



How to
Forgive
when life hurts



ChristyJohnson.org



How to Forgive When Life Hurts

Relationships are supposed to be our source of comfort. Instead they are often our greatest conflict or source of pain. How do we heal our hurts? How do we get away from the revolving door of disappointment and develop fulfilling, lasting relationships? I believe there is hope beyond the misery, but we can't walk in freedom until we uncover the lies that so many of us have believed about relationships.

Here's my story....



In my own life, it wasn't until I got to the end of myself that I could see the truth. Some of us get to the end of ourselves through the conviction of the Holy Spirit or by our own conscience. I didn't give up easily. I got caught.

I was a gluttonous obsessed love junkie, using men like a drug, I had never known anything else. I thought that was the way all women were.

My addiction to relationships started long before I got married. In high school, I spent every Friday night glued to the television. Truly, everything I learned about romance I learned from *The Love Boat*. By the time I figured out that real devotion comes from a friendship, not a cruise ship, it was too late—I was already hooked. Turns out I got old too soon and smart too late.

By the time my first husband and I were engaged, I had made him responsible for my emotional welfare. Bob's actions dictated whether or not I was happy, sad, depressed or angry. His behavior monitored my peace. I gave him my heart and threw away the key. At the time, this twisted dependency seemed romantic.

Then we got married.

It didn't take long for the new to wear off. His broken promises, deceit and manipulation had me in a constant state of confusion. We argued non-stop and then he returned to some of his addictions—drugs and pornography. That's when the real insanity began. Eventually Bob and I both went to marriage counseling together, but I was only there for one reason: To change him. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't the one with the issues. I was the good one. I was oblivious, however, to my own invisible prison of bitterness. Under constant stress, I suffered from frequent migraine headaches and irritable bowel syndrome. I thought my happiness was tied to my husband—if only he would change, I could be happy.

Without an outlet for my resentment, bitterness finally got the best of me. Some women turn to food or alcohol, but I had a different addiction—relationships. Just like food and water, we all need relationships, but some of us take good things to an extreme. One doughnut isn't enough. We have to have the entire dozen. I was like that with romance. I used the intoxication of a new relationship to occupy the vacancy in my heart. I was a gluttonous obsessed love junkie, using men like a drug. I had never known anything else. I thought that was the way all women were.

Relationships are a socially acceptable addiction. If you aren't married, it's easy to conceal the fact that you have to have a relationship to

be content. When you are married, however, what once concealed your pain is no longer acceptable. Even though I knew adultery was wrong, once I made my first slip, I was hooked. I had no idea the romantic intoxication would be so temporary, but nothing else took away the pain, disappointment and bitterness I felt. I had to have another fix. After years of futile attempts to change my husband, I officially gave up. Instead of the happily-ever-after I'd dreamed of, I settled for pain relief in the arms of another man. At first, the guilt was enormous, but a little justification worked wonders. He deserved it. If he had treated me better, none of this would have happened.

I never thought I'd be caught. Apparently God was more interested in my character than my contentment. The day my husband discovered my affairs was one of the worst days of my life, but at least my secret was out. Even though I had nowhere else to run, I didn't have to hide behind my lies anymore.

When you hit bottom, the only way out is up

I loved Tyler Perry's movie, *The Diary of a Man Black Woman*, but I could have written my own movie entitled, *The Diary of a Mad White Chick*. Little did I know that God was using the adversity in my marriage—the broken promises, the drug addiction and the manipulation, to teach

me how to forgive. I had never really learned how to forgive. Instead, I bottled my hurt inside my soul. When I could no longer contain the pain, I exploded. That wasn't forgiveness. That was poisonous.

Sometimes it takes getting to the end of our rope before we accept the truth. That was how it was for me. Through a lot of tears, prayer and surrender, I finally resolved to let go of the bitterness that poisoned my soul and allowed God to help me learn a different way to deal with my pain. I'd like to say that my recovery was instant, but that wasn't the case. The only way to learn forgiveness is to overlook an offense. Apparently, I needed a lot of training.

I'd also like to say that my marriage was instantly restored, but that wasn't the case either. What I can say is I got better gradually. Little by little, step by step, issue by issue. Throughout the next several months, I learned many life changing truths, but most importantly, I finally accepted responsibility to change myself. I had tried for years to change my husband, thinking that he was the problem. All the while, I ignored the fact that if I wanted to be happy, *I* had to determine to be happy. I spent the next several years of my marriage hoping and praying that my husband would experience recovery as well. God had done so much to restore my life, so I prayed that my husband would surrender his life to God too. I wanted our marriage to be restored. Instead, Bob spiraled

further into his drug addiction. Twice we were separated for over a year, but God was teaching me the fruit of longsuffering. Some versions of the Bible call longsuffering patience. Patience sounds a lot prettier than longsuffering. Honestly, I've never heard anyone pray for longsuffering, because the only way to get long suffering is to suffer long.

My husband promised changes that only seemed to be temporary manipulation tactics to get what he wanted. But despite his manipulation and verbal abuse, I was healing. God showed me how to walk in joy despite the conflict around me. Insults didn't pierce me the way they used to. Threats no longer threatened me. My confidence had shifted. My self esteem no longer depended on the approval of others because I finally believed Christ loved me just the way I was. I no longer needed a man to provide my identity or a new romance to escape the pain. Like the apostle Paul, God was teaching me a secret—the secret of being content.

By the time Bob and I divorced eight years later, I was not the same person. A surrendered life and years of adversity had transformed me into a new creation. I liked the new me. Although there were several invitations to go back, I didn't want to return to my prison of bitterness. Misery loves company, and bitterness was still familiar. The pull back to the wilderness where I spent so much of my life was like a magnetic field. That's why so many people go back to addictions after a measure

of recovery. It's work to stay free. We have to change bad habits, make wise choices, and hang around wisdom. Recovery is not always easy, but it's always worth it.

Two years after our divorce, Bob had our two boys, Garrett and Jake, for his weekend visitation. By this time, he had a decent job and I thought he was rebuilding his life. I had no idea he had returned to his addiction again. On Saturday morning, June 13, 1998, he made plans to go to his brother's house to take the boys fishing with his brother and nephew Cody. It was Cody's thirteenth birthday, but Bob never made it to their house. Driving under the influence of Methadone, Demerol, Xanax, Valium, and Benadryl, Bob hit another car head on at 10:00 in the morning. Our youngest son Jake died at the scene. Garrett spent five days in Children's Hospital with a fractured jaw.

There are no words to describe the agony of losing a child. I had every right to be angry. I had every right to fall back into despair.

I once heard someone say that when we don't want to forgive, we can pray for willingness. Sometimes, even asking for willingness can be difficult, but God will deliver it. Once we are willing and choose to forgive, an amazing thing happens. The grace to walk in forgiveness comes. It did for me. There is no way I was strong enough to forgive on my own, but I didn't want to go back to my former life. If I learned one thing from my years of taming my sin of bitterness, I knew unforgiveness

was a deadly disease that would take me straight back to bondage. If I allowed bitterness to contaminate my soul once again, I knew I would die in my misery. Oh, it wouldn't have been an immediate death. The leprosy of bitterness is more deceptive than that. At first, I may have not even noticed it because it was so familiar. Mine would have been a slow death with the grasp of bitterness growing tighter with each passing day.

For years, I had clung to Isaiah 43:18-19. *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.*

These scriptures again became my lifeline. I couldn't afford to look back. I had walked daily trusting God with hurts, insults, false accusations and disappointments. And now, my only hope was to trust Him again. Nothing was going to bring Jake back. Resentment would only bury me in anger again. I had no choice but to forgive my ex-husband.

As I chose to forgive, an incredible thing happened. God began to fill me with joy in the midst of my pain. I had never felt such a powerful force of joy in my life, and it made no sense that I could experience joy in the midst of such tragedy. Yet somehow, I was keenly aware that the joy was more than I was capable of containing. The joy was to be shared; the only way I could keep it was to give it away. My destiny changed the day Jake died. The purpose for his life was transfused into mine.

In the movie, *The Guardian*, Randall, the only survivor of a deadly mission, was advised of an opening for an instructor. The last thing that he wanted to do was teach. But his superior sternly advised him, “I need you to train the next generation.” Struggling with the loss of his crewmembers, he threw himself into his newest assignment. The birth of Randall’s purpose originated out of a great tragedy. His motto ultimately became, “So Others May Live.” The byline of the movie asserts that “your darkest hour can be your finest moment.”

Along similar lines, my hope is sustained by memorializing Jake’s life. For me, it’s not optional. It’s necessary to maintain my joy. Proverbs 10:7 says, “The memory of the righteous shall be a blessing.” Since the accident, I determined to carry the celebration of his life beyond the funeral. I may have buried my son, but I did not bury his future or his purpose. His future and purpose did not die with his physical death because the kingdom of God does not operate with the same principles as the world.

Death does not equate to finality. Eternity embraces our past, present, and future. Jake left a legacy of hope and joy in the midst of the storm. It is now my purpose to train other women to acquire the vision to see beyond life’s difficulties. That is my mandate from heaven. Whether I initially wanted that assignment or not, my “Superior” advised me that he needed me to train the next generation. That is the purpose I was

created for, the mission that keeps me awake at night, and the calling I was born to complete.

He Will Complete the Work He Began in You

When circumstances and issues continue to rob our joy, often the very reason they don't subside is because God is trying to do a work in us. Our first clue that God is more concerned about our soul is when our issues are stuck on repeat. We pray and pray for the circumstance or the person to be removed and it keeps coming back like a boomerang.

It took me awhile, but I finally figured out that when this happens to me, it's time to wave the white flag and surrender and tell God, "Okay, I give. If the other issue or person won't change, please change me!" And he does. The heat increases for a while and it hurts when the useless waste is sifted off, but in the end, I become a little purer. More of him and less of me. Lee Ezell says it best: "When you don't forgive you permit your enemies to live rent free in your head."

God's is more interested in our purpose than our pain and before we can accomplish the purpose he's created us for, he has to remove the excess flesh. Does it hurt? Undeniably! Do we let go easily? No way, but when we allow him to perform a little heart surgery, the results are worth it.

We don't have to forgive if nothing offends us. In a perfect world, we wouldn't need forgiveness, but we don't live in a perfect world.

Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean forgiveness is easy. It always takes the grace of God to forgive. Jonah was a prophet, but he was angry. In fact, he ran away from God because he didn't think the people of Nineveh deserved God's forgiveness. When it came to forgiveness, he was a big fat chicken. If Jonah had surrendered his will and let go of his bitterness the first time God tried to get his attention, however, there would have been no need for his chicken-of-the-sea ordeal. But to Jonah, Tarshish sounded like a good place to escape. Instead he got a three day trip in a whale's belly.

Despite his near death experience, God was up to something. Kingdom principles are different than the world's ways. Suffering always precedes glory. Once you endure the pain you get to go to the other side of what God is trying to accomplish in your life, so don't give up! Your pain is not in vain. There is hope and purpose on the other side of your hurt.

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Your burdens will either defeat you or develop you. There is rarely any middle ground. Your burdens come to make you stronger and develop qualities in you that will prepare you for your future, but you can't achieve victory without a battle, so don't give up when life gets hard. Thomas Carlyle, Scottish historian and teacher during the Victorian era once said, "The tragedy of life is not so much what men suffer, but rather what they miss." Without pain, many of us get stuck in our old demanding habits of trying to resolve conflict on our own terms. When we choose to embrace the hidden opportunities conflict brings, we can enjoy the peace that comes from trusting God to work things out and give us wisdom.

Pain has a Season

It's a well-known fact that pain accompanies pregnancy and childbirth. Although the pain can be severe, knowing ahead of time that the pain has a season gives us comfort. The other encouragement to endure is we know there is a reward for the suffering—a beautiful bundle of joy. After we've suffered for a little while, we see the glory. There is an end to the pain and a reward for enduring.

There are countless women who have endured the same kind of pain who tell us with a great amount of assurance exactly what we can

expect. We may live near a toilet for the first several months, consume large quantities of crazy cuisine, waddle like a duck and have more mood swings than a schizophrenic kangaroo, but we will make it. It may seem like an eternity, but it will be over in nine months. We even know going into this gig the maximum amount of time. There is a limitation of the season of gestation. If we have morning sickness, tender breasts, food cravings, swollen feet, frequent urges for the nearest bathroom, at least we have comfort knowing, that in nine months, we will be done.

A mother endures the pain because of the joy set before her. She knows that although she may suffer, at the end of her travail, she will receive a beautiful treasure. In the same way, Christ endured his suffering. He also had a vision for the prize on the other side of his pain. After tremendous agony comes beauty. It's a kingdom principle because God gives beauty for ashes.

So what is on the other side of your pain? Just like women in labor use a focal point to help them get past the pain of contractions, ask God for a focal point to press past your own pain. He wants to give you a glimpse of His glory on the other side of your situation. He wants you to overcome and walk in joy, so do it now. Make the ask. I believe he wants to birth something beautiful in your life.



4 Secret Weapons to Prevent Bitterness

Did you know bitterness is a poison? Bitterness not only affects our emotions, but left untreated, the toxins produced by bitterness eventually seep into our body as well. Resentment can cause all kinds of physical ailments.

In her book, *Who Switched Off My Brain? Controlling Toxic Thoughts and Emotions*, Dr. Carolyn Leaf reports, “A massive body of research shows that up to eighty of physical, emotional, and mental health issues today could be a direct result of our thought lives. Resentment, bitterness, lack of forgiveness and self-hatred are just a few of the toxic thoughts and emotions that can also trigger immune system disorders.”

The grasp of bitterness is deceptive. Have you ever hung onto a grudge because you wanted to punish the other person only to notice that you were the only one who suffered? No matter how much we want vengeance, Deuteronomy 29:18 warns us: Make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.

Just like the habit of hanging onto resentment, releasing forgiveness is a decision and reaction. It's a choice. The more we practice forgiveness, the easier it gets to tear down the walls of bitterness. Here are my four secret weapons I use to prevent bitterness.

1. Trust God

Before forgiveness can come out of us, it has to be birthed inside of us through a relationship of trust. Forgiveness is a quality we develop before an offense arises. Forgiveness is actually more proactive than reactive. Let me explain it by using electricity as an example.

If I install electrical wiring in my house and wire a lamp to the ceiling, when I need light, all I do is flip the light switch and suddenly, there is light. But if I never took the time to install electrical wiring and a fixture, nothing would happen when I flip the switch. I could flip the switch all day long and remain in the dark. In order for forgiveness to be a reactive habit or reflex, just like electrical wiring, wiring and fixtures need to be installed. I needed to have a relationship of trust installed into my soul before I can forgive.

So how do we get this kind of "forgiveness wiring"? A person with a willingness to forgive releases control of the situation and surrenders the situation to God by saying, God I trust that you will work this situation

out. I trust that you can handle the outcome. A person who is unwilling to forgive thinks thoughts like, I want to handle the punishment. I want to control the outcome. I think my wrath is necessary.

2. Eliminate Expectations

Four words sums up this principle: Get rid of them! Expectations are a set up for bitterness. Each time our expectations are not met, disappointment sets in, and when disappointment gets rooted in our soul, the climate for bitterness is ripe.

Ultimately, the only person we can change is ourselves. Expecting others to perform according to our standards not only puts us in the judgment seat, it also makes us vulnerable to bitterness. We can spend our lives trying to change others, but the only person we can change is ourselves.

3. Guard your Heart

I have a scripture that is my secret weapon to walking in peace and staying free of bitterness. If you implement this one scripture I can almost guarantee that you will eliminate at least half of the issues you ever deal with.

Proverbs 4:23 says, “Guard your heart for out of it flow the issues of life.” The Bible refers to the process of setting boundaries as putting a guard on our heart. This is one of the best boundaries verse in the Bible

and I hope that you noticed who is responsible for putting the guard in place—we are!

Guarding our heart is like buying an insurance policy against bitterness because when we guard our heart, we help protect ourselves against toxic emotions. Guarding our heart and learning how to set boundaries can help us avoid the trap of bitterness more than any other anger management technique.

Identify areas in your life that trigger your anger and then put guards in place to protect those areas. Be cautious around people who trigger your anger. Avoid them if possible. Anger in itself is not a sin, but unresolved anger that turns into bitterness is a sin.

Guarding my heart put me in a position where I could trust God because I wasn't constantly bombarded with bitterness. Before I understood this scripture, I was a "yes" woman. I thought saying "yes" to everything was the spiritual thing to do, so I did everything everyone wanted me to do, even when it made me angry. It took a long time before I figured out that if something makes me angry, I had no business doing it if it caused me to end up dealing with the resulting sin of bitterness. I had to learn to say "no" to guard my heart.

4. Take the Grace

2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "My grace is sufficient for you." But here's the catch: He gives us the grace to endure and the strength to overcome when we need it, not before. I can't tell you how many people have told

me, “I don’t think I could ever forgive someone for being responsible for the death of one of my children. Well, here’s the deal. Unless, it happens to you—you’re right. You can’t. God doesn’t distribute his grace until the moment of need. He doesn’t give it out early. He gives it out when we need it. The grace for your situation will be different that the grace I need for my situation.

Grace is like anesthesia. How many of you would ever get anesthesia if you were not having surgery? None of you! Only those scheduled for surgery get anesthesia. Anesthesia gives us the natural tolerance to endure physical pain. Grace gives us the supernatural tolerance to endure soul pain.

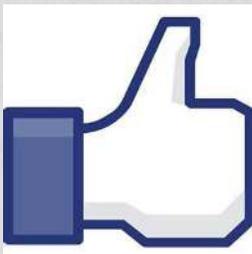
An anesthesiologist stays by you during the entire operation and watches over you to modify the anesthesia if your tolerance to pain diminishes. In the same way, God watches over you to make sure the pain is not more than what you can bear (1 Cor 10:13).

Still, many people want to be strong by themselves and think they can make it without God’s grace. But if our strength doesn’t come from the Lord, it will not sustain us through our pain. So don’t forsake His strength. Take the grace!



Can I
pray
for you?

Lord, I pray for my new sister and the new work you are continuing in her. Please heal and restore the hurts she's experienced from her own relationship issues. I thank you that you will cause all things to work together for her good and that she will not grow weary in doing well. I pray she would witness your hand on her life, that no matter what she has endured she will see Your faithfulness. Surround her with Godly women to help her press past any remnants of pain and finish her course. I am so thankful that no matter what she has endured, You are the Restorer of her soul. In Christ's name I pray. Amen!



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