

When Forgiveness is Complicated

DARRELL DELANEY

Forgiveness sounds beautiful in theory, until it collides with real life. What if the person you need to forgive is gone, not sorry, or has hurt you more times than you can count? Today on *Groundwork*, we bring some of the hardest forgiveness questions of scripture and look for honest, hopeful answers. Stay tuned.

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And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we have covered a lot of ground in this short, three-part series. This is episode three of our three-part series...the final one; and in the first episode, we turned our attention to God's forgiveness, and saw from the Old and New Testament that he lifts the burden of our sin and surrounds us with grace; and then in episode two, we talked about what it means to forgive others, made clear the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation, and saw how God's mercy becomes a pattern for our mercy; and today, we want to face some of the hardest questions that listeners ask about forgiveness, and bring some of those questions under the light of scripture.

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Two of those big questions arise for us. One is: How do I forgive myself? Another one that we will get is: How do I forgive somebody who died before I had a chance to offer them forgiveness? Before we speak to those, let's just anchor ourselves again in what God in Christ has already done, because again, this sets the keynote. So, now we are in 2 Corinthians 5:17-19. Paul writes: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old one has gone, the new one is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

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We are forgiving people because we have been forgiven, because God is the one who initiates the relationship with us, and extending grace to us as believers, we receive that by faith first. So, he gives us the ministry of reconciliation. Number one: reconciling us back to him; and then he charges us to go and reconcile one another. So, when a Christian says: I just cannot forgive myself, there is something deeper going on underneath that, Scott. I think the real question is: Will we agree with God's verdict about me concerning the finished work of Christ, or am I going to continue to keep taking myself to court in my own mind? That is the question.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right, yes; sometimes, you know, we as pastors...we have heard this, but as believers we have heard this...that sometimes it is easier to forgive somebody else than forgive yourself. You know, as you say, you kind of keep putting yourself on trial. You keep putting yourself in the dock of a courtroom: I just cannot let it go. Well, again; you know what we have to say is...I mean, scripture does not command us anywhere that I am aware of, to forgive ourselves, but it does call us to receive God's forgiveness and to live with that new identity. So, what we need to hear God saying to us when we say: Oh, I just cannot believe I did that! I cannot forgive myself! God is saying: I forgave you; so, you can forgive yourself, too, Scott. You know, you can let it go because I already did; and I have already made you new. So, I don't see that when I look at you. I don't want you to see that when you look at you in the mirror.

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Yes; we have been put in the witness protection program, so to speak. I mean, I think this understanding that we don't need to cling to the guilt that God has already taken to the cross, buried, and dealt with...paid for...atoned for. We don't need to carry that load anymore. In the first episode, we talked about how God carries the burden, and he is the only one who can remove the heavy sin burden off of us when we sin against him; and he has done that through Jesus Christ. So, we need to trust that he is the divine judge when he says: Not guilty when he looks at Jesus' finished work on the cross. He says: Not guilty when he looks at us, and we need to receive that as a gift.

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Yes; I mean, if we cannot forgive ourselves...I mean, it is sort of like saying: Well, I guess my standard is higher than God's mercy. I've got higher standards than God! Really? You really want to say that? No; I don't think you want to say that at all. Again, if God says he can get over it, you can get over it. You are reconciled, so that means we accept that, even if our feelings sometimes lag a little behind. But then, we had another question: How do you forgive somebody who died?

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Yes; this is the hard part because you see how we are sitting across from each other when we are having this podcast...this episode right here. You cannot do that when that person has passed on. They cannot be across the table from you. You are not going to hear them say they are sorry. You are not going to see them change their behavior. So, it can feel kind of frozen from your side: What do I do with this? How do I release this? I mean, it is really challenging when you cannot have the relationship with them that you had before. Forgiving the dead does not mean you have to rewrite history, but it is naming the harm honestly before God, and that is shown in the book of Micah; and so, in the book of Micah in Chapter 7, there is a scripture that calls God as the Judge with a capital J. Verse 18 says: Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. ¹⁹You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

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Again, if God can do that, then we can do that even when the person that we need to forgive is no longer present to hear us pronounce forgiveness. If they died before they ever said they were sorry, well, that is another wrinkle to it, right? And now they are never going to say they are sorry because they are dead. You are not going to hear from them again this side of glory. Somehow, we have to be like God and let it go. Again, not rewriting history; not pretending like that bad thing never happened; no, but just knowing that, you know, if God perhaps has forgiven them—if this person is now actually with Jesus—then we need to forgive them, too. If they were a believer and if they are with the Lord, then we have to accept that that is God's verdict on them and it has to be our verdict on them, even though their death seems to have short-circuited and cut short the full process of forgiveness, but that is what we are called to do.

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Yes; so, I had a friend who...we didn't always get along...and I don't think we ended on the best terms, but this friend ended up getting terminal cancer...pancreatic cancer; and turning for the worse in health very suddenly; and this person...she passed away in her 30s...and we were friends; and at the funeral, I...I...I...felt like this burden...I felt frozen, just like: Oh, man; I don't know how I am going to deal with this; but then, when I walked up to the casket, I touched it and I said whatever burden it was, I now release; and I felt the burden emotionally lift off of me. I am saying this is it. There is no more we can do here on this side of heaven; and it was very powerful for me to be able to release that. It was good, because I could feel it in my heart that it was going away; it was lightening. So, I mean, maybe you need to do something like that. Maybe you need to write a letter that you may never deliver. Maybe you need to speak into a pillow or speak into what you would say. There are many different ways to address it, but you have to get it outside of you. You have to talk to God about it; you've got to let it out.

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Yes; and if you are listening to this and if you are in that scenario, you know, be easy on yourself. It is not going to happen quickly. Don't condemn yourself for finding it difficult to forgive the person who is no longer with you, but just keep bringing it to God...keep bringing it to God.

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Well, in just a moment, we will take up some more hard questions: How do we relate to people who are not sorry? How do we forgive people who just keep on hurting us? So, stay tuned for that.

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Segment 2

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and so we are looking at some of the wrinkles of life that complicate forgiveness. We have already been looking at how do you forgive yourself? How do you forgive somebody who dies before you have had a chance to forgive them, or before you have had a chance to hear them say they are sorry? But then, what about somebody who just isn't sorry at all, or repeat offenders? It is very difficult...forgiveness is difficult, even when somebody says they are sorry. When they refuse to even say that...when they refuse to own it...that is crazy-making. That can make you feel really crazy; and it tempts you to say: Well, if they are not sorry, then I am not going to forgive them; but again, scripture calls us to do the hard thing, to try to forgive them anyway. We have some verses from Luke 17, verses 3 and 4, that kind of speak to this.

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Yes; Luke 17, picking up at verse 3, it says: "So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴Even if they sin against you seven times in a day, and seven

times they come back to you, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

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So, Jesus is tying forgiveness to repentance. So, if your brother or sister sins, you rebuke them; if they repent, you forgive them; if that pattern repeats, keep forgiving. You do not stay silent in the face of sin, you rebuke it; you call it to account. You say: Hey, listen; this happened. This is wrong. It should not have happened; and I was offended; I was hurt by what you did. You named that; you speak that truth, but then you keep your heart ready to release it when they repent and say they are sorry. This is where we kind of get confused, I think, because we sometimes believe: Are they really sorry if they keep coming back? What is going on there? Why are we doing this again? But God is not asking us to determine the heart of the person there. God is asking us to release the person when they come back...each time they come back.

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And anybody who is married for any length of time knows that we tend to have to forgive our spouse, or they have to forgive us, for the same thing a lot, you know. If you are prone to lose your temper, you probably don't do it just once. You ask for forgiveness, and at some future point, you might have to do it again and again and again and again. So, you know, rebuke people; but of course, again, as we said, what if there just never is... What if they are remorseless? They never take ownership of anything? They never say they are sorry? Well, it may be, Darrell, that this is a person that you are just not going to be able to have a relationship with anymore. I mean, if they really are that hard-hearted; if they are that blind to their own sins, this is maybe somebody you are going to have to walk away from, but still try to forgive them; take pity on them, maybe; it is sad when people live that way, but it is very, very difficult. Forgiveness is, like I said, hard enough to do when they say: I am really sorry; it is really, really hard to do when they won't even go that far; they won't even meet you halfway. So, it may be somebody that you cannot have a relationship with anymore, and yet, the gospel still calls us, you know: Have pity on them; let it drop; do your best to forgive them, even though they don't even want your forgiveness; which also makes it hard. If somebody says: You keep your forgiveness. I don't even want...I don't need it...

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and we have to also notice what Jesus does and does not say: He says if your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them. But he does not say: You need this boundary; you need that boundary; you go this way and you go that way. If they say it this way, then don't... He doesn't give detail about those things. That is where you need wisdom on how to handle the boundaries of what it means to walk in relationship with this person; and like you said, it may not go the same way again; but what about people who don't repent at all? That is another situation that we see that is named in 1 Peter; how Jesus is affected by these things. So, we can talk about that, too.

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1 Peter 2:21: For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps: ²²He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. ²³When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, in this situation, Scott, we see that Christ is suffering unjustly. He does not retaliate; he doesn't threaten. This is so contrary to what we see on social media and what we see online. It is just people are often retaliating and saying these weird and painful and hurtful things that they probably would never mention in person if they were sitting across from the person. But somehow it is easier to type these characters online; but you see that Jesus, in this situation, is contrary. He does not retaliate; he does not threaten; he entrusts

himself to the one who judges rightly. That is our pattern, especially when we are faced with stubborn wrongdoing, and people who don't admit...they absolve responsibility; they act like they didn't do anything wrong; but forgiveness, in this case, looks like *not* returning evil for evil, like we talked about in the last episode in Romans 12, where you overcome evil with good.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you feel sorry for somebody who is incapable of repentance, you know; who just...about anything. They never take responsibility... You feel sorry for them. That is sad...it is a sad way to live. The only thing that would make it sadder is if you get so hung up on that, that you make yourself miserable. So, I think what...you know, Lewis B. Smedes, who wrote a couple of books on forgiveness...you know, he said: When you forgive somebody, you set two prisoners free. The other person and yourself. He was sometimes accused of that was an overly therapeutic view of forgiveness, but I don't think so. You can imprison yourself if you just cannot get over the fact that this person never says: I'm sorry. Take pity on that person; feel sorry for that person; but don't let it ruin your life, too. I mean, they are living in kind of a sad situation; don't you live in a sad situation. Do your best to let it drop, even though it does not feel right because they didn't ask for it; they didn't want it; let it go. You will be a better, more free person.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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DARRELL DELANEY

It does not mean that you are going to just become a doormat and let them walk all over you. It does not mean that... You know, even if consequences are pursued, and wise distance is maintained, the heart is not living on a steady diet of revenge, like you said; but it is also not going to allow these other things. So, it is a mix of two different extremes. One extreme says if you really forgave me, you would let me back in your life and everything would be back the way it was. That is one extreme. The other extreme is, if they hurt you again, forgiveness is off the table forever, right? But scripture tells us there is a different path. It invites us to rebuke and correct and hold people accountable; call for repentance; and honor boundaries. At the same time, it points us toward a posture that refuses to let bitterness have the last word.

DARRELL DELANEY

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, forgiveness...we have all seen courtroom scenes where the family of a murder victim forgives the killer...they forgive the killer. Sometime the killer receives that gladly and is genuinely sorry, but when that happens, the judge does not say: Oh, well, now you don't have to go to jail. I mean, they forgave you; you accepted; you took responsibility; so, you don't have to go to jail. No; actions have consequences, and not everything can go back to where it was before just because you forgave somebody; but it is the way to chart a better path forward.

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Well, in our final segment today, we will look a little more closely at what happens in our hearts when we try to live this out and bring forgiveness to complex situations in God's presence. So, stay tuned as we wrap up this series.

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Segment 3

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DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we have talked about, Scott, how to forgive ourselves, forgive people who have died, forgiving the unrepentant and repeat offenders; but underneath all of this situation is another question: I mean, what is really actually going on in our hearts as we strive to forgive people? How do we deal with the swirl of anger, the grief, the pain, the confusion, the fear that comes with this territory? It is really a complex situation emotionally in our lives. A lot of tidal waves and a lot of actions that are building up inside of us, we have to do something with it, Scott.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

In the Psalms, I think, many of the psalms give us a starting point. They show us how to bring our whole emotional life into the presence of God; not just the parts that we think are acceptable to show God; no, show God everything. He sees it all anyway. Lift up the hood on your life; he sees it all anyway.

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So, here are some interesting and good words from Psalm 62, beginning at verse 5:

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Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. ⁶Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. ⁷My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. ⁸Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

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DARRELL DELANEY

I like that last phrase you just read: Pour out our hearts to him, for God is our refuge. We take all the things and pour them out to God. He doesn't expect us to clean up our emotions and get our act together before we come to him. He wants us to invite him into a real-time, raw emotion: the disappointment, the rage, the feelings of fear, the pain, the grief; all of that stuff, he said, right there. Offer that; pour that out to God. That is not a lack of faith; that is actually a demonstration of faith.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; we trust God to be able to take it when we pour out all the junk that is roiling in our hearts. We give it over to God, you know; forgiveness is not just about some neat and tidy release. It sometimes begins with a raw cry: God, this is what this is doing to me. This is how this is tearing me up inside. Help me! I want to show you all of it. We pour out our hearts. We are taking that heavy weight inside us, and we set it in God's hands.

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hands.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, I was thinking about this because my mother...she has struggled with addiction. When I was at a very young age, one of my number one prayers was: Why, God, is the addiction so powerful in her life? I am angry at the addiction; I am angry at the situation. It is hurting our family. It is hurting me. What is happening, God? Do something; right? But naming that right in the middle of the situation was part of me releasing God's power and God's trust, but strengthening my relationship with God, because I didn't take that anger and that pain away from God, I brought it to him and said: Can you help me understand this, because I do not understand it. I am thanking God that my mom is clean and sober to this day; but really, in that moment, it was a very painful process, and I am really glad that this is what you name when you bring those things to God. Like, okay, so she hurt me when she did that. I had to forgive her; and I received forgiveness from God to do that, and now we have a better relationship.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; you don't have to pretend that everything is fine and rosy in your life to be a faithful servant of God, right? The psalms of lament in the Old Testament...a third...a third of the psalms are laments, where we figure God can take it even when we are yelling at God; even when we are saying: God, this is not fair; you are not being fair. God can take it. The psalms of lament prove that, because...well, you know, mentioned in the previous program, a podcast interview I did with the Old Testament/Psalms scholar, John Goldingay. He does not call them psalms of lament; he calls them psalms of protest. I asked him why and he said: Because you don't need religious faith to lament. Anybody can lament. But you do need religious faith to protest...to say to God: You know and I know that this is not the way it is supposed to be; so I am protesting this situation in my life, Lord. Please help me to clean it up...you know, help it to get cleaned up. So, God can take it when we do that, and we hear this in the New Testament vein, too.

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Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and

your minds in Christ Jesus.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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DARRELL DELANEY

But he tells you what to do with that anxiety. He says there could be some situations that make forgiveness feel impossible, but the promise is not that we won't feel anything, but the promise is that God's peace will transcend and surpass all understanding; will guard our hearts and minds as we keep bringing these things to him. So, when those hard things are happening in our hearts, we bring them to God and he exchanges them for peace in his timing.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is maybe not something that is just going to happen once, either, right? I mean, we are going to hit repeat...shampoo, rinse, repeat. This is going to happen a lot. We are going to have to bring some of the same emotions to God over and over and over; but over time, we continue to let God help us loosen the grip of that resentment; loosen the grip of that bad memory; and you know, there are days when you feel like the progress is slow; there are days when you feel like you are kind of right back at the beginning; but the good news of the gospel, you know, is that God's patience is larger than, you know, whatever pace we think we should be on. The one who calls you to forgive is the one who forgives you, strengthens you; who, we are promised, always finishes what he starts in you. Our failures to forgive perfectly are not stronger than the grace of God, and that is good news.

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DARRELL DELANEY

It is good news. So, as we think about our own stories this week, we can take one relationship, one memory or one wound, and we bring it to God in prayer, saying: Lord, what is the next faithful step of forgiveness that we need to do here? That is a simple prayer that you can take with you; and as we think about this series we ran through, in the episodes we talked about God's forgiveness and we saw what we live in the environment of grace, being made possible by the cross of Christ. In episode two, we talked about the call to forgive others as we have been forgiven; and made clear that forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And now, in this episode, of course, we brought those hard questions into the light of God to see that God's grace is still sufficient, even when life throws us some serious curve balls; even when life gets really messy and really complicated, God is in the mess. One of the truths of the incarnation is that Jesus came down and was born into this world...into our mess...he is in the middle of it all with us, and that is good news.

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Forgiveness? It might be one of the hardest things that most of us ever have to do, but in Christ it is also one of the most freeing things we can do, Darrell. You know, it loosens the hold of the past on us; it opens space for new growth; it bears witness to the mercy we have received as we share that mercy with others; and through it all, Darrell, we know that we don't walk this road of forgiveness alone. The same Savior who prayed: Father, forgive them, when he was being crucified, is right with us, with his Spirit, to release all of our debts into God's hands. It is God's grace at work; thanks be to God.

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Printed on July 8, 2026