many questions that your group members will certainly have.

Editor's Note to Leaders

Be prepared if someone in your group indicates that she wants to forgive someone who has hurt her, but she's not sure how to go about it. Because every situation is different, this study can't begin to give a full description of what that might look like, but it's important that you suggest a next step. Here are some suggestions for how you might do that:

1. Don't press for specifics, but do ask questions to determine the level of injury sustained: Was this more than a one-time occurrence? Was pain inflicted intentionally and within a close relationship? Is there a refusal to reconcile or even an outright denial that it happened? Is the person who inflicted the injury no longer living or unable to participate in the process? Is the level of injury severe? Was a crime committed?
2. If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then suggest that the person seek help from a pastor, a pastoral counselor, counselor or attorney, or a professional mediator. Give specific information of whom to contact and how to contact this person. If at all possible, let your group member make the contact herself. If she can't make contact, she's not ready to do so. Offer your ongoing support for the person as she starts the process. Pray with her.
3. If the injury caused is not at such a high level and if the person who caused the injury is open to it, suggest that your group member meet with that person. You'll want to recommend that this meeting take place with the help of a mediator or support person. The goals of the meeting would include
 - communicating the offense and the impact it had on both parties and on their relationship
 - opportunity for a response and explanation by the person who caused the offense
 - an expression of regret and apology for the wrong behavior
 - a sincere request for and extension of forgiveness
 - a commitment to doing what still needs to be done to restore the relationship
 - prayer together seeking God's help and guidance in continuing on the road of reconciliation
4. If the level of hurt is only one of annoyance, suggest that your group member confront the person responsible either in person or by letter, state her grievance clearly, and ask for an apology. If an apology is received, then she can simply say, "I forgive you from the heart." Both parties can then express their joy in reconciling and look for ways to be sure the offense won't happen again.

Glossary of Terms

denarii—Jewish coins in use during Roman times. A hundred denarii would equal a few dollars in today's North American economy.

grace—undeserved favor, kindness, and love.

holy—set apart from others by being pure, free from iniquity, cleansed, and ready to do God's will.

hyssop—a plant that grew in Egypt, in the Sinai Desert, and in Palestine that was capable of producing a stem three or four feet in length.

iniquity—sin; disobedience to God's will.

kingdom of heaven—God's active rule over the creation that becomes visible wherever places, people, and relationships are devoted to obeying the Lord Jesus Christ. Can refer both to the angels and spirits in heaven and to people on earth who seek to live the way God intended.

mercy—compassion and kindness that is not deserved; often used as reference to forgiving a debt.

Pharisee—a member of the Jewish religious sect that emphasized the importance of keeping even the smallest of religious laws and rituals. Some Pharisees were known for their legalism and hypocrisy.

prophet—one who speaks for God or comes with a message from God.

righteous—free from guilt or sin. God regards people who are joined to God by faith as righteous through Christ.

sin—an action or thought that misses the mark of God's perfect standard for our lives. Sin results in a broken relationship with God.

sinner—one who sins.

talent—a measure of gold, much larger than a denarius; a thousand talents would equal millions of dollars in North American currency.

tax collectors—Jews who agreed to serve the hated Roman government by collecting tax from their fellow Jews; they were expected to keep a portion of the taxes for their own pockets.

transgression—see **sin**.

uncircumcision—the state of not being circumcised. Circumcision was the physical sign of belonging to God's covenant people; it implied purity and being set apart from the rest of the world.

Lesson 1

Psalm 103:1-5, 7-12; Proverbs 20:9; 1 John 1:9;
Psalm 130:3-4; Colossians 2:13-14

The Power of God's Forgiveness

Introductory Notes

Your preparation to lead this lesson should begin long before the first week of the study. As soon as you make the decision to lead this Bible study, you should begin to pray. It will be the best preparation you can do.

Why? You will be dealing with things here that go deep into the human spirit—issues of hurt, grief, bitterness, loss. Your group members will be struggling with trying to understand why they are called to forgive those who have hurt or betrayed them. They may also be struggling to understand and accept God's forgiveness of them.

So begin praying for them (even the ones you don't know) long before you meet face to face. Pray that God may be softening their hearts even now, plowing up the hard ground of resentment, tossing out stones of bitterness, watering them with the showers of the Spirit's presence and life. If you do this, you will find that the seeds you plant in your discussions—seeds of forgiveness, healing, and freedom—will take root much more quickly. The Holy Spirit, through your prayers, can work powerful things in the human spirit.

Pray also that you may grow through this study. It is a rare Christian—even among mature believers—who does not harbor a hidden resentment. And many of us do not think daily, with gratitude and astonishment, of the forgiving love that God pours on us. So work through the lessons prayerfully yourself. Even though you are the group leader, the Spirit can make a tremendous difference in your walk as a Christian through this study.

When you are leading this first lesson, do not be afraid to share your own struggles with forgiveness. This will open the door for group members to talk freely about their questions and hurts.

So begin your first lesson on a personal note. Talk about your feelings in leading a study of this kind, and about your anticipation of the Spirit's work in your own life as you look at the Scriptures together. Acknowledge that you are dealing with a difficult topic, one that is intertwined with emotion and memory, one that will touch each member on a personal level. But also emphasize that the Bible passages you are studying contain truths that are a solid foundation on which to stand—truths will bring freedom and healing if they are embraced.

And finally, become familiar with the good news material at the conclusion of lesson 6 on page 59. Some of your group members may be seeing the God of forgiveness for the first time and be ready to make a first-time commitment to Jesus Christ *before* they get to lesson 6. If so, you will be able to better lead them to faith in Christ.

Optional Opening Share Question

What person do you trust most in your life? What makes a person easy to trust?

1. *Psalm 103:1-5*

- a. *What is the psalm writer encouraging himself to do?*
- b. *What benefits has he received from God?*

The psalm writer—in this case, David—opens his song with three of the most familiar words in all the Psalms: “Praise the Lord.” **What is included in praise?** Talk about the elements of thanksgiving, of telling good things about God, of speaking to God in a spirit of worship and adoration.

What part of himself does David address? Look at the words he uses: “soul,” “all my inmost being.” David is speaking of the deepest part of himself. He wants to be stirred in the very heart of his being with praise to God. **What is the difference between praising someone just with your mouth and praising someone with the deepest part of who you are? Can you tell the difference when someone praises you? Do you think God can tell the difference?**

The writer gives himself specific instructions. **What is he supposed to remember?** God has done some wonderful things for David, and David is concerned that he not forget them. **Why is it easy to take for granted what someone else has done for us? What does this say about us?** (Grow groups may want to talk briefly about how easy this is to do with the many blessings and provisions that God brings our way. How many days go past, for example, in which we neglect to specifically thank God for the great gift of salvation?)

Make a list with your group of the benefits that David has received from God. **What has happened to David’s sin? To all his diseases? What did God do for him when his life was “in the pits”?** Look at the word *redeem* and talk about what that means. To redeem something is to pay a price for it and buy it back, to save something from destruction. **What does this imply about God’s desire to restore and care for a broken life?**

David also talks about a crown being put on his head. **What is he being “crowned” with? What does this tell us about God?** Discuss how wonderful it is to have a God who offers love and compassion rather than criticism and judgment to those who walk in relationship with God.

Look also at verse 5 and talk about how God has fulfilled the writer's desires. **What did God give—even when perhaps the human desires were for the wrong things? What was a result of the good things God gave?**

Encourage the group's discussion of these first verses of Psalm 103 to set the tone for the rest of the lesson by focusing on God's love, compassion, forgiveness, and healing power.

2. *Psalm 103:7-10*

- a. *How does God show compassion?*
- b. *How does God respond to people when they sin?*

This psalm makes it very evident that God cares for people. **What is God's response when people are oppressed, according to verse 7?** You may want to share with newcomers and those not familiar with the Bible that the Old Testament contains God's commands and guidelines for the people of Israel, and that many of these commands deal with issues of justice and taking care of people who are weak, unprotected, and helpless.

Also, much of the Old Testament tells of the relationship between God and the people of Israel, whom God chose as his own. Encourage your group members to read more of the Old Testament, starting with Genesis, if they are unfamiliar with Moses and the history of the Israelites, and how God constantly made himself known to them.

Verses 8-10 are a beautiful description of God's nature. Look at the positive qualities in these verses: compassionate, gracious, abounding in love. Remember that some of your group members may not have this concept of God. **Does the description of God in verse 8 match your ideas of who God is? How is it the same or different?**

Note the harsh, negative words used to describe God: anger, accuse, treat us as we deserve, repay. These are all judgment words. **How do they apply to God in these verses? Do the people who belong to God get what they deserve? Why or why not?**

You may want to explore the following questions with your group as well: **Do you think God has the right to accuse and repay? Why or why not? Why might God choose not to, according to this passage?** As you lead, be aware of the Holy Spirit's presence here and rely on the Spirit to help reveal to your group members the unexplainable and life-giving love that God bears for each of them.

3. *Psalm 103:11-12*

- a. *How great is God's love toward those who fear God?*
- b. *What happens to the transgressions of those who have this kind of relationship with God?*

These are two of the most reassuring and awe-inspiring verses in the Scriptures. They speak of infinite distances, of lengths that cannot be measured—and all in reference to God’s love and forgiveness toward us.

Ask your group to imagine that they are standing outside after midnight, looking up into a clear sky full of stars. **What is the distance of those stars from earth? How high do the heavens actually extend? Is this distance measurable?** Even today, with the help of high-powered telescopes and radar, scientists are unsure as to how far the universe extends. They do know that it is expanding rapidly, far beyond the measure of our knowledge.

What does this tell us about the depth of God’s feelings toward those who are in relationship with him? You may want to read from Ephesians 3:17-19, which puts the same idea into different words:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. . . .

As your group is talking about the extent of God’s love for them, silently pray this prayer from Ephesians for them too. Ask the Holy Spirit to be opening their hearts and awakening their desire to taste and see God’s love for them.

Take some time to explore the meaning of the phrase “those who fear him.” **What do you think it means to fear God, in the context of this verse?** Talk about the kind of God being described here. **Is it likely that *fear* means to be afraid of such a God and to live in terror of God’s anger?** Explain to your group that *fear* can also mean to revere someone, to obey and serve someone with all of one’s heart. The Bible often speaks of fearing God in this way. **What does this suggest about the kind of relationship God wants to have with us?**

Not only is God’s love immeasurable to those who fear him, so is the extent of God’s forgiveness. Before talking about this marvelous forgiveness, however, you may want to look briefly at what the phrase “our transgressions” implies about God’s people. **Are they perfect people? Do even those who truly fear God with all their heart sometimes transgress God’s laws?** It may be comforting for some in your group to hear again the reality that those who have a living relationship with God are still as much in need of forgiveness as the next person. The phrase “our transgressions” is, in a small way, a comforting one for a person who wonders if he or she could ever be “good enough” to have a relationship with God.

Perhaps some of your group members have traveled around the world. **Is it possible to say how far the east is from the west? How does one begin to measure such a distance?** Again, help your group to see that the psalm writer is talking about an infinite distance here. **Have you ever felt that a wrong thing you have done has come back to haunt you over and over**

again, hanging over your head or weighing on your conscience? How does this verse free us from that burden? What does this verse tell us about the extent of God's forgiveness?

4. *Proverbs 20:9*

- a. *What does this question imply about all people?*
- b. *Do you believe there is anyone who can truthfully say this? Why or why not?*

This short little verse contains one of the major themes of the entire Scriptures. Another way to put it is found in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This verse from Proverbs may start some lively discussion in your group, particularly if there are a number of newcomers. It is embedded in our human nature to believe that, if we try hard enough, we can be good enough for God. Almost all religions are built upon a code of behavior that is meant to make us acceptable before God. And some in your group may point to this great person or that as an example of someone who has kept his or her heart pure and can be said to be without sin.

Do not be drawn into a useless argument over whether this or that person sinned. Simply state what Scripture says: all people have at one time or another broken God's rules for our life. Then ask each group member to look personally at her or his own life to see if this verse from Proverbs holds true individually.

You may want to ask group members if they know what a rhetorical question is. If they are unsure, explain that it is a question that is asked in such a way that the answer is obvious to everyone. **How does that apply to this verse?**

Note also that there may be people who don't see this as a rhetorical question, people who may even say, "Yes—that's me! I am clean and without sin!" **What kind of person might say this?** Talk about the Pharisees of Jesus' day, and explain that one or two of them might have answered the question this way. **Why is this a particular temptation for those who see Christianity mainly as a set of rules?** Help your group to see that if we look on the Christian faith as a set of rules for sin management rather than as a relationship of trust with God, we soon become either self-righteous do-gooders or people who despair of ever being good enough to win God's love and approval.

5. *1 John 1:9*

- a. *How does this verse echo Proverbs 20:9?*
- b. *What comfort is there in this verse?*

John emphasizes the truth of the human condition, stating it even more strongly than the writer of Proverbs. **Does he include believers in this statement? What does this tell us about Christians as well as non-Christians? What does it say about the person who says, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?**

There is a comforting side to this verse, however. **What happens when we confess our sins?** Repeat, as you will throughout this entire study, that *God forgives*. God waits to forgive; God’s heart is ready to forgive; God’s mind is ready to forget the sins we have grieved him with and to remove them infinitely far from us.

What words describe God in this verse? Look at the word *faithful*. **What does this mean in the context of your discussion on forgiveness?** Help group members to see that God will always hold true to his promises; if God has promised forgiveness when we confess, then God will forgive. We can depend on God’s forgiveness—not 50 percent, not 80 percent, not 99 percent, but 100 percent of the time, for 100 percent of our sins.

Look also at the word *just*. **How does it describe God in the context of God’s forgiving nature? Do you think God forgives only his favorite people and not others?** You might also point out that God is so just that he could not forgive sins without *someone* having taken the punishment for sin. So God did so himself. (You can discuss this further in the last Scripture passage of this lesson.)

When we realize that we have not been able to keep our hearts pure, and we admit this to ourselves and to God, something more happens. **What else does God do besides forgive us?** Look at the promise to “purify us from all unrighteousness.” **How does that offer hope to someone who struggles with sin? What is the difference between someone who says, “I have kept my heart pure” and the one who says, “God has purified my heart”?**

6. *Psalm 130:3-4*

- a. *What does verse 3 imply about all people? About God?*
- b. *What quality of God allows people to have a relationship with God?*

Again, note that the question in verse 3 is meant to be a rhetorical one. **According to the other passages of Scripture we’ve looked at, who could stand?**

There is a lovely word in this verse, however: *if*. **What does this tell us about God?** God not only removes our sins from us by an infinite distance, he also keeps no list of them. Take a moment to explore this with your group. **How does it feel to live with or work for a person who keeps a record of every wrong thing you do? What kind of attitude does this suggest?** Talk about the discomfort of being in relationship with such a person.

Why is this not God’s attitude toward us? Again, look at Psalm 103 to restate the truth that God wants to have a relationship of love with us. It is

God's forgiving nature that allows this relationship. Again, look at the word *feared* (v. 4). **What does it mean in this context? How does it compare with Psalm 103:11?**

7. *Colossians 2:13-14*

- a. *How does this verse describe the condition of people before they were forgiven by God?*
- b. *What did God do for these people? How?*

Verse 13 gives quite a graphic picture: dead bodies, lying on the ground. **What can a dead body do for itself? How does this describe the hopeless fight of all humans against sin in their lives?** When it comes to ridding our human natures of sin, we are helpless. We cannot truthfully say, "I have kept my heart pure"; it is an impossible task.

You may note, especially for newcomers, that circumcision was a procedure done to all Jewish males in the Old Testament as a sign that they belonged to God. Outsiders to the Jewish faith were required to be circumcised if they wished to become part of God's people. **If circumcision was a sign of relationship with God, how does the word *uncircumcision* fit the condition of those trapped in their sinful nature?** Such people cannot say, "I belong to God," because their sins stand in the way of their having a relationship with the holy and just God.

What phrase contrasts with "dead in your sins"? The writer of Colossians is writing to people who have realized their sinful condition and have trusted God to forgive them because of their faith in Christ. They are no longer dead; they are alive! Though their physical appearance remains unchanged, there is a complete renewal of their spiritual condition and their relationship with God. **What has happened to their sins?** Forgiven!

How has God accomplished all this? Note that, prior to Jesus' death in our place on the cross, the old system of law and punishment had been in effect. If someone sinned, they were to bear the punishment for that sin—unless they brought an animal to be killed in their place. But when God offered up his own life and accepted the punishment for all human sin, the written code was no longer in effect. **How had that code worked against us? What has happened to it now? Who took it away? What did it cost? What does this tell us about God's feelings for us?** Help your group to see that not only does God have a heart that is ready to forgive, God also provided the way to make forgiveness possible. Use these questions to present the good news of Jesus' death for us on the cross—especially if there are those in your group who may not have heard it in full before.

**8. Psalm 103:1-5, 7-12; Proverbs 20:9; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 130:3-4;
Colossians 2:13-14**

- a. *What do these passages tell us about the human condition? About God?*
- b. *What is the key to a restored relationship with God?*

These questions should help summarize the basic truths of this first lesson: God's loving and forgiving nature allows us to have a relationship with God. This concept is the foundation for our understanding of how we in turn are called to forgive others. So be sure that your group has had ample time to explore these passages and questions.

If your group will feel comfortable doing so, ask members to participate in the closing prayer with brief sentence prayers of thanksgiving to God. If you have a number of newcomers, simply offer a brief prayer of thanks for the rich Scripture passages that hold so much promise and hope, and for God's love and forgiveness.

Your discussion today will have alerted you to any group members who may be struggling to set aside the concept of a judgmental God who takes delight in punishing us for our sins. Pray especially for them during the coming week, that God may use the Scriptures in this first lesson to reveal God's loving heart and desire to forgive their sins.

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STUDY GUIDE

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ISBN 1-56212-803-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

How to Study	4
Introduction.....	5
Glossary of Terms.....	7
Lesson 1	
The Power of God's Forgiveness	8
Lesson 2	
The Response of the Forgiven Heart	11
Lesson 3	
How Many Times?	14
Lesson 4	
The Hidden Power of Forgiveness.....	18
Lesson 5	
Stories of Forgiveness	21
Lesson 6	
The Good News: Receiving and Giving Forgiveness	26
Evaluation Questionnaire	

How to Study

The questions in this study booklet will help you discover for yourself what the Bible says. This is inductive Bible study—no one will tell you what the Bible says or what to believe. You will discover the message for yourself.

Questions are the key to inductive Bible study. Through questions you will search for the writers' thoughts and ideas. The prepared questions in this booklet are designed to help you in your quest for answers. You can and should ask your own questions too. The Bible comes alive with meaning for many people as they discover for themselves the exciting truths it contains. Our hope and prayer is that this booklet will help the Bible come alive for you.

The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Step 1. Read the Bible passage several times. Allow the thoughts and ideas to sink in. Think about its meaning. Ask questions of your own about the passage.

Step 2. Answer the questions, drawing your answers from the passage. Remember that the purpose of the study is to discover what the Bible says. Write your answers in your own words. If you use Bible study aids such as commentaries or Bible handbooks, do so only after completing your own personal study.

Step 3. Apply the Bible's message to your own life and world. Ask yourself these questions: What is this passage saying to me? How does it challenge me? Comfort me? Encourage me? Is there a promise I should claim? A warning I should heed? For what can I give thanks? If you sense God speaking to you in some way, respond to God in a personal prayer.

Step 4. Share your thoughts with someone else if possible. This will be easiest if you are part of a Bible study group that meets regularly to share discoveries and discuss questions. If you would like to learn of a study group in your area or if you would like more information on how to start a small group Bible study, write to Discover Your Bible, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560 or to P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8, or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org.

Introduction

Someone has done you wrong—perhaps a deep wrong. You have been hurt more than you care to admit, even to close friends. The memory of that hurt feels like a bruise on your spirit, a crushed area that remains tender and bleeding, even though weeks, months, or even years have passed.

You try not to think about it too much, because it makes you feel sad or angry. You may forget about it for days on end. Life may seem to go on as it did before—until you see that person again. Suddenly all the hurt and anger come to the surface, and the memory of your hurt is as fresh and painful as on the day it happened.

Against that person, your heart remains angry and bitter and confused. How could your friend or coworker or family member or neighbor have wronged you like that? What can you do to show that person how his or her actions made you feel? How can you teach a lesson in return? How can you pay back a little of what you received?

So a root of bitterness springs up. It may be just a little root, or it may be large—but it finds a place to grow in the soil of your heart.

Sometimes this root of bitterness, this unforgiving spirit, will grow until it kills a relationship that once was loving. Sometimes it grows large enough to kill the spirit of the person who harbors it. It becomes a prison, and those caught in it are unable to free themselves.

There is a key that will open the prison and free your spirit. It is the key of forgiveness. It will let you out of the small, dark place that your spirit has been trapped, and bring you out into the light, into the open spaces of God's love. You will find healing—and will find that others are unexpectedly blessed by the change in your heart.

Come and sit by God's side for a while, and look into the deep places of his forgiving heart. Listen to Jesus talk to his friends about forgiveness. Eavesdrop on how members of the early Christian church were taught to get along with each other in spite of their differences.

Then open your heart to discover the healing power of forgiveness in your own life.

—Edith Bajema
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Recommended Resource

It will be clear by the end of this study, if it is not already clear, that a six-lesson study on forgiveness can only begin to answer some of the tough questions on forgiveness. One excellent resource is Lewis Smedes's *The Art of Forgiving* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). You may find it helpful to read Smedes's book side by side with this study, as it expands on many questions that your group members will certainly have.

Glossary of Terms

denarii—Jewish coins in use during Roman times. A hundred denarii would equal a few dollars in today's North American economy.

grace—undeserved favor, kindness, and love.

holy—set apart from others by being pure, free from iniquity, cleansed, and ready to do God's will.

hyssop—a plant that grew in Egypt, in the Sinai Desert, and in Palestine that was capable of producing a stem three or four feet in length.

iniquity—sin; disobedience to God's will.

kingdom of heaven—God's active rule over the creation that becomes visible wherever places, people, and relationships are devoted to obeying the Lord Jesus Christ. Can refer both to the angels and spirits in heaven and to people on earth who seek to live the way God intended.

mercy—compassion and kindness that is not deserved; often used as reference to forgiving a debt.

Pharisee—a member of the Jewish religious sect that emphasized the importance of keeping even the smallest of religious laws and rituals. Some Pharisees were known for their legalism and hypocrisy.

prophet—one who speaks for God or comes with a message from God.

righteous—free from guilt or sin. God regards people who are joined to God by faith as righteous through Christ.

sin—an action or thought that misses the mark of God's perfect standard for our lives. Sin results in a broken relationship with God.

sinner—one who sins.

talent—a measure of gold, much larger than a denarius; a thousand talents would equal millions of dollars in North American currency.

tax collectors—Jews who agreed to serve the hated Roman government by collecting tax from their fellow Jews; they were expected to keep a portion of the taxes for their own pockets.

transgression—see **sin**.

uncircumcision—the state of not being circumcised. Circumcision was the physical sign of belonging to God's covenant people; it implied purity and being set apart from the rest of the world.

Lesson 1

Psalm 103:1-5, 7-12; Proverbs 20:9; 1 John 1:9;
Psalm 130:3-4; Colossians 2:13-14

The Power of God's Forgiveness

1. *Psalm 103:1-5*

- a. What is the psalm writer encouraging himself to do?

- b. What benefits has he received from God?

2. *Psalm 103:7-10*

- a. How does God show compassion?

- b. How does God respond to people when they sin?

3. Psalm 103:11-12

- a. How great is God's love toward those who fear God?

- b. What happens to the transgressions of those who have this kind of relationship with God?

4. Proverbs 20:9

- a. What does this question imply about all people?

- b. Do you believe there is anyone who can truthfully say this? Why or why not?

5. 1 John 1:9

- a. How does this verse echo Proverbs 20:9?

- b. What comfort is there in this verse?

6. Psalm 130:3-4

- a. What does verse 3 imply about all people? About God?

- b. What quality of God allows people to have a relationship with God?

7. Colossians 2:13-14

- a. How does this verse describe the condition of people before they were forgiven by God?

- b. What did God do for these people? How?

8. Psalm 103:1-5, 7-12; Proverbs 20:9; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 130:3-4; Colossians 2:13-14

- a. What do these passages tell us about the human condition? About God?

- b. What is the key to a restored relationship with God?