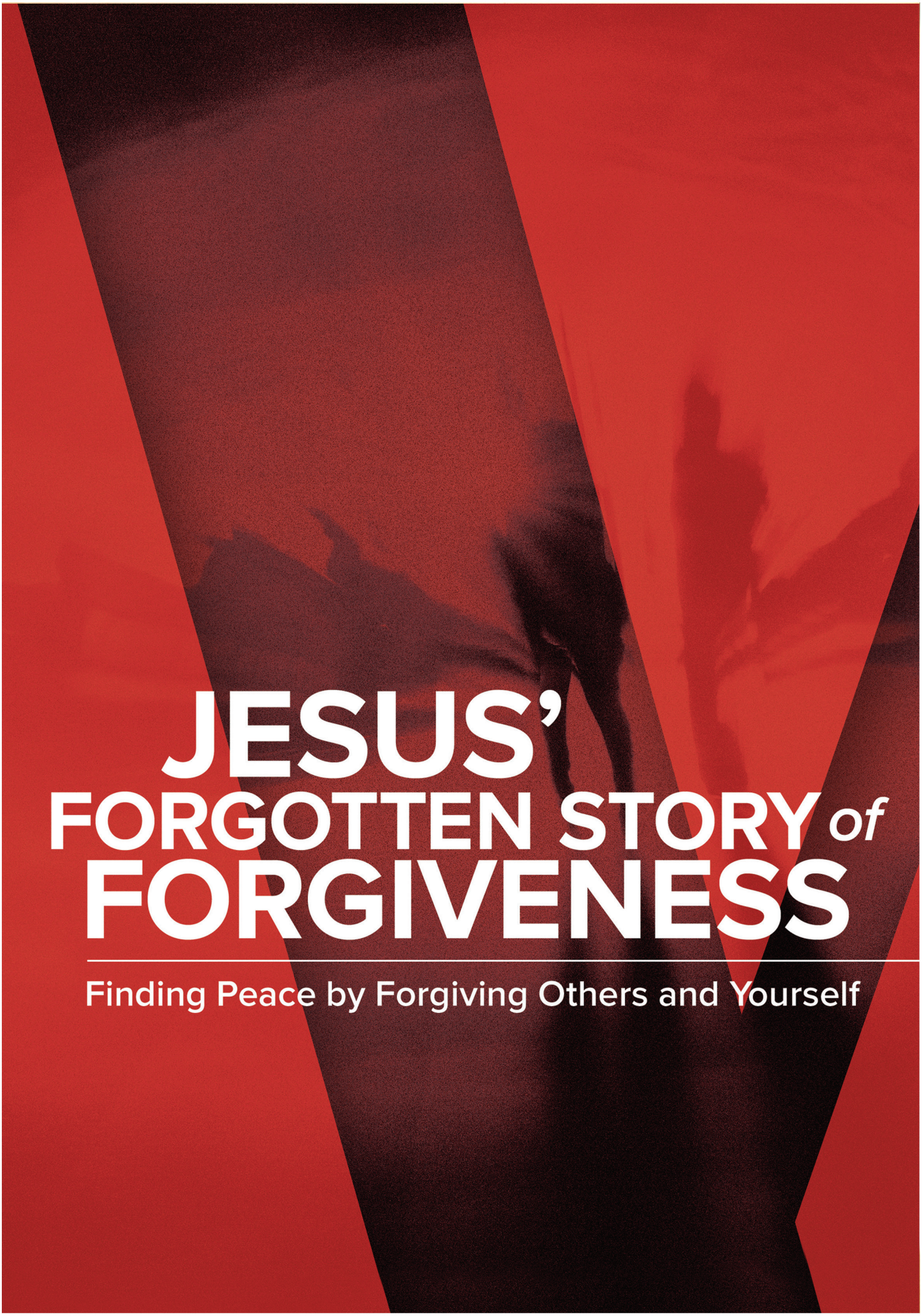

JESUS'
FORGOTTEN STORY of
FORGIVENESS
Finding Peace by Forgiving Others and Yourself

the shocking secret

jesus' forgotten story of forgiveness



"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable
because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

—C. S. Lewis

I was speaking at a large church in South Africa. We met in a huge dome-shaped building, filled with almost five thousand people. I was talking about family dynamics between different generations that day—how parents, children, and grandchildren interact, based upon my book *Experiencing Spiritual Breakthroughs*. I was truly enjoying the day, passionate about my message. I'm not even sure how the topic came up, but I ended up making a brief comment on forgiveness. In my mind, it was a quick detour.

But it was anything but a detour. After mentioning forgiveness, I could feel the tension between adult children and their parents in the audience. It was obvious, painful, and growing. It needed to be addressed. Before I knew it, I heard myself calling them to respond to it. "If you have resentment and unforgiveness toward your parents and have put up walls, if you find yourself often avoiding them and want to break free—please stand. Come forward."

Twenty-five hundred people stood up.

I was in shock as they poured forward. Hundreds of them were weeping quietly. I quickly shot a prayer to God, *Lord, I know how to help one or two people at the same time, but how can I help twenty-five hundred people forgive?*

These people coming to the altar represented hundreds of households, each with a personal story. In some homes, much like Lil and John, entire families rarely talked with each other. In others, the parents were close to divorce and separation. Some were experiencing trauma because of one member's selfishness, abuse, or neglect. Others were ready to give up on God because He didn't seem to be answering their prayers to repair the brokenness and wounds infecting their family for years. Many sons and daughters had left home because of their alienation and hatred for their parents.

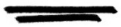
It was overwhelming. But healing had to be personal. So I asked these twenty-five hundred people to pick a partner—men with men, women with women. I asked them to face each other so they could help one another forgive. Once they were all paired up and facing one another, I led them step by step through the process of forgiveness.

They named their wounds and their pain. They forgave from the heart—and their hearts broke open. It was magnificent—forgiveness *flooded* the room. Joyful weeping broke out in sobs. The room felt so *peaceful.*

As dramatic as it was to watch, the real drama was happening on the inside—in the hearts of those making the choice to open in forgiveness. Invisible walls of hatred collapsed. Families that had been torn apart were joined once again. Freedom rang out in hearts that had been prisons of unforgiveness only minutes before. Torment left for thousands of households because of one little invitation to forgive.

The church's leaders would tell me later that the congregation had a revival not only in the church but in their homes. The church broke through to a new level of health. Why? Because the underlying cause of their spiritual apathy and pain had been overcome. They forgave others. They forgave themselves. They received God's forgiveness.

And God poured out His blessings in a wonderful way on their opened hearts.



Friend, unforgiveness is always accompanied by suffering of some kind—it is a universal reality. It affects billions of people.

But at this point, we should be asking some tough questions. If unforgiveness and suffering are indeed connected, then *why? Who* controls that connection? *How* does it produce suffering? *What kind of suffering?*

Would you be willing to accept the answers from the greatest teacher—Jesus?

I'll warn you, though—His answer is not going to be what you think.

You may be as shocked as I was when you see it.

When I saw this for the first time many years ago, it was during a period of my life when I was dealing with significant unforgiveness—in hindsight, often without even knowing what I was wrestling with. I was reading in the book of Matthew, studying one of Jesus' parables.

Jesus loved to teach His deepest spiritual truths through stories. A parable is a fictional story that teaches an important truth. The passage in front of me—Matthew 18:21–35—contained a familiar parable, often titled, "The Unmerciful Servant."

As I read this classic passage that I'd read many times before, a shocking truth leapt out at me. All of a sudden, the *point* of the

passage, a point I'd missed while reading this dozens of times, was right in front of me. My eyes widened.

As you prepare to read through the following story, will you pray this short prayer with me?

Lord, I want to know the truth about forgiveness. Please teach me by Your Holy Spirit to see my own heart clearly, and let me choose, like You do, the way of forgiveness and freedom. In the name of Jesus, who died so that I could experience His forgiveness for all my sins, Amen.

Jesus used this story to drive home the main reason why we should forgive those who have hurt us. And that reason is not what we might think.

Read the parable in Matthew 18 with me.

> *Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"*
>
> *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." (vv. 21–23)*

In response to a question about how often one should forgive, Jesus gave His disciple Peter a seemingly impossible number—"seventy times seven." He could have left the issue at that. But Jesus then told a story that revealed *why* Peter should choose to forgive without exception, without limit. Because of what I learned in this parable, unforgiveness became a sin I no longer committed. Jesus' words set me free, and they will do the same for you as well. It's that powerful.

The story begins in a king's business chambers. The fiscal business year is ending and it is time to close the financial books. It is time for the king to be paid the money that his servants owe him.

> *And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. (vv. 24–27)*

Person by person the king calls his staff to settle accounts. But one servant is in deep trouble. He owes the king a massive fortune—ten thousand talents was more than a lifetime's income for many of Jesus' hearers. And the servant knows that he can never repay that debt.

Knowing this, the king orders that the servant, his wife, his children, and all that he owns be sold to help offset the debt. When the servant hears this judgment—his life and family to be dismantled and auctioned away—it hits him like a punch to the gut. His knees buckle. He falls to the floor. He begs the king for mercy, pleading for time, for patience, for *anything* but that harsh sentence.

And the miracle of the story?

Out of his deep compassion, the king forgives him the debt he could never repay.

But Jesus' story wasn't over yet.

> *But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay me what*

you owe!" So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. (vv. 28–30)

The forgiven servant exits the king's presence and finds a fellow servant who owes him money. The sum in question is pocket change compared to the debt just erased by his master. But what is the servant's response? Instead of emulating his master's kind, gracious, forgiving character, the servant abuses and assaults his fellow servant, grabbing him by the throat. He demands every penny.

The man pleads with him for mercy—just as the servant had done a few moments before with his master—but he refuses to give it. This ungrateful servant, forgiven the debt of a lifetime, throws another man into debtor's prison until he pays up his pennies.

But someone saw this great injustice.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. (vv. 31–34)

The other members of the king's staff watch this servant's ungrateful act, and their hearts break. Was the second servant's debt legitimate—to the point he could legally be thrown in jail? Yes. But the unmerciful servant's petty demands were so far from the compassion of the king, so far from his kind forgiveness, that a report must be made to the king.

Unsurprisingly, the king is furious. He summons the servant and condemns him for not showing his fellow man the compassion and forgiveness he had been shown.

The king then orders the merciless man who had received abundant mercy to be delivered over to the torturers until the previously forgiven debt should be paid.

A rough story. But Jesus wasn't done telling it yet. In fact, the main point of the story was still yet to be revealed.

What is the connection between unforgiveness and suffering? Jesus tells us.

> *So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses. (v. 35)*

As I read those words, my mouth dropped open in shock.

What is the point of this story—the missing motivation to forgive? Jesus spells it out clearly.

Remember that the point of the parable was to answer Peter's question "How can anyone forgive someone seventy times seven?" Most people assume that Christ's answer to that question is grounded in God's gracious forgiveness toward us. This is true, and it is the backdrop of the whole story. We would love it if Jesus had stopped there, leaving us only with a positive motivation to forgive, and had moved on. But He didn't.

His teaching here is both startling and shocking.

Jesus teaches that the Father will deliver us into suffering if we do not forgive others from our hearts.

What is our liberating truth? Our missing motivation to forgive? The reality that God releases us to suffer if we don't. This work is not cruel, not unloving, but it is real and painful.

Most people harboring unforgiveness know they should forgive those who have harmed them. But they do not. But what if they saw this motivation—one that would make them run to forgive,

rather than to hide and hold their debts in their heart? What if there was a motivation so potent and immediate that we would even stop counting how many times we had been wounded—even beyond seventy times seven?

Why should we forgive everyone for everything? Jesus' teaching is clear: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you . . ."

What does that refer to—from the preceding sentence of the story? The master "delivered him to the torturers."

So our heavenly Father will also do to us. We are shocked to read this.

Why? Under what circumstances would our loving God deliver a person over to the torturers? Jesus gave a direct answer: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Hard to miss when you see it. But I didn't see it for years.

The master didn't torture the person but did delegate the torture (creating suffering and distress) to others. God will deliver a person to the torturers if each of us, from our heart, does not forgive our brother (another human being) his trespasses (hurts, wounds, injustices done to us).

The connection couldn't be clearer. If we do not forgive we will surely experience some kind of negative result in our life, a situation that could be described as "torture" or "suffering."

And for how long? "Until he should pay all that was due to him." (Based on the larger context and Christ's point in the parable, this refers to forgiveness, not the original salvation resulting from the canceling of our debt for all our sins. The parable is focused not on salvation but on Peter's question of forgiving others who sin against him.) The implication? That as soon as we forgive, the connected torment is legally canceled.

My head spun as I read an old story for what felt like the first time.

How could we imagine forgiving others seventy times seven times—a seemingly infinite number? Because we don't want the Father to discipline us by turning us over to the torturers until we do.

What does this mean? That there are always consequences—real and painful consequences—to our unforgiveness. If we think our unforgiveness can be pushed down, hidden, stored away without effect, we are terribly wrong. Its presence delivers us to suffering. And it will never be broken until our hearts open in genuine and complete forgiveness.

When we fail to forgive others and ourselves, God takes away the protection of His peace in our hearts. The implications of that vary widely depending on our circumstances, but are always negative. Because of this, we experience various degrees of distress until we forgive. This is the loving discipline of a Father who does not want His child to live a life contrary to His compassionate character. The unforgiveness we hold toward others is far from what He has done in forgiving each of us. So He acts—allowing discipline to bring us to obedience. To true forgiveness.

And that is the shocking revelation at the heart of Jesus' teaching. It is the Father who assigns suffering to accompany unforgiveness in our lives.

He does that because *He loves us* and wants our good more than He wants our comfort.

Many people resist the idea of God making a link between the sin of unforgiveness and our suffering. After all, how could a loving Father allow torment for His beloved children?

First, this is an issue of discipline, not punishment. He is teaching us, even if it initially seems harsh, that our suffering arises from our unforgiveness. He is doing this to motivate and train us to be like Him—a forgiver!

Second, He has provided a path of escape from all torment caused by our unforgiveness. Unlike punishment, which only ends when the punisher decides that you have suffered enough, the suffering brought by our unforgiveness can end immediately—as soon as we, the "unforgiver," have learned to model our character after God's forgiving nature, releasing all of the trespasses of others from our hearts.

And He is waiting eagerly to grant you complete freedom from that connected torment. Right now.

We are all wounded in our lives. We are hurt, and it is natural to hang on to such wounds as unpaid debts.

But Jesus' parable shows that the issue of forgiveness is not what another person did to you, but what *God* will do to you if you don't forgive them. The choice to be disciplined or not to be disciplined is ours to make, all based upon whether we are willing to turn and offer others the radical love and forgiveness that our King has offered to us. Do we have His loving and gracious character yet? If not, He loves us enough to deliver us into suffering as motivation to change.

This is God's radical revelation—forgive others, so you won't have to undergo painful discipline. Forgive others and yourself so you can live in freedom, joy, and peace.

God does not desire to make us suffer, nor does He take pleasure in watching us suffer. Quite the opposite. It pains Him too. But from His love for us, He is willing to place us into the hands of torturers—not because He wants us to suffer, *but because He wants us to forgive*.

And the moment we do forgive "from the heart" the one who hurt us? The discipline disappears.

There is no need for it anymore.

What is my point? The connection that Jesus makes between unforgiveness and torture is real. It is not imaginary, symbolic, or abstract. Nor are the words of Jesus an overstatement—this is the

universal reality of all who choose not to forgive. From Lil and John to you and me. None of us is excluded.

When I studied this passage for myself over twenty-five years ago, I was shocked by Christ's connection between unforgiveness and suffering. I had read that passage so many times, but missed its message.

But when it finally clicked? *Whatever it takes*, I thought, *I want the torment gone. And I don't ever want this cycle to start again in my life.*

I want to know how to end it.

But before the torment can end, we need to understand how it works.

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