

# 3 Levels of Forgiveness That Heal What Pain Has Locked Inside You

By System Import | Sermon | March 13, 2026

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## 3 Levels of Forgiveness That Heal What Pain Has Locked Inside You

Pain has a way of locking doors inside of us that we didn't even know existed. We go through life thinking we have moved on, thinking we have buried the hatchet, but then a name is mentioned, a song plays, or a similar situation arises, and suddenly, that old wound begins to throb with a fresh ache. We realize that while we might have bandaged the cut, the infection is still deep beneath the surface. Unforgiveness is the most deceptive spiritual cancer because it often disguises itself as justice. We feel justified in our anger. We feel righteous in our resentment because, after all, they *did* hurt us. They *did* betray us. But the Bible paints a terrifying picture of unforgiveness: it describes it as a prison. When we refuse to forgive, we think we are punishing the offender, but in reality, we are the ones sitting in the cell, shackled to the past, while the person who hurt us often goes on living their life completely unaware of our torment. And before we dive in, if this message is already stirring something in you, hit the subscribe button and stay connected to God's Word daily, because we believe that truth sets us free. Today, we are going to walk through a journey that few dare to take completely. Most people stop at the surface level of forgiveness—the polite "it's okay" that we say to keep the peace. But deep, biblical healing requires us to descend into the three profound levels of forgiveness. These levels unlock the spirit, the soul, and the body from the trauma of the past. We are going to look at how Jesus forgave, how Joseph forgave, and how you can finally drop the heavy bag of stones you have been carrying up the mountain of life. This is not just about saying sorry; it is about spiritual surgery. It is about removing the root of bitterness so that the fruit of the Spirit can grow again. If you are ready to be truly free, to reclaim the joy that was stolen from you, and to understand the power of the Cross in a new way, then open your heart. This message is your key out of the cage.

It is crucial to understand that time does not heal all wounds; only the application of the blood of Jesus and the intentional work of the Holy Spirit heals wounds. Time often just covers the wound with a scab of hardness. Many of us are walking around with hard hearts, unable to trust, unable to love fully, because we have never completed the cycle of forgiveness. We have done the "religious" thing, but we haven't done the "relational" thing with God regarding our pain. We have tried to forgive the person without first acknowledging the depth of the wound. Or we have tried to forget without truly forgiving. Today, we strip away the band-aids. We are going to look at forgiveness not as a feeling, but as a multi-layered spiritual technology that God designed to keep His children free from the poison of offense.

### Number 1: The Poison of the Root

Before we can understand the levels of forgiveness, we must understand the anatomy of

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unforgiveness. The writer of Hebrews warns us to "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled" (Hebrews 12:15). Notice the imagery: a \*root\*. Roots are hidden. You can cut down the weed of anger, you can trim the branches of resentment, but if the root remains underground, the plant will grow back, often stronger than before. Bitterness is a root that feeds on the soil of replayed memories. Every time you replay the video tape of what they did to you, you are watering the root.

This root acts as a spiritual blockade. Jesus was very clear in Matthew 6:15, "But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." This is a terrifying verse. It implies that unforgiveness blocks the flow of grace. Think of grace as a river. It flows from God, into you, and through you to others. If you build a dam to stop the flow to others, you inadvertently stop the flow into yourself. You become a stagnant pond. The water that was meant to bring life becomes a breeding ground for disease. The poison you mix for your enemy is the poison you end up drinking yourself.

Medical science is even beginning to catch up with Scripture, showing the link between chronic resentment and physical illness. The body keeps the score. Unforgiveness puts the body in a constant state of "fight or flight," flooding the system with cortisol, raising blood pressure, and suppressing the immune system. God designed us for love, not for hate. Hate is a foreign substance to the human soul, and it corrodes the vessel that holds it. So, the first step in healing is realizing that forgiveness is not a favor you do for the other person; it is a life-saving surgery you perform on yourself. It is the decision to stop drinking the poison.

We must also recognize that the enemy uses offense as bait. The Greek word for "offense" is \*skandalon\*, which refers to the trigger stick of a trap. Satan sets traps of offense everywhere—in your marriage, your job, your church. He knows that if he can get you to bite the bait of offense, he can trap you in the cage of bitterness. Once you are in that cage, you are neutralized. You cannot pray effectively, you cannot worship freely, and you cannot witness powerfully. Breaking this trap requires identifying the root and deciding, "I will not be a prisoner to this anymore."

## Number 2: Level 1 — The Judicial Decision

The first level of forgiveness is what we call Judicial Forgiveness. This is the forgiveness of the \*will\*. It is a decision, not a feeling. This is where you choose to obey God's command to release the debt, regardless of how your emotions are screaming. In ancient times, a debt was a serious legal matter. If someone owed you money, you held a certificate of debt. You had the legal right to

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demand payment or to have them thrown in prison. Forgiveness, in the Greek sense (*\*aphiemi\**), means "to send away" or "to cancel the debt." It is tearing up the IOU note.

At this level, you look at the person who hurt you—whether it is an ex-spouse, an abusive parent, or a betraying friend—and you say, "You owe me. You stole my childhood. You stole my reputation. You stole my joy. But, in the name of Jesus, and by an act of my will, I cancel this debt. I will not demand payment from you anymore." This is what Jesus did on the Cross when He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He didn't feel good about being nailed to a cross. His body was in agony. But His will was aligned with the Father's mercy. He made a judicial decree.

Many Christians get stuck here because they wait to "feel" like forgiving. If you wait until you feel like it, you will take that grudge to the grave. The heart is deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). You must lead your heart; do not let your heart lead you. You make the decision first, and the feelings will eventually follow. It is like steering a large ship. You turn the rudder (the will), and it takes a long time for the ship (the emotions) to actually turn. But if you hold the rudder steady, the ship will turn. Judicial forgiveness is turning the rudder.

This level handles the *\*vertical\** aspect of the sin. You are telling God, "I am handing this case over to You. I am stepping down from the judge's seat." As long as you are judging them, God cannot. But when you step down and release them, you allow God to be the Judge. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Judicial forgiveness is trusting God's justice system over your own. If this message inspires you, don't forget to subscribe for more Bible insights every week.

## Number 3: Level 2 — The Emotional Process

If Judicial Forgiveness is the decision, Emotional Forgiveness is the *\*work\**. This is Level 2, and it is where the healing of the soul takes place. You can tear up the IOU note (Level 1) and still feel tremendous pain. You can decide not to seek revenge, but still feel a knot in your stomach when you see them. This is normal. Judicial forgiveness happens in a moment; emotional forgiveness happens in layers. This is what Jesus meant when Peter asked, "How many times shall I forgive?" and Jesus answered, "Seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). He wasn't just talking about 490 separate sins; He was hinting at the continual process of forgiving the *\*same\** wound every time the pain resurfaces.

The Emotional Process involves grieving. You cannot heal what you do not feel. Many Christians try to "spiritualize" away their pain. "Oh, I'm fine, praise the Lord." No, you are bleeding. David

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poured out his complaint to the Lord in the Psalms. He was honest about his enemies. He was honest about his pain. Level 2 requires you to take the pain to Jesus and let Him touch the wound. It involves admitting, "Lord, I forgave them, but it still hurts. I am angry. I am sad. I feel rejected."

This level is like peeling an onion. Today, you might forgive them for the act itself. Tomorrow, you might need to forgive them for the consequences of that act. Next week, you might need to forgive them for the years you lost. As the Holy Spirit brings up different aspects of the trauma, you apply the blood of Jesus to each layer. You say, "I forgive them for this, too. And for this, too." It is a diligent cleaning of the wound to ensure no infection remains.

This is also where we separate the \*person\* from the \*pain\*. We begin to see the offender not just as a monster, but perhaps as a wounded person themselves. "Hurt people hurt people." This doesn't excuse their behavior, but it gives us perspective. When Stephen was being stoned, he saw the glory of God and asked for their forgiveness. He saw their blindness. Emotional forgiveness moves us from being a victim to being a victor who has the capacity to show mercy. It is the slow, steady process of the heart softening again.

## Number 4: Level 3 — The Redemptive Release

The third and deepest level is Redemptive Forgiveness. This is the level of Joseph. Genesis 50:20 is the banner of this level: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." This is where you stop looking at the offender as the author of your life story and start seeing God as the Sovereign Editor who can rewrite even the darkest chapters. At this level, you release the person not just from your judgment, but you actually begin to wish them well. You pray for their blessing. Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:28).

This seems impossible to the natural mind. How can I bless the person who destroyed my marriage? How can I pray for the boss who fired me unjustly? You can't—not in your own strength. This is supernatural. It is the evidence that the Holy Spirit has taken over your heart completely. When you can pray for your enemy's salvation and healing, you know you are free. The hook is out of your jaw. They no longer control your emotions. You are so secure in God's love that their hatred cannot diminish you.

Redemptive forgiveness recognizes that God is bigger than the devil's attacks. It says, "What they did was terrible, but God is so great that He will use even this for my promotion." Joseph would never have reached the palace without the pit. The betrayal by his brothers was the transportation system to his destiny. When you see this, you stop focusing on the "brothers" and start focusing on the Providence of God. You realize that your destiny was never in their hands; it was always in

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God's hands.

This level brings you to a place of profound peace. You are no longer defined by what happened *\*to\** you, but by what God is doing *\*in\** you. You become a "wounded healer." Your pain becomes your pulpit. The very thing the enemy used to try to kill you becomes the weapon you use to set others free. You can look at others going through the same thing and say, "I survived, and so can you." If this message inspires you, don't forget to subscribe for more Bible insights every week.

## Number 5: Forgiving God and Yourself

While we often focus on forgiving others, there are two other persons we often hold grudges against: God and ourselves. This is a sensitive but necessary part of the 3 Levels. Often, our deepest anger is directed at God. "God, why did You allow this? If You are good, why didn't You stop the abuse? Why did You let my child die?" We might feel it is blasphemous to say we are angry at God, but God knows our hearts anyway. We hold Him responsible.

Forgiving God doesn't mean God actually sinned or made a mistake. God is perfect. But *\*we\** perceive that He failed us. "Forgiving God" is really about releasing our *\*accusation\** against Him. It is dropping the case we have built against His goodness. It is reconciling our limited understanding with His infinite wisdom. It is coming to the place where we say, "Lord, I don't understand, but I trust You. I let go of my demand for an explanation."

Then there is forgiving yourself. This is often the hardest lock to pick. We look back at our past mistakes, our gullibility, the times we stayed too long in bad situations, and we loathe ourselves. "How could I be so stupid? How could I have done that?" We punish ourselves as a form of penance. But if God has forgiven you, who are you to condemn yourself? Are you a higher judge than God? If the Supreme Court of Heaven has declared you "Not Guilty" because of the blood of Jesus, you are in contempt of court if you continue to declare yourself guilty.

Self-forgiveness is accepting the grace of God as a reality for *\*you\**, not just for others. It is looking in the mirror and seeing a person who is flawed but loved, broken but being redeemed. It is treating yourself with the same kindness you would show a friend. You must unlock the cell door and let yourself out. You cannot love your neighbor as yourself if you hate yourself. The healing of the soul requires you to make peace with the person in the mirror.

## Number 6: The Myth of "Forgive and Forget"

We need to address a dangerous myth that keeps people trapped: "Forgive and forget." We hear this all the time, but it is not biblically accurate in the way we think. God, in His omniscience, does

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not have "amnesia." When the Bible says He "remembers our sins no more," it doesn't mean He loses the data; it means He no longer *acts* upon them. He chooses not to bring them up against us. For humans, we do not have a delete button in our brains. Trauma is etched into our neural pathways.

If you think you haven't forgiven because you still remember the event, you will live in constant condemnation. You *will* remember. The goal is not amnesia; the goal is healing the memory. A healed memory is like a scar. When you look at a fresh wound, it hurts to touch. It is red and inflamed. But when it heals into a scar, you can look at it, you can touch it, and it doesn't hurt. You remember how you got it, but the sting is gone. That is the goal of the 3 Levels.

Furthermore, forgiveness is not the same as *reconciliation*. Forgiveness takes one person; reconciliation takes two. You can forgive someone totally and yet, for reasons of safety or wisdom, never speak to them again. If someone is abusive, unrepentant, or dangerous, you forgive them to free your soul, but you guard your heart to protect your life. David forgave King Saul, but he didn't go back to the palace to be a target for his spears. He stayed in the wilderness. That was wisdom.

Do not let anyone guilt-trip you into restoring a relationship that God has not restored. Trust is earned; forgiveness is given freely. You give forgiveness like a gift, but you make people earn access to your heart like a bank vault. Level 3 forgiveness allows you to love them from a distance without letting them destroy you again. It is a boundary built with love, not a wall built with hate.

## Number 7: The Freedom of the Unoffendable Heart

When you walk through these 3 Levels—Judicial, Emotional, and Redemptive—you arrive at a place of spiritual maturity called "The Unoffendable Heart." This doesn't mean you never feel pain. It means you have a system for processing it instantly. You keep short accounts. You don't let the sun go down on your anger. You become "quick to forgive."

Living with an unoffendable heart is the ultimate freedom. Imagine walking through life without the heavy baggage of the past. Imagine having so much space in your soul for joy because it isn't cluttered with old arguments. This is the abundant life Jesus promised. It is a lightness of spirit. People will wonder, "How can you be so happy after what you went through?" And you can tell them, "I let it go. I gave it to Jesus."

This state of being also unlocks your prayers. Mark 11:25 says, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." A forgiving heart is a conduit of power. When the blockage of bitterness is

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removed, the power of the Holy Spirit flows unimpeded. You will find your prayers are answered more quickly. You will hear God's voice more clearly. The static on the line is gone.

You become a dangerous person to the kingdom of darkness because you break the cycle of vengeance. Satan relies on the "ping-pong" game of revenge. You hit me, I hit you back. But when you forgive, you drop the paddle. The game ends. You stop the transmission of evil. You become a legacy changer for your family. Your children will not inherit your bitterness; they will inherit your peace. This is the greatest inheritance you can leave them.

## Conclusion

We have journeyed deep today. We have looked at the deadly root of bitterness and the three keys to unlocking the prison door. We have seen that forgiveness is a decision (Judicial), a process (Emotional), and a transformation (Redemptive). It is the path to freedom. It is the path to the very heart of God.

Maybe you are sitting there realizing, "I have stuck at Level 1." Or maybe, "I never even started." That is okay. Today is a new day. The Holy Spirit is right there with you, ready to help you. You don't have to do this alone. In fact, you can't. You need the supernatural power of Christ to forgive the unforgivable. Ask Him. Say, "Lord, help me to forgive. I want to be free."

Remember, forgiveness is not minimizing what happened to you. It is maximizing what Jesus did for you. It is trusting that His cross is bigger than your crisis. It is believing that your future is brighter than your past. Don't let the person who hurt you in the past control your future for one more day. Cut the chain. Walk out of the cell. The door is open.

Before you go, make sure to subscribe, like this video, and share it with someone who needs encouragement today. And join us next time as we uncover another powerful truth from God's Word.