

# Forgiveness and Redemption

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's scripture reading comes from the book of Hosea. We'll select passages from chapter 1 and chapter 3. Please follow along in your bulletin. The word of the Lord came to Hosea, the son of Beri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel.

When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, Go take to yourself a wife of whoredom, and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord. So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Dublaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the Lord said to him, Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.

She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the Lord said to him, Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God.

I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen. When she had weaned no mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, Call his name Not My People, for you are not My people, and I am not your God.

[ 1 : 16 ] Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, You are not My people, it shall be said to them, Children of the living God. And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head.

They shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel. Chapter 3. And the Lord said to me, Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.

So I bought her for fifteen shuckles of silver and a homer and a lethic of barley. And I said to her, You must dwell as Mine for many days. You shall not play the whore or belong to another man, so I will be to you.

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. Afterward, the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to His goodness in the latter days.

For the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord and the Lord and to His goodness in the latter days.

[ 2 : 51 ] And they shall come together and so on. So I've been acting as the dad for the week. They're my godkids as well. But one of the things I learned about being a dad or having kids around is that, especially when you've got to focus just on them, and it's a two-year-old and a four-year-old that we're looking after.

And the four-year-old has been described, perhaps euphemistically, as spirited or rambunctious or a handful.

And so when we were taking them in and out of taxis and so on, you know, I'm not the most organized person anyway, and I can tend to be forgetful of, you know, my own personal belongings and so on.

So when there's kids around, right, and you're responsible for making sure they get in and out of the taxi alive, then other things just kind of get left behind. And so one of the things I left behind was my phone in the taxi last week.

And, yeah, it's sad to say we never heard from it again, even though we kind of sent through a message through the network. So if anyone's tried to call me or message me or text me or anything like that, I apologize.

[ 4 : 05 ] I haven't been able to get back to you. So, yeah, I asked another taxi driver, and he said, oh, I think I was about six hours later, and he said, you know what, it's probably in Shenzhen by now. So it's just gone.

I haven't had a great run with taxis, actually. So we ended up in Hanoi last week. And, yeah, trying to keep two kids alive in Hanoi, I felt like, was my main job.

I don't know if you've ever been to Vietnam or anywhere around in third world countries, but, you know, you're walking down the streets, and there's just thousands of motorcycles coming by you. And normally you can walk on the sidewalk, so it's sort of okay.

But there was one street we went down which had no sidewalks. And so we were basically walking amongst, through, and around the motorbikes, and I just had to keep a firm grip on a rambunctious four-year, and watch out for this as well.

When you end up in Hanoi, taxis try and scam you as well. So sometimes it's just a couple of dollars or so on, but on the trip back to the airport, because we had all these kids and all the luggage, and I was trying to make sure that everybody was going to be okay, the guy just said, okay, I said, how much?

[ 5 : 15 ] And he said, one and a half million dong. And I just handed it over without even thinking. And then I thought about, hang on a minute, that's 75 US dollars. That's like five times as much as what I paid to get back out.

And so I sat back in the taxi and argued with him for the next five minutes. And they threatened to call the police and all that kind of stuff. And he gave me back like a third of it or something like that. So then he charged me, he overcharged me three times instead of five times what he should have. So Eric's going next week, so I'll have to tell him that story. I don't think he's here. But yeah, he has to make sure.

You know, I was pretty angry, actually, about that whole thing. You know, I hate being cheated. I think it just kind of runs in the family. And yeah, you know, I was arguing with him.

And the conversation was getting pretty heated. And he was making up all this stuff. And yeah, and you know, afterwards, you know, I got out. I just couldn't even look at him.

[ 6 : 14 ] I just shook my head. And, you know, I just wanted to, you know, shake him. I said, what are you doing? And it made me think about forgiveness.

Because that's what I was thinking about during the week, right? And I didn't think about it until later. But I was reading in Phil Yancey's book about grace, the story of Les Miserables.

Where, you know, right at the beginning, you know, Jean Valjean, the prisoner, a hardened criminal over 20 years in jail, goes and he stays at the priest's house and he steals.

And he's treated with kindness and grace to a thief. He's shown forgiveness and mercy. And because of that, his whole life is changed and transformed.

And so, yeah, it just made me think, you know, how difficult it is for even us as people who have experienced grace to continue to practice grace in the face of what we consider to be injustice.

[ 7 : 24 ] Or when we feel like we've been wronged in some way. There's a story of forgiveness that I heard as well one time.

And it goes kind of like this. There was a husband. And he was happily married to his wife.

And in a moment of madness, he committed adultery one night against his wife. And almost immediately, he regretted the terrible mistake that he'd made.

And he decided to come clean and confess to his wife what he had done. And not knowing how she would respond, he forced himself to do so, stealing himself for what she might say.

Not knowing what she would say. And her reply was this. What you have done has really hurt me. But I love you and I forgive you.

[ 8 : 28 ] He couldn't believe his ears. I mean, what could he say? Was that it? Could he be forgiven so easily?

Is it that easy to forgive? In Hosea, we have a story of hurt and forgiveness. And Hosea has been called the second greatest story of forgiveness in the Bible.

Because it points to the greatest story of forgiveness in the Bible, which is found in the New Testament. But in this part of Hosea, we read about Hosea and Goma.

Goma, a promiscuous woman. A woman of whoredom. Who Hosea is told to marry. And it seems strange to us that God would ask a prophet to do something like this.

But one thing that we need to understand is that the prophets were God's spokespeople, spokespersons, in the land of Israel at that time, and other places as well.

[ 9 : 46 ] And God sent many prophets to the land. And as we heard from just a few weeks ago, when Graham spoke about, spoke on Amos. Hosea and Amos were contemporaries.

And the land of Israel had turned away from God. They'd actually enjoyed a long period of peace and prosperity, where riches had flowed into the land, and the borders had expanded under King Jeroboam.

And in this time, even, religion was expanding and booming, but it was a religion which was not focused on God. Instead, it was what they call syncretistic.

It was mixed in with the religions of all the other lands and places around them. And so, God sees this, and His heart is torn apart, broken, because He sees a people who have deserted Him and gone to run other, other idols, run after other idols.

And so, the prophets embody in themselves God's message within them. To be a prophet, to be a spokesman, like the old children of prophets, is to almost identify with God in such a way that you feel what God feels.

[ 11 : 11 ] If you want to know what it's like to be an altarsome prophet, you can read the words of Jeremiah. And he said, he talked about it like this, if I say, I will not mention His word or speak any more in His name, His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.

I am weary of holding it in. Indeed, I cannot. God's word is like a fire inside of the prophets, and it must come out.

And in some cases, the prophets, even in their, not just their words, but their physical lives, embodied the message of God, embodied the heart of God, the feelings of God, communicating what God wanted to communicate to His people.

Hosea is one of those prophets. And so he is commanded to take a wife of Hortum and children of Hortum, and he commanded to do so because Israel has left their God.

has become unfaithful. And so, Hosea marries, it says, Goma. And they get married and they have a child together.

[ 12 : 34 ] And after this child is born and some more children are born, Goma leaves Hosea for a new man, a new life. and God tells Hosea as well the names of the children that He is to name them.

And they are not pretty names. Jezreel, the first one, it's just the name of the land that they were in. But judgment was coming to that land and that was why the name was given.

The next ones were named perhaps in accordance with the fact that they may not have been Hosea's children at all. No mercy and not my people.

And God said that He would no longer show mercy to the house of Israel and that they would not be His people anymore. Because Israel were the people of God chosen by God and they were to be His people and He was to be their God but they had wandered away, had walked away, had deserted Him.

And so God in effect broke the covenant which He had with Israel, threw it aside and said you are not my people and I will not be your God.

[ 13 : 56 ] Well, Gomer leaves, as I said, Hosea for a new man, a new life and yet this new life doesn't seem to work out in the way that she had intended because she sinks lower in society and eventually hits rock bottom when she is placed for sale on the slave market.

She is reduced to nothing, owning nothing, in fact not even herself. she is owned by another, the slave traders. And this sad story could have just ended here except that in chapter 3 we're told that God tells Hosea to go and love her again.

We're not told what Hosea thought about kind of such an instruction but we can imagine. I think of a friend who was convinced that, or who suspected that his wife was emotionally unfaithful to him and his fury knew no bounds as he suspected everybody.

what were Hosea's options? Well, he could have just left her there, seen her at the slave auction market, left her to her own, yeah, to her fate, laughed at her, told her that she deserved it.

or he could have taken her in, brought her as a slave and brought her in his house, under his house and exacted his revenge by taking a new wife, which he was entitled to do under Jewish law and

bring her in as a slave under new management, as it were, so that she could see what she once had and missed out on.

[16:05] But that is not what God told him to do. God told Hosea to love her again. And so he does so.

And you can imagine what his friends and neighbours have said and thought about all this as they were watching this drama of this prophet and his wife being enacted out in Israelite society.

perhaps they would have said, Hosea, you're crazy. She doesn't deserve your love. She doesn't deserve your payment.

Why would you pay to take back this woman? Don't you remember? She left you.

She took up with someone else. She betrayed you. She doesn't deserve your love. Yet Hosea obeys God.

[17:10] And he goes and talks to her and rescues her and gathers the resources necessary to pay the price for her freedom.

him. And when he talks to her, he doesn't just bring her in as a slave. No. He restores her to a position as a wife.

She's fully restored, forgiven, and he resets as well their marriage commitment. He says to her, you must dwell as mine for many days.

You shall not play the war or belong to another man. So will I also be to you. It's a recommitment of their marriage.

That once again, she will be committed to him and he will be committed to her for life. Fully restored, their broken marriage.

[18:13] It's a high price to pay as well. The resources that were needed to buy her back, the humiliation that he would have experienced, that they both would have experienced from friends, family, neighbours, society.

The hurt and anger that Hosea would have had to either bury or just kind of assume within him. and the prophet was reenacting the broken covenant relationship between God and Israel.

We read chapter 1 and chapter 3, but between them is chapter 2, where God addresses Israel directly and speaks to her and he says to her at that point that she is like this woman, an adulterous woman, and they have become an adulterous people.

As it says, upon her children I will have no mercy because they are children of wardom. Their mother has played the war. She who conceived them has acted shamefully, for she said, I will go after my lovers who give me my bread and my water, my will and my flax, my oil and my drink.

[19:29] She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them. She shall seek them, but not find them. She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, the oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold, which they used for bail.

Therefore I will take back my grain in its time and my wine in its season. I will take away my will and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. The people of Israel were like Gomer.

And the prophet and his wife were just kind of like a microcosm, an acted story of the wider story that all of Israel shared.

And when people looked in and asked why is this happening to this prophet, this man of God, then they would know that this is because the finger was pointed right back at them.

You, this is what you have done. This is who you are, are people who have forsaken God. And to read Hosea, and we don't have time, obviously, to read the whole book, it's 12, 14 chapters, something like that.

[20:41] To read the whole book of Hosea is to see, to get a peek into the heart of God, possibly more than any other book. And we see inside the heart of God is pain.

is broken as his heart is broken over his people. In chapter 4, verse 1, I mean, if you're following along, if you've got phones and so on, I'll be skipping around and so on, but just for this little while. But in chapter 4, verse 1, God says, hear this word, hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or steadfast love and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

This is the land of Israel, the chosen people of God, where there is no knowledge of God in the land, no faithfulness, no steadfast love, no grace. In chapter 5, God says, their deeds do not permit

them to return to their God, for the spirit of wardom is within them, and they know not the Lord.  
[ 22 : 12 ] And in chapter 6, God kind of pleads with them. He says, in chapter 6, verse 4, what shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the dew that goes away early, goes early away.

It's like somebody who turns around and loves someone, only to change their mind, and then come back again, and then change their mind, and then come back again. And that was the whole history of Israel, right from the beginning.

Even when God saved them out of Egypt, and they saw with their very own eyes what God had done for them, rescuing them with His mighty hand, His power.

And yet, 20, 40 days later, they're off worshipping the golden calves. They're complaining, they're forgetting what God has done for them.

and that cycle continues on as they continue to forget God in one generation, cry out for mercy, and God comes and rescues them again.

[ 23 : 22 ] And then they forget God in the next generation, and they suffer, and they cry out for mercy, and God comes and rescues them again, and they forget again. And this cycle just continues on, and God says, your love is like the morning mist.

It's there for a while, and then it just evaporates. like trying to love a prostitute who continues to have her eyes set on others.

Hosea changes the metaphor a little bit in chapter 11, when God treats Israel like a son. He says, when Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more they were called, the more they went away, they kept sacrificing to the bales, and burning offerings to idols. I don't know if you've ever experienced a relationship like that.

Family member, or someone where, a friend, where the more that you try and reach out to them, the more they draw away, and they will not be reached.

[ 24 : 34 ] like Hosea's wife, the people of Israel through their adultery violated their marriage covenant with God again and again and again until there was nothing left.

And so what can God do with such a people? God will end, this is why God declared that he will end that covenant, that they will not be his people any longer and he will no longer have mercy upon them to forgive them.

call her name no mercy for I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all. And the son, the Lord said, call his name not my people for you are not my people and I am not your God.

Our people that have abandoned their God are in turn abandoned by God. And if that was the end of the story, well, that would be it.

There wouldn't be any more Israel. There wouldn't be people of God at all. But it's not the end. And again, in this book, you see the dilemma in the heart of God.

[ 25 : 54 ] He says, how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I give you up, Israel? And he says, I can't. I can't give you up.

And so even just in chapter 2, a little bit before we got to chapter 3, he turns and he says, I will make for them a covenant on that day once again.

And I'm going to call them back. I will speak and allure Israel. He will woo her back to him. I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness, in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.

I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you will know the Lord. I will have mercy on no mercy. And I will say to not my people, you are my people.

and he shall say, you are my God. The act of restoration between Hosea and Gomer in fixing what was smashed, irreparably broken, in putting it back together, in restoring it, is a picture of what God longed to do with the house of Israel.

[ 27 : 12 ] To restore them, to bring them back. the people who were rejected by God will be restored once more. And yet for all of these words, you know, the judgments, the warnings in Amos, the call to come back to God here in Hosea, Israel never did come back to God.

Israel had a whole string of kings, I don't know how many, maybe 30, 40, more, and not one of them. followed God with his heart, all his heart, not one of them.

And so they led the people astray all that time. And so even as the kingdom ended, they continued to follow other gods. And so Israel fell into ruin and were conquered by Assyria.

Judah remained, and yet they too forsook their God were led into exile and then returned back into the land. And the people of Israel were intermixed with the peoples around them.

And so they became by Jesus' day the Samaritans. And they were despised people by the Jews, despised as those who were children of adultery.

[ 28 : 42 ] They were the children of these early Israelites. And they'd been mixed in with the other peoples of the land. And they worshipped God and they worshipped all these other idols at the same time.

What about us? How do we read Hosea? And what about the way that Jesus comes in? And the way that he treated Samaritans? When he went to visit a Samaritan village and encountered a woman at the well who was a woman who had five husbands and then was living with someone who was not a husband, a woman of Hortum, he called her and he named her and all the things that she'd done and he forgave her and she turned around and told the whole village and they came out and met Jesus as well.

And God through that act or in that time was all of a sudden calling back this broken and kind of destroyed people back to himself.

And so what we have here is this hint of what is yet to come that not only Israel and Samaria but all of the peoples of the world would come back and be restored to God.

[ 30 : 23 ] As we're thinking about it today, here in 21st century Hong Kong, we might be thinking, well, am I Hosea? Am I Goma?

Who do I identify with in this story? And you might be tempted to identify with one or the other and say, oh, if I'm to be Hosea, then my role is to try and win back those relationships.

Perhaps there's been a broken marriage and I need to fix that. Or if we identify ourselves as Goma, then we think that we're the ones who are the whore.

And we're the ones who've fallen away from God and we're the ones like Israel, who are like Israel. But can I suggest that's actually not the best way of reading through the Old Testament, particularly through Old Testament prophets.

Because that's not what the New Testament does. The New Testament doesn't say that we are the people of Israel. It doesn't teach that we are to be identified with Israel in that way.

[ 31 : 24 ] Rather, Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians that what happened to the Israelites is a warning for us. That is, we're to look at the way that God dealt with Israel and we're to learn certain things about God and certain things about the human heart condition.

And as I said before, what we learn from this passage, from the book of Hosea, is a peek into the very heart of God. And what we see in God's heart is real pain.

And it's only when we see God's pain at a people who have deserted him, at a creation that has turned their back on him, even though he gave us life and breath and everything.

It's only when we see the depths of God's pain that we can see the depths of his forgiveness, the way he longs to reach out to us. And forgiveness forgiveness is not without cost.

It's not easy. Remember the story of that guy that I told you about from the beginning, who was forgiven by his wife after committing adultery against her?

[ 32 : 36 ] He thought that it was so easy that he could be forgiven. He almost couldn't believe it. And after the affair and his confession of it, then life just seemed to go back to normal for them.

And he thought, oh, that was it. I got off. And it seemed like everything was over until one day he heard what sounded like the sound of his wife crying.

And he came closer until he realized that she was crying and she was praying to God. And he heard what she was saying and she was saying, oh God, please help me to forgive him.

I want to. but it's so difficult. And in that moment he realized what his act and the forgiveness that he had received cost his wife and was costing his wife daily.

For him it was free, but for her the emotional cost was immense. for Hosea, the price of forgiveness was high.

[ 33 : 53 ] He paid for it with his own resources, with enduring disbelief, shock, and humiliation from his neighbors, and yet to swallow his own sense of injustice, injustice, hurt, and anger at his wife.

so it is with God. This is what God does when he forgives us. It seems so easy for us. We confess our sin and ask and receive forgiveness and grace.

But for God, the just judge of all the earth, it comes at a great cost. Jesus said that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

Can a just God forgive when he looks upon this world and sees evil and wrongdoing and injustice and hurt and betrayal and lying and murder and adultery and cheating only by bearing the pain himself.

Jesus Christ came as a ransom for many and he died for our spiritual adultery. This is the kind of God that we follow.

[ 35 : 18 ] A God who experiences the pain of brokenness, of broken relationships and a God who walks through that pain and embraces even more pain in order to win us back.

Do we know this God, this true forgiveness? How do we receive this forgiveness? True forgiveness, it can't be demanded, expected, or presumed on.

Can you imagine if that husband had gone in and demanded forgiveness from his wife for what he'd done? It would have been thrown in his face. No, true forgiveness can only be received with a kind of a humbled awe.

Like that husband, who was speechless forgiveness when he realized the cost of forgiveness. And he could only stand there and receive it in humility.

We receive forgiveness as well from God. True forgiveness, not by demanding it from him, expecting it from his hand, or presuming upon it.

[ 36 : 42 ] it can only be received with a kind of humbled awe as we come before God realizing that this is the God who made us, who gave us everything, who sustains us, and yet who we turn our back on, who we engage in idolatry against, who we get distracted from, who is, rather than being foremost in our thoughts, is often last in our thoughts, and a bottom priority for us.

True forgiveness though, overcomes revenge, and spreads love, peace, and redemption. But as the woman who was betrayed was praying, so also it is hard too for us to forgive.

Because forgiveness is not natural for the human spirit. Rather, unforgiveness is natural. And I think about that taxi driver, and what I wanted to do, you know, to throttle him for what he'd done.

When I think about a relative of mine who is old enough to remember the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, and says he would never go to a Japanese restaurant, and never speak to a Japanese person, except to curse them.

Decades on. When I think of a pastor's wife crying at a pastor's conference, as we talked about anger, and forgiveness, and she was talking about hurtful relatives, who she could not forgive.

[ 38 : 32 ] In this book, Philip Jansi writes of forgiveness, it's called What's So Amazing Around Grace, and he tells a story of two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians ten years after the end of World War II.

They said, would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany? They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war, and to begin to build a new relationship. There was silence.

And then one Pole spoke up. What you are asking is impossible, he said. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood. We cannot forgive.

Before the group parted, they said the Lord's prayer together. When they reached the words, forgive us, forgive us our sins as we forgive, everybody stopped.

Tension swelled swelled in the room, and the Pole, who had spoken so vehemently, said, I must say yes to you. I could no more pray our father. I could no longer call myself a Christian if I refuse to forgive.

[ 39 : 45 ] Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength. Eighteen months later, the Polish and West German Christians met together in Vienna, establishing friendships that continue to this day.

unforgiveness is hard because within us we want justice and we seek redress for the hurt that has been done against us.

See, this is like Miroslav Rolf, who's a Croatian theologian. He writes, deep within the heart of every victim, anger swirls up against the perpetrator, rage inflamed by unredeemed suffering.

We don't pray, Father, forgive them for what they do. We'd rather pray, Father, forgive them not for they knew exactly what they did. Forgiveness is an outrage against straight-line, dues-paying morality.

If perpetrators were repentant, then forgiveness would come more easily, but too often they are not. And so victim, both victim and perpetrator, are imprisoned in the automatism of mutual exclusion, unable to forgive or repent, united in a perverse communion of mutual hate.

[ 41 : 00 ] And the trouble with revenge is that it enslaves us. And of course he's talking about the genocide and of his hometown in Serbia and Yugoslavia, back in those days in the 90s, warfare, blood feuds and genocide, the end result of unforgiveness.

But it takes an act of grace to break into that. It takes someone to take the initiative to forgive. Often we think, I'll forgive if they come before me and are repentant.

And I used to think that as well. And then I realized that Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing when he was on the cross for people who had certainly not repented.

to forgive is divine, as they say. And God's correct grace teaches us to forgive. The reason why we find it hard to forgive, even as people who have experienced forgiveness, and I don't know if you have or not, but one of the reasons we might find it hard is that we've forgotten forgiveness.

We've forgotten who we are as people of God. we've forgotten the forgiveness that comes to us. Like the unforgiving servant who couldn't forgive a debt, even though he'd been forgiven a debt millions of times greater.

[ 42 : 35 ] It reminded me of when the kids were playing and they ran out of water. You can't drink the water in Vietnam, the tap water, so you've got to buy a bottle of water. And so they ran out of water. And so I had a big bottle and I filled up one of the kids' bottles with mine and gave it to her.

And she took it gratefully and drank it. And then we told her, share it with your sister. She said, no, mine. I was like, I just gave that to you. And we just looked at each other and thought, that's what it's like with us and God.

We can't forgive this thing that somebody else has done towards us. And we say, no, that's mine that you've taken from me, my hurt that I can't give up.

And we forget God's broken heart. We forget the forgiveness that we've received. No wonder Jesus says that we should pray, Father, forgive us as we forgive those who have sinned against us. because if we cannot forgive others, then we have forgotten the forgiveness that was ours. And if we continue to forget that forgiveness, then perhaps we're not forgiven at all.

[ 43 : 53 ] Grace is the only solution to ungrace. I'm going to finish with this story, one final story here, which illustrates this.

And it's about a woman who had to forgive. You see, and I think the names have been changed, but Rebecca, in weeks of meeting together in this small group discussion regarding forgiveness, spoke up and said that she had married a pastor who was quite well known, and yet he had a dark side. He would visit prostitutes whenever he would go to other cities to speak. And she knew about it and sometimes he would ask Rebecca for forgiveness and sometimes he did not. And in time, he left her for another woman, Julianne.

Rebecca told us how painful it was for her, a pastor's wife, to suffer this humiliation. Some church members who had respected her husband treated her as if his sexual strain had been her fault. Devastated, she found herself pulling away from human contact, unable to trust another person. She could never put her husband out of her mind because they had children and she had to make contact with him to arrange visitation. And she had this increasing sense that unless she forgave her former husband, a hard lump of revenge would be passed on to their children.

[ 45 : 20 ] For months she prayed. At first her prayers seemed as vengeful as some of the psalms. She asked God to give her husband what he deserved. Finally, she came to the place of letting God not herself determine what he deserved.

One night, Rebecca called her ex-husband and said in a shaky, strained voice, I want you to know that I forgive you for what you've done to me and I forgive Julianne too. He laughed off her apology. I'm willing to admit he had done anything wrong. Despite that, the conversation helped Rebecca get past her bitter feelings. A few years later, Rebecca got a hysterical phone call from Julianne, the woman who had stolen her husband.

She'd been attending a ministerial conference with him in Minneapolis and he'd left the hotel room to go for a walk. A few hours passed and Julianne heard from the police. Her husband had been picked up for soliciting a prostitute.

On the phone with Rebecca, Julianne was sobbing. I never believed you, she said. I kept telling myself that even if what you said was true, he had changed. And now this. I feel so ashamed and hurt and guilty.

[ 46 : 25 ] I have no one on earth who can understand. Then I remember the night when you said you had forgiven us. I thought maybe you could understand what I'm going through. It's a terrible thing to ask, I know, but could I come and talk to you?

Somehow Rebecca found the courage to invite Julianne over that same evening. They sat in their living room, cried together, shared stories of betrayal, and in the end prayed together. Julianne now points to that night as the time when she became a Christian.

Our group was hushed as Rebecca told her story. She was describing forgiveness not in the abstract, but in the reality of the rawness, of a husband, steal, and abandoned wife kneeling side by side on a living room floor praying.

God comes and identifies with us.

We don't have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, and yet was without sin. And yet he became sin for us.

[ 47 : 51 ] God bridged the gap. He came in and forgave us. He has been there, and he knows and understands. And as Jesus recorded, forgiveness was not easy for Jesus either.

If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, Jesus prayed. There was no other way. And yet he says, in his dying moments, forgive them, all of them, the Roman soldiers, the religious leaders, the disciples who fled in darkness, you, me, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Let's pray. Amen. Father God, we know that we are a people who sometimes are far away from you and run in the opposite direction, even though you hold out your hands to us.

And we might take a step forward but then fall back again. And Father, I know that in my life too, I have failed to continue to follow you, to seek after you.

Forgive me, forgive us. Father, we ask that you would help us to remember not to demand or expect or presume upon your forgiveness, but to receive it from you with humbled awe.

[ 49 : 23 ] And we thank you for this. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.