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a resource in:

**Relationships**

## Overcoming Hurt

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From the counseling I've done over the years, I've discovered that many people who seem to be moving through life without a care in the world are suffering from a lot more hurt than most of us realize. They were abused as children. They got a raw deal at work. They experienced the rejection of a recent divorce. They lost a sibling to cancer. Their reputation was slandered. They were betrayed by a friend. They were paralyzed as a result of a head-on collision with a drunk driver. On and on the list goes. Hurts come at us from every direction—in many forms, shapes, and colors.

Some of the hurts which we receive, of course, are only minor in nature. They haven't been intentionally inflicted and amount to nothing more than day-to-day bruises that need to be brushed aside as quickly as they arise. I wish I could say that all the hurts we receive are minor hurts, but they aren't. Many of them are far more serious. They are more like open wounds than insignificant bruises. The pain they cause is deep and lasting.

Hurt inevitably happens to all of us, without regard to our race, background, wealth, or goodness. Hurt can have a positive or a negative effect upon our lives. It can make us bitter, or it can make us better, depending, of course, on how we respond.

### THREE WAYS WE RESPOND

When we're the victims of serious hurt, we experience many powerful emotions: anger, grief, shock, confusion, and shame. These negative feelings are our natural responses to pain. They arrive on the scene of our hurt without warning or invitation, and they persistently demand our attention. How we respond to these emotions has a profound impact on our health and well-being because they serve as the springboard for our behavior.

Typically, we react to hurt in one of two ways. Either we'll turn the hurt outward in retaliation, attempting to make the offender feel as badly as we do, or we'll turn the emotion inward, attempting to suppress our feelings. Either of these responses can lead to pretty unpleasant consequences for us and those around us.

Sooner or later, someone or something is going to hurt you deeply. When this happens you can take matters into your own hands and try to even the score, leading to an unending cycle of anger and revenge. Or you can bottle up all the hurt and wind up poisoning yourself with bitterness and hatred.

Fortunately, there is a better way to deal with hurt. You can choose to release the negative emotions with a positive response—forgiveness. It may seem too hard or unfair or impractical or downright unnatural to consider forgiving someone who hurts you, but this is the single most effective response for bringing about healing and health.

## RETALIATION: *Hurt Turned Outward*

Retaliation. Eye for eye . Tooth for tooth. Blood for blood. We can give our offender what we think he deserves. We can make sure we hurl back the stones which come our way with greater force than they were received: slash his tires; spread a rumor about him; decide to have an affair with his spouse; punch his lights out; anything to make his life miserable.

It all sounds pretty satisfying to think about getting even, but retaliation only perpetuates evil. Someone does something to you, so you feel you must do something back. You do something to him in your attempt to get even; now he feels he has to do something to you again. As Mohandas Gandhi said, “An eye-for-eye [kind of justice] only ends up making the whole world blind.” Not to mention that revenge is simply not worth the price. Even a grizzly bear understands this. He’s tough enough to whip any animal in the West, but there’s one that he never messes with—the skunk. He knows all he’ll get from that fight is a great big stink.

There’s another problem with retaliation as a response to hurt. If we’re going to get even with our offender in this way, we’re going to have to violate the commands of God. Plus, we’re going to have to usurp His authority by making ourselves the administrators of justice. However, God hasn’t turned the judgment of this world over to us. He’s the Judge of the universe. He’s appointed civil government to be the administrator of justice, and when civil government fails, He promises He’ll handle the matter Himself: “Vengeance belongs to Me. I will repay.”<sup>1</sup> Settling the score is not our prerogative. God alone has the right to do this. And whether He chooses to punish or to forgive is His business. God doesn’t need our help, our advice, or our interference.

If you have confidence in God’s ability to administer justice, revenge becomes unnecessary. God is a better administrator of justice than you could ever be. He is capable of doing His job without your help. So why not defer it to Him?

## JOSEPH: *Retaliation v. Forgiveness*

The Bible tells a great story about someone who left justice in God’s hands instead of taking revenge. It’s about a teenager named Joseph. Among 12 sons, he was the favorite. It hurt his brothers to think that their father loved Joseph more than them, and their jealousy was intense. To add insult to injury, Joseph was a tattletale. When he saw his brothers doing something wrong, he ran and told their dad. The brothers were so angry, they decided to get even with Joseph if it was the last thing they did. Finding him in a field, they seized him and sold him to some slave-traffickers who happened to be passing by. Then they went home and told their father, Jacob, that his favorite son had been killed by a wild animal.

The betrayal Joseph felt when his own brothers bartered away his liberties and reduced him to the status of a slave had to have been enormous. Then it went from bad to worse when Joseph wound up getting thrown into jail when he was falsely accused of having an affair with his master’s wife. What a terrible shock to lose his freedom twice through no fault of his own! He must have been intensely confused, upset, and angry.

Amazingly, the lemons Joseph got from life made for great lemonade. The Bible says that God was with Joseph while he was in prison.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, he had a chance to do a favor for the Pharaoh. It made the Egyptian ruler so happy that he rewarded Joseph by releasing him and making him second in command of the entire country.

Meanwhile back in his hometown, Joseph's brothers and father were starving because of a terrible famine. As a last resort, they decided to go to Egypt in search of food because they had heard about the storehouses of grain there. Ironically, the brothers who had treated him so cruelly would now be begging bread from Joseph's hand. If Joseph had nurtured resentment in his heart, this would have been the time for revenge.

Thankfully, Joseph wasn't made of that material. Rather than hurting them, he chose to help them. Instead of the family dying from starvation, they lived to see their broken relationships healed. Forgiveness wiped the slate clean, allowing Joseph and his brothers to love one another again.

### GRUDGES

Holding a grudge is a bit like combining both negative responses into one. On the one hand, it's like retaliation. Somehow we convince ourselves that we are punishing an offender with our resentment when, in fact, he probably couldn't care less. On the other, it's internalization. We never directly express our hurt or release it by forgiving.

In his book *None of These Diseases*, Dr. S. I. McMillen said, "The man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind. It may be a luxurious car that I drive along a lake fringed with [trees in] autumnal beauty... [but] I might as well be driving a wagon in mud and rain. When the waiter serves me porterhouse steak with French fries and strawberry shortcake covered with ice cream, it might as well be stale bread and water. My teeth chew the food and I swallow it, but the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it. I really must acknowledge the fact that I am a slave to every man on whom I pour the viles of my wrath."

### INTERNALIZATION: Hurt Turned Inward

The second way we can respond to hurt is to grit our teeth, hold our chin up, and repress the pain we feel, pretending all is well when it isn't. When hurt is internalized this way, it usually causes resentment, bitterness, and hostility to take root in our lives. Like a toxic waste, it poisons us inch by inch from within. It should always be remembered that a small wound that becomes infected causes far more pain than a large one that heals. If we internalize our hurts, they'll sour our personality. Worse, we can find ourselves in a deep and miserable depression.

It's not always easy to recognize how hurt has been internalized in our own lives or the lives of those we love. It may show up as irritability or anxiety. It can lie at the root of high blood pressure or an eating disorder. It can even be related to feeling tired all the time because it takes a lot of energy to hold in the emotion.

Quite often, suppressing negative feelings is like trying to keep a pressure cooker from exploding. The anger and bitterness often erupt into inappropriate temper tantrums: fuming at traffic, raging at your child's bad grade, lashing out at your coworker because the copier jams.

Although we often suffer hurt at the hands of another person, it can certainly come from the unexplainable, painful experiences of life. Your home is destroyed by a tornado. The father you rely on for wisdom and guidance is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. You lose a child to miscarriage. Your retirement fund evaporates in a depressed economy. How do you handle hurt when there is no one to blame but God?

### JOB & HIS WIFE: *Internalization v. Trust*

The story of Job takes up a full book of the Bible exploring how we humans deal with the pain of loss. God allowed Job and his wife to experience the deepest kind of hurt. The things they worked for all their lives—their servants, their cattle, their camels—were all taken away by invaders in one day. Then came the terrible report that their 10 children had been killed in a violent storm. Their whole world came crashing in around them. There's no way to fathom the grief they felt. The depth of their pain boggles my mind.

It's incredible to consider Job's response to the news that he had lost everything he had: "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."<sup>3</sup> Anyone can say, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away," because that amounts to nothing more than a statement of fact; however, Job went on to say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." Obviously, Job's love for God wasn't contingent upon any pain he would endure or blessings he would receive. Job determined to go right on trusting and honoring God no matter what.

Not long after, Job found himself covered with sore boils from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. Although we have only one verse on record from Mrs. Job, it's easy to see her hurt in every word. Apparently, she'd been brooding over the loss of her children and possessions, and seeing her husband like this was more than Mrs. Job could bear. She hissed, "Why are you still trying to stay innocent? Curse God and die!"<sup>4</sup> It's logical to conclude that Mrs. Job had unresolved anger in her heart due to the tremendous tragedy in her life. She hadn't done anything to deserve what had happened, and now here was more suffering at her doorstep. How could anyone go on trusting God's goodness in light of the circumstances?

Through a series of conversations with his best friends, Job tried to make sense of what's happened, but the experience of suffering was beyond his understanding. Still, Job refused to curse God as his wife ordered.

Rather, he chose to trust God—a positive response in a terribly negative situation. Thus, we've come to know the "patience of Job" as a desirable virtue and a powerful way to overcome hurt.

### IT'S YOUR CHOICE...

The story is told of two men who traveled through life with sacks on their backs. Each time a hurt was received, they would place it in what became known as their “injury sack.” One man’s sack became so bulging and heavy that he couldn’t walk without difficulty or pain. The other man’s sack was empty and light. A stranger asked the second man why his sack was so light, wondering how it was possible for him not to have ever been hurt.

“Oh, I’ve been hurt many times,” the man replied. “As my sack grew too large and heavy to bear, I asked a friend one day if he would help me carry the load. ‘No one can help you carry the load of hurt,’ he replied, ‘but there is a way for you to rid yourself of it. Take the scissors of forgiveness and slit the bottom of your sack, and your load of hurt will fall away.’ That’s what I chose to do that day. Since then, I take all the hurts which I receive and place them into my ‘injury sack’ as before, but now they simply slide out the bottom. That’s one load I choose not to carry.”

### WHAT GOD EXPECTS

We look at the lives of Bible figures like Joseph and Job and may come away thinking, *that’s fine for them, but you don’t know how badly I’ve been hurt. God cannot possibly expect me to forgive the person who hurt me. He can’t honestly expect me to keep on trusting Him.* Clearly, it’s tempting to hold on to our righteous indignation, but it’s also evident from the teachings of Christ that He expects us to forgive others and trust Him completely.

When His disciple Peter<sup>5</sup> asked Jesus if He thought a person should forgive one who has wronged him as many as seven times, Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” Then He went on to illustrate His answer with a story about a man who owed a king a very large debt—10,000 talents—an amount that would have taken 15 years of wages to settle. Because he begged for mercy when the payment was due, the king was moved with compassion and forgave the debt. This same man who had been forgiven so much went out and found a man who owed him 100 denarii—a sum which could be worked off in a day. When the debtor couldn’t pay up on the spot, the man had him thrown into prison, notwithstanding his pleas for mercy. When the king heard what had happened, he was angry. He took back his forgiveness and threw that ungrateful soul into prison until all was paid.

Jesus also addressed forgiveness when He taught His disciples how to pray. He said that we should ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive yours: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive yours.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus went on to show us the power of forgiveness, not with words or stories, but with His own life. Evil men accused Him falsely and convicted Him unjustly. They beat Him unmercifully and mocked Him cruelly. Then they spiked Him to a cross and hanged Him up to die. With blood running over His forehead, down His arms and over His feet, and with His back whipped unmercifully, Jesus looked down from the cross at the hostile crowd and prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”<sup>7</sup> Not a twinge of bitterness, but only love and forgiveness were in His heart toward those who had put Him there.

## FORGIVE BY CHOICE

Someone confessed to me recently that he didn't feel like forgiving the person who had injured him. No one ever does. If we wait until we feel like forgiving, we never will—not any more than if we wait until we feel like cleaning out the garage or changing a dirty diaper. Forgiveness isn't a feeling. It's something we choose to do by an act of the will. It's not a matter of can or can't. It's a matter of will or won't.

Some people refuse to forgive because they don't want to be healed. They would rather talk about their problem—use it as a crutch so they can walk with a limp, get sympathy from others, and draw attention to themselves. It would be incredibly difficult to honestly confront this attitude in your own heart, but imagine what life would be like if you were emotionally healthy enough to walk without that crutch! Forgiveness is a great place to start that healing.

Another reason we don't want to forgive is that we'd have to give up our right to an apology. Yet this is the spirit of retaliation, seeking your own justice rather than relying on God to judge. True forgiveness releases others whether they ever acknowledge the hurt or say they're sorry.

This is one reason why forgiveness is usually so difficult, because the cost is always borne by the one who does the forgiving. If I owe you \$1,000 and you forgive me the debt, the amount you forgive is the amount you lose. Forgiveness doesn't restore the goods which were stolen or the marriage that was broken up. It doesn't repair the damage which was done; it writes it off.

When we forgive, we're releasing our offender from any obligation to suffer consequences, apologize to us, or make amends for what he has done. This doesn't mean we automatically feel better about what happened, nor does it mean the damage wasn't real. Forgiveness means we've chosen to let go. Thus, the decision to forgive or not to forgive is a decision which you alone can make.

## FORGETTING: *Moving Forward After Hurt*

Some people say they're willing to forgive a person for what he's done, but they're unwilling to forget. If they mean by this they're never going to stop holding a grudge against the individual for what he's done, they haven't forgiven him at all. So long as we hope our offender will be miserable in his new marriage or get fired from his job, there's no need pretending that we forgave him.

So why the phrase "forgive and forget"? Forgiveness doesn't cause our memory to fail. As long as our mind is clear, we'll be able to remember the hurts we've received. I believe that forgetting is one of the most important parts of forgiveness. Forgetting after a hurtful incident means getting on with our lives and leaving the other party to get on with his or hers.

This doesn't mean that we'll always want to re-establish a close relationship with someone who hurts us, like going back into business with someone who's swindled a sum of money or becoming intimate friends with someone who's betrayed a confidence. Rebuilding wholeness in a broken relationship may mean that certain behaviors or attitudes must change before you can trust a person fully, and that's not always possible. Nor does forgiving mean that the one who's guilty won't have to answer to the law for his actions. Even though you've forgiven him the wrong he's done, the justice of the court may still need to be satisfied. The drunk driver who kills a child can be forgiven, but he still needs to satisfy his debt to society.

As you go about forgetting, it's important to remember that even though forgiveness is extended by an act of the will in a moment of time, getting over our wounded feelings may take a while. Sometimes we have to keep reminding ourselves that we have forgiven our offender for what he's done and we don't intend to harbor resentment against him anymore. Otherwise we'll be tempted to mull over previous hurts and take our forgiveness back. This will cause the pain to begin all over again. After our emotions finally get the message about what our will has done, we'll wake up one morning and be able to remember the incident without feeling any pain or a desire for revenge. Then, we'll know forgiveness is complete.

### WHEN YOU'RE THE OFFENDER

As you've been reading this booklet, you may have recognized that you have played a part in hurting someone else. If you have, it's up to you to begin the healing process. First, ask God for His forgiveness. He promises that if you confess when you do something wrong, He will forgive you and give you a fresh start.<sup>8</sup>

Then you must take the next step and ask the person you've hurt for his or her forgiveness. Don't be dismayed if he refuses to accept your apology. God doesn't hold you responsible for how others respond. Unless something needs to be returned or repaid, offering a sincere apology will allow you to move forward, with or without the other person.

In the end, whether you have been hurt or have hurt someone else, forgiveness is the only choice that moves us past the pain. The decision is yours to make. What will it be?

BIBLICAL REFERENCES: <sup>1)</sup> *Deuteronomy 32:35*. <sup>2)</sup> *Genesis 41:40*. <sup>3)</sup> *Job 1:21b*. <sup>4)</sup> *Job 2:9*.

<sup>5)</sup> *Matthew 18:21-35*. <sup>6)</sup> *Matthew 6:14-15*. <sup>7)</sup> *Luke 23:24*. <sup>8)</sup> *1 John 1:9*