

*Forgiving Our*  
FATHERS  
AND  
MOTHERS

*Finding Freedom from Hurt and Hate*

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## BECOMING JONAH: RUNNING FROM OUR STORIES

*Oh yes, the past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or learn from it.*

—RAFIKI, FROM *THE LION KING*

### *Study Questions*

1. Do you ever feel like Jonah, as though you're running away from something you're supposed to do? Have you experienced this in relation to anyone in your family?
2. Are you aware of the ways in which your running plays out (avoidance, busyness, alcohol, overeating, etc.), especially when the situation involves certain family members? And like Jonah, are you consumed by feelings (anger, anxiety, fear, depression) that you can't run far enough from?
3. How well are your forms of running working for you? What would happen if you didn't run? Give an example of how running away

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from the pain of your past may be keeping you from fulfilling your calling or purpose in life.

4. What does your “belly of a whale” look like? What excuses or beliefs swallow you up and keep you from facing your truth and pain?
5. As you read this chapter, what specific situations in your life came to mind?
6. Read John 4:1–30, about the woman at the well. Is there anyone in your life who knows your whole story? Or a part of it? If so, who? Is that person still in your life? If not, why not?
7. What were the circumstances in which you told this person your story?
8. What factors help you in determining your ability and willingness to be vulnerable with another person?
9. Did those with whom you shared your story respond in a similar way or differently than those who hurt you? Was this experience affirming or another reoccurring event?
10. What feelings and thoughts were you left with after you shared your story? Were you able to completely disclose it? Why or why not?

## DARING TO CONFESS: THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

*Why must holy places be dark places?*

—C. S. LEWIS'

*Forgive me, Father, for my father has sinned.*

—LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS

### *Study Questions*

1. What are the predominant feelings you had growing up with your father or mother, or both?
2. Describe a childhood memory with your father or mother where you had these feelings.
3. What are the predominant feelings you have with your father or mother today?
4. If you could share freely with your father or mother, without fear of retribution, what would you want your parent to know about you?
5. What new awareness could you add to your childhood story, as an adult, that you didn't know or couldn't have known growing up?

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6. Were there any other significant adults during your childhood who offered comfort, refuge, or help in bearing your childhood burdens?
7. Read John 9:35–41. What does it mean to be spiritually blind? Especially considering verse 39, what impact does Jesus' statement have on you?
8. Are there additional issues from the ways you have coped that also need to be confessed?
9. If you are a parent, do you see repetitions of some of the ways you were parented reflected in the parenting of your own kids?
10. In what ways have you made different choices with your children from how your father or mother parented you?

## THREE

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# BECOMING HUMAN: THE DEBT WE SHARE

*How did I get so lucky to have my heart awakened to others and their sufferings?*

—PEMA CHODRON<sup>1</sup>

*The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.*

—ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN<sup>2</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. Who are your parents? Describe your father or mother as if speaking to someone who doesn't know that person.
2. What do others say about your father or mother? Have you discovered ways in which your parents' peers might see them? In what ways do others' perspectives of your father or mother differ or echo your own experience?
3. If you were to observe your parents objectively, as individuals outside the role of parent, what strengths might you see in them? What are their limitations as people?
4. Who are you more like, your father or your mother? In what ways are you similar to or different from either parent?
5. What are one negative way and one positive way your father or mother made you feel about yourself? What are one negative

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behavior and one positive behavior you adopted from your father or mother?

6. Have your parents ever let you know any of their hopes and dreams for life? Do you believe they've lived out any of those dreams? If yes, what? If not, what, as best as you can ascertain, got in the way of their hopes for life?
7. Who did your parents have to lean on, guide them, and care for them during their growing-up years?
8. Think about your parents' childhood experiences. Is there any part of their story you feel compassion for?
9. Do you think there is any connection between the ways in which your parents were wounded and what may have spilled over into the way you were raised?
10. Because we have a limited perspective on our parents' lives, it's often difficult for us to see them clearly. We need others to be our witnesses, to bear with us and reveal to us what they see from the outside looking in. Whom would you be willing to talk to in order to gain deeper understanding of your parent?

## FOUR

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# THE UNFORGIVEN AND THE UNFORGIVING

*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*

—MAHATMA GANDHI<sup>1</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. Who are the Ninevites in your world, the worst of the worst in your life—the “wicked” people who have hurt you and those you love, the ones you see prospering while your life suffers from their destruction?



*The Unforgiven and the Unforgiving*

2. What does Jonah's "shade-giving plant" represent in your life?
3. Who or what is the "worm" that deprives you of what little good you may feel you have and deserve? How are you continuing to victimize yourself rather than claim your power back?
4. How do you express your justifiable feelings? Would those closest to you in your life now consider you an angry, resentful, or unforgiving person? If yes, why? If no, how would they describe your expression of anger, resentment, or bitterness, even if it is rarely seen?
5. Pray about your attitudes as you overlay Jonah's life picture and worldview onto your own picture. Do you see any of Jonah's attitudes in yourself? If so, how? Take a moment to put it into words.
6. What do you gain by holding on to your unforgiveness?
7. What do you lose by holding on to your anger, bitterness, or resentment? Can you identify any benefits to releasing your unforgiveness?
8. Read Psalm 139:19–24 and reread Matthew 5:43–48. How do these verses validate your emotions toward hurtful people? What do these passages say about what to do with the strong feelings toward those who have done you wrong?
9. Have you been able to release any anger, bitterness, and resentment from someone who has harmed you? If so, how? What ideas do you have about some healthier ways to work through your strong feelings?
10. What role does pride play in relation to your hurt? Is there any part of you that desires to continue in relationship with the person you are not forgiving?

## FIVE

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# THE HEART OF FORGIVENESS

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

—C. S. LEWIS<sup>1</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. At this point in your forgiveness journey, how is your heart feeling? Is it heavy or hopeful? Still reluctant? Take a moment to pray about any resistance or closed heartedness to forgiveness you are feeling.
2. We are called to love because Christ first loved us. Does it not follow that we ought also forgive to the depth we have been forgiven? Have you connected with your own vulnerable need for forgiveness?

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3. What specifically have you gone to the Lord with in order to receive forgiveness? Are there personal transgressions for which you still need to seek His forgiveness?
4. What repetitions do you see from one generation to the next (generational strongholds) that you need to name and confess, claiming authority in the name of Jesus Christ?
5. Christ's forgiveness is a gift to us. How is His command to us to forgive also a tremendous gift to you personally?
6. You know how difficult forgiveness can be with a chronically hurtful parent. The forgiveness journey most often involves repeated processing as hurt is compounded. Christ tells us to forgive those who sin against us seventy times seven (Matt. 18:21–22). Who benefits from this supernatural kind of forgiveness?
7. What if your parent does not acknowledge his or her wrongs? The world tells us to forgive only those who express genuine sorrow for their wrongs against us. What's the downside to this condition of forgiveness? What does the Bible tell us about this?
8. What are some ways to forgive if your father or mother does not seek your forgiveness? How do you humble yourself, give up your pride, and still forgive? What role do boundaries play?
9. Anger is a true emotion, but how it is expressed can be productive or harmful to both people. Can you make a decision not to act on your bitterness or resentment as you work through it? How does the idea of mercy and the element of choice factor in to help your heart to shift? Are you willing to take ownership of your feelings and be responsible for them?
10. Have you seen forgiveness walked out in someone else's life? Have you ever experienced the blessing of a repaired

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relationship by offering undeserved forgiveness with no expectations? Or have you offered forgiveness and the relationship did not repair?

## THE PRODIGAL FATHER AND MOTHER: HONORING THE DISHONORABLE

*For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.  
Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

—JAMES 2:13 ESV

### *Study Questions*

1. What does honor mean to you? First, just allow yourself to think, without any person in mind, of the idea, concept, and action of *honor*.
2. Reread Romans 12:18. Let's break it down into three parts for examination. If we were to turn each phrase into a question, how would you respond? First, circle or highlight the word(s) that is the emphasis of each phrase below. Now try responding to these phrases as if they were questions.
  - *If it is possible?* \_\_\_\_\_
  - *As far as it depends on you?* \_\_\_\_\_
  - *Live at peace with everyone?* \_\_\_\_\_
3. Now consider the above passage with your personal situation.
  - *Is it possible in my situation to be at peace with my parent(s)?*
  - *What or how much depends on me?*
  - *Who is "everyone"? How is "live at peace" qualified by the two preceding phrases?*
4. Name some examples of honorable behavior that you try to live

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out in your own life. In what ways have you felt treated honorably by others?

5. List some characteristics from the honorable examples you named above. Where did your honorable values come from?
6. How do honor and boundaries go together? Are honor and respect the same thing? If I honor a person, do I also respect his or her rights to personal boundaries?
7. Are there some boundaries that need to be set in order for you to have an honorable adult relationship with your parent(s)? What ideas come to mind?
8. Practice writing how you might verbally express your boundary with your father or mother. (For example, “Thanks, Mom, but \_\_\_\_\_ is not going to work for me.”) The directness and severity of your boundary will depend on your specific situation and the degree of communication you have with your parent(s).
9. Pray about your willingness to be an honorable person for your heavenly Father. Tell God all the dishonorable things your earthly parents have done. It’s okay—He’s heard and seen it all, but for you it may do you good to cry on His massive shoulders. Then ask Him to show you how to be honorable in the face of dishonor. If you are willing, write a prayer to God offering your will to be honoring in His eyes.
10. You have told God and others the ways in which your parents have acted dishonorably. But can you name one way they were kind to you? What if you start there and begin shifting from praying about their hurtful ways toward you to incorporating praying for your parents and their healing?

## LORD, HAVE MERCY: IN THE LAST HOURS

*And why all this ardor if death is close? . . .*

*What continents, what oceans, what a show it is!*

*In the hall of pain, what abundance on the table.*

—CZESLAW MILOSZ<sup>1</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. Who have you lost in your life, through death or long-term estrangement, whom you were close to? List all significant people, whether a parent or not.
2. Consider how the endings or last words with people you've lost affected you long after their departure.
3. Take a moment to recall your last exchange or experience with your departing parent. Do you remember—can you picture it? Do you remember what you told yourself about that exchange?
4. If you could have a *redo*, one more day or even hour with that parent, what would you do, not do, or say differently? What do you imagine that opportunity might bring you?
5. Even if, and especially if, your parent is gone, forgiveness is important for you to move beyond the grave. What steps or actions can you take to release the bondage your deceased

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or absent parent has on you and thus allow yourself to rest in peace long after your parent is gone?

6. What was the one thing you felt like you never got from your parent? Did you grieve the loss of that experience? How are you going to own it now? What ways are you able to find this loss fulfilled in the present parts of your life?
7. What was your favorite memory of your parent? Was there a moment in time when you connected? (It is possible for some that this question will have no answer.)
8. When a parent dies, the hope of reconciliation with that parent dies too. Have you grieved your lost hopes and expectations? After death, hope can properly transfer to an eternal reconciliation where God heals all brokenness and deals lovingly and justly with each of us. Are you able to see your parent's humanness and brokenness?
9. What were your expectations of your parent while he or she was still here? Were they reasonable given what you know of your parent now? Do you have those same expectations in your own parenting? Do you meet them?
10. What is it that your deceased parent has finally found peace from? What was the darkness in his or her life that stood in the way of the joy of having a good relationship with you? How do you reconcile what you thought to be true and what you know is real now?



## AFTER LAMENT: RECLAIMING THE PAST

*It's never too late to have a happy childhood.*

—TOM ROBBINS<sup>1</sup>

*Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. . . . Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.*

—LEWIS B. SMEDES<sup>2</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. When you hear Joel 2:25—"I will *restore* [repay, make up for, give back to you] the years the locusts have eaten . . ."—does

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redemption for what has passed seem possible for you? If yes, then there is hope! If no, then more time is needed in reclaiming yourself from what was lost.

2. You are not your lost past; you are part of the present and can seek God to intervene for your future. Can you make a distinction between what happened to you because of your parents' sin and mistakes and who you are, in spite of them, because of Christ?
3. Forgiveness is an active process. It takes time but doesn't happen with time alone; you must intentionally pursue it. Name some ways you have chosen to pursue forgiveness of your father or mother.
4. Ever feel like complaining to God about all the wrong and hurt you've experienced? Isn't rattling off lists of woes to close friends *for a time* part of processing? Once heard, emotional healing can take place. Does your view of God include this?
5. David knew God could handle his pain as he cried out in anguish in many of the psalms: "I cry out to the LORD; I plead for the LORD's mercy. I pour out my *complaints* before him and *tell him all my troubles*. . . . I am overwhelmed . . . Hear my cry, for I am very low" (Ps. 142:1–3, 6 NLT, emphasis added). Have you allowed yourself a time of telling God all that's not right as part of your grieving?
6. When you look back and think about all the ways you have tried to cope with your hurt, how does embracing truth and new awareness of your parents and your past affect you moving forward?
7. In your journey of forgiving your parents, is there anything you are excusing in them or blaming in yourself that is still holding you back? Are there areas in which you still need to forgive in yourself?

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8. Do you ever wonder if God has the same value and belief in you as your wayward parent? If so, what steps can you take to reclaim the truth of God's love for you and His hurting for what happened in your life?
9. Can you write three ways God redeems you? Why?
10. Read Jeremiah 29:11. What is your present understanding of the purpose and plan God has created for your life? What are you doing now, along with God, to self-parent your strengths and purpose?

## BECOMING JOSEPH: INTO THE LAND OF FREEDOM

*As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.*

—NELSON MANDELA<sup>1</sup>

### *Study Questions*

1. Do you ever feel like Joseph? His experience and story teach us a lot about life after heartache and tragedy and about the power of forgiveness. What parts of Joseph's life journey do you identify with?
2. Reconsider Genesis 50:20 in light of your family circumstances. Are you able to gain some perspective on how God's greater good trumps man's evil intents in your life?
3. Compare Jonah's versus Joseph's attitudes and reactions. What are the differences you note between them? When and in what ways have you been like Jonah or like Joseph in your attitudes and reactions?
4. What qualities of character were cultivated in Joseph through his difficulties, during his years of separation and estrangement

*Becoming Joseph: Into the Land of Freedom*

from his family? How did God's timing serve him and prepare him to extend forgiveness to those who had done harm to him?

5. Do you ever imagine a healing reunion with your family members, as Joseph had with his? What if your family, especially your father or mother, do not see their part? Are you also able to consider extending forgiveness even if your outcome differs from Joseph's? What might that look like for you?
6. Describe the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. What would have to take place for you to have both in your specific situation? Which comes first?
7. While Joseph forgave his brothers, he did not trust them immediately. What can you learn from Joseph about re-establishing trust in ruptured relationships? What graduated risks are you willing to take in regaining your ability to trust others after what was broken with your parents?
8. Each narrative chapter of this book demonstrates aspects of the forgiveness process. Following each of the chapter summary phrases, try to express how you connect with each progressive phase and where you see yourself in the forgiveness process.
  - *Running, avoiding, or hiding from what's true. What's your story? What tugs on you that you need to do?*
  - *Confessing; naming hurtful truth and generational sin to another.*
  - *Humanizing your offender; seeing your shortcomings; developing a sense of compassion.*
  - *Allowing time to be in touch with your hurt, anger, protest of wrongs; assessing when bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness have taken root.*
  - *A matter of your heart. As God forgives you, can you also choose to forgive?*

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- *Honor people, not dishonorable acts; choosing to honor by being honorable.*
  - *Forgiving through loss and grief; developing mercy; being a part of God's legacy.*
  - *Remembering well to release your bondage and reclaim your past.*
  - *Extending forgiveness; being open to reconciliation; establishing healthy boundaries; learning to trust; because of Christ, choosing a higher calling for yourself, others, and the kingdom of God.*
9. Specifically name where you are making progress from your list above and where more work needs to take place. Share your success with a trusted friend and ask him or her to support you as you journey on.
10. What is a next right step for *you* in *your* forgiveness journey?