How to
FORGIVE...
When You Don’t
Feel Like It

JUNE HUNT
HOW TO FORGIVE...WHEN YOU DON’T FEEL LIKE IT
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This book is dedicated to my forever friend, Barbara…
to the first friend willing to extend full forgiveness to me…
to my “grace friend” who was willing to look beyond my fault
and see my need. Thank you for allowing God to use your
forgiving heart to be a part of my emotional and spiritual
healing. You consistently give me hope for my heart.
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Finally, I give highest praise to my Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, for not giving up on me. His forgiveness is why I have a story to tell about the lifechanging freedom of true forgiveness.

On a Personal Note

Throughout the writing of this book, I have repeatedly thought about those whom I have hurt in the past...and my heart has grieved. I am without excuse. I cannot help but ask forgiveness from the deepest part of my heart. Many times I have prayed, “Lord, may I see my sin as You see it—may I hate my sin as You hate it.” He has painfully answered my prayer. His cleansing love has enabled me to “walk in the light as He Himself is in the light” (1 John 1:7 NASB).
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Resentment...rage...retaliation. Ever struggled with forgiveness? Ever thought it was impossible? Ever knew you oughta but didn’t wanna? I believe the majority of the world’s population is struggling with forgiveness—right now! If you are human (which you are) and if you are reading this book (which you are), you have been hurt—deeply and profoundly—and have faced the formidable foe of unforgiveness.

Each weeknight, I host a two-hour call-in counseling program—Hope in the Night—during which people across America pour out their hearts on live radio. I’m constantly amazed at their candor and profoundly touched by their pain.

I’m also grieved over the steady stream of people personally wronged and mistreated by others—from their own family to their church family...from casual acquaintances to close neighbors...from complete strangers to “best friends.”

My heart goes out to the hurting—to those who just want their pain to stop and want to have hope again.

After more than a decade of hearing hundreds of heartrending stories, I come to the challenge of forgiveness with tremendous compassion. I don’t want those who are hurting to be further hurt by living with embedded bitterness—simply because they don’t grasp the true meaning of forgiveness...or they don’t know the “how to’s” of forgiveness.
And I come to this topic with more than compassion. I come with experience, having wrestled for years with unforgiveness. Indeed, I have felt its heavy weight. So for me, forgiveness is not merely a theoretical premise...or just a theological concept. Forgiveness is a real-world, nitty-gritty matter of the soul.

Forgiveness is a decision—an act of the will that, when done right, results in true freedom. It is a process—often misunderstood. It took me a long time to learn the why of forgiveness and even longer to live out the heart of forgiveness. The call of God in Colossians 3:13 has been the catalyst for my journey: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Through vivid illustrations and riveting real-life experiences, I want to connect you with others who have suffered greatly and forgiven much—some who thought they could never find peace because of the depth of their pain. And I want to point you to the One who has been offended the most and has forgiven the most...Jesus. He knows your pain, He knows your need, and He knows how to empower you to forgive—even when you feel it’s impossible.

Through these pages, my prayer is twofold: (1) that you will learn how to get rid of the boulders of bitterness holding you back—those heavy rocks of resentment—and (2) that you will experience the freedom of forgiveness—a freedom only possible when you learn how to forgive...even when you don’t feel like it.
In my growing-up years, I remember hearing many catchy sayings that made a lot of sense, such as, “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” and “A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

Another popular adage is “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” What I say in response is, “Wrong, wrong, wrong!” We all know that words can break our hearts. The Bible puts it this way: “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

Words can kill a relationship. Words can murder our motivation and inspiration. This truth was recently driven home to me when I was leading a conference in Indiana.

“How many of you have really struggled with forgiveness? You’ve had a huge struggle forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply?”

Immediately hands go up…about one-fourth of the audience. Quickly I scan those with raised hands, looking for someone physically fit.

My question comes at the beginning of my talk on forgiveness,
but it isn’t until the final 15 minutes that I point to the thirtyish-year-old man.

“Sir, I need some help. Would you be willing to join me on the platform?” Surprised, he nods with a smile and saunters up to the stage. Now we both stand next to a table that has a mound of rocks. “Would you share your name and something about yourself?”

“My name is Rick. I’m an accountant, and my hobby is running. When I’m not at work, I’m usually running because I plan to enter a marathon this year.”

“That’s great, Rick! And thanks for being willing to help.”

Reaching over to a small table, I pick up a large gray meat hook, more than two feet long, and a burlap bag. The top of the hook is able to fit around a person’s neck like a horseshoe. A straight shaft extends down a couple feet then arches back up, like a very large fishhook with a sharp point.

“Here you go, Rick. Slip this meat hook carefully around your neck.” His eyes open wide—the hook looks ominous. He gives me a wary glance. Some people in the audience groan (probably just glad they weren’t picked!). Slowly, cautiously, Rick slides the top of the hook around his neck. The shaft of the hook reached down his chest to waist level, and the pointed tip was in front of him. I push the top of the burlap bag over the tip of the hook.

“Rick, at the beginning, when I asked if anyone had struggled with forgiveness, I noticed you raised your hand.”

“That’s right.”

“What has been so hard to forgive? Would you tell me what happened?”

At this point I reach over to the mound of rocks, knowing that every time Rick mentions an offense, I will drop a rock or a small boulder into the burlap bag. Each rock represents a wrong someone has committed against him—a wound he is carrying.

Rick begins by going back to his childhood. It doesn’t take long for us to learn that all his “rocks” come from the same source—growing up with a harsh, sometimes tyrannical father who was
unaffectionate and inflexible. As Rick focuses on his father and the wrongs suffered, he speaks softly:

“Never accepting me for who I am….” His father’s critical, caustic words force the first rock to fall.

“Zero affection….” No hand on the shoulder, no hugs, no pats on the back earn a fist-sized rock flung into the bag.

“No play time….” No playful wrestling, no playing catch, no playing anything—they all warrant another weighty rock. The more Rick remembers, the more he elaborates on what he has missed.

“No father-and-son times….” No hanging out together, no talks about manhood, no career conversations. This drives another rock downward. Rick continues pushing the emotional “replay button” buried in his memory.

“Screaming….” A sudden, fearful flashback causes Rick to wince. All the yelling and verbal attacks generate a sizeable jagged rock.

“Hurting my mother….” His father’s grating emotional and verbal abuse sends a sizeable sandstone dropping into the bag.

“Get out of my sight!…” His devaluing, denigrating words propel a big hefty boulder.

“Rejection….” sums up the emotional impact of all his father’s wounding. Momentum drives a very large, hard rock into Rick’s bag. It crashes against the other rocks inside, leaving some small, sharp-edged fragments. Jagged pieces are painfully wedged in Rick’s memory. Ultimately, rejection says it all.

Expanding on the visual, I tell Rick he has a bag of rocks residing in his soul. For years he has been hauling rocks of resentment, stones of hostility, and boulders of bitterness. Then I point to the bag hanging from the hook around his neck—the burlap now straining from the weight of the rocks.

“What would happen if you were to keep walking around with that bag of rocks hanging onto your hook the rest of your life?”

He immediately responds, needing no time to think, “I wouldn’t be able to run anymore.” I am surprised and glad at his answer. Instead of saying, “I would become bent over,” or “It would be difficult
to walk,” Rick, the devoted athlete, expresses concern that he could no longer run.

His response articulates so well the cost of failing to get rid of cumbersome “rocks.” Think of all the scriptures that refer to running. The apostle Paul says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”² And he asked, “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”³

What Rick said from a physical standpoint—“I wouldn’t be able to run anymore”—is just as true emotionally and spiritually. Weighed down by too many rocks, the best we would be able to do is trudge our way through life. If more rocks are added to the pile, we’ll barely be able to move forward. And if even more rocks are thrown on the heap, we will completely collapse under the weight.

But when we learn to forgive—even when we don’t feel like it—we get rid of the rocks dragging us down and depleting our strength. As we work through the process of forgiveness, we are set free from the pressure of the strain…we feel unshackled…we feel released…we feel free!

The prophet Isaiah describes what this freedom is like: “They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.”⁴

Now back to Rick: The last thing I want to do is leave this wounded young man weighed down by emotional pain. I want to see him run!

“Rick, do you want to live the rest of your life carrying all this pain from your past?”
“No, I don’t.”
“Then are you willing to take all the past pain off of your hook and place it onto God’s hook?”
“Yes, I am.”
“Would you be willing to take your father off of your emotional hook and place him onto God’s hook?”

“Yes, I want to.”

In prayer, we both go before God’s throne of grace. “Lord Jesus,” I start.

“Lord Jesus,” he echoes, “thank You for caring about my heart… and how much I’ve been hurt…You know the pain I have felt… because of my father’s treatment…his anger…his lack of affection… his abuse…his rejection.”

All of a sudden, throughout the crowd, the unexpected occurs. As Rick repeats the prayer, making it his own, an undercurrent of prayers—barely above a whisper—waft across the room. Goose bumps rise on my arms. Feeling a holy sense of awe, I realize that on this day, more than one bag of rocks is soon to be empty.

“Lord, I release all this pain into Your hands….Thank You, Lord Jesus…for dying on the cross for me…and extending Your forgiveness to me…. As an act of my will…I choose to forgive my father.”

As Rick continues to pray, a remarkable change takes place. His voice, initially reserved, swells with determined strength.

“I choose to take my father…off of my emotional hook…and right now, I place him…onto Your hook…. I refuse all thoughts of revenge…. I trust that in Your time You will deal with my father… just as You see fit. And thank You, Lord, for giving me…Your power to forgive…so that I can be set free…. In Your holy name I pray. Amen.”

Rick’s tears of gratitude reveal he is now experiencing the freedom of forgiveness. And at this same time, through the power of forgiveness, many bags of bitterness throughout the auditorium have been emptied.

Personally, I know what it feels like to be weighed down with the rocks of resentment. If you, too, feel such a weight, I understand. Just know, the words within this book are written with one goal in mind—to leave you with an empty bag.
The decision to write about the pain of my childhood was not made quickly or easily. I have written on many other topics without divulging details about my growing-up years. However, as a matter of integrity, I cannot write a book on forgiveness without explaining this painful period—without sharing memories that for years stuck like shards in my soul, deadening my emotions.

The most overwhelming tests in my life have involved my relationship with my father, a man who was hard as flint and whose anger could spark at even the slightest annoyance. Without these tests, I would have no testimony—especially regarding forgiveness. And without a testimony, there would be no platform for the ministry God has given me. Mine is a story of learning to forgive...even when I didn’t feel like it.

I grew up in a family full of secrets—secrets we dared not discuss with one another, much less friends. Our family was dysfunctional, full of fear and facades, dissension and disruption. My father’s frequent and flagrant acts of immorality went totally unchecked. Throughout my tumultuous growing-up years, Mother held the most precious place in my heart. She was unfailingly kind, gracious, and loving. I adored her.

My father, on the other hand, was an enormous success in his professional life, but an enormous failure in his family life. He had
a looming, larger-than-life presence, always seen in his business “uniform”—navy blue suit, light blue shirt, blue bow tie—which he wore every day, seven days a week. He was recognized as a visionary leader who provided hundreds of jobs through his various business ventures.

While considered a great man by many outside our home, he was viewed as an oppressive man inside our home. So unpredictable was his temper that around him, we were all eggshell-walkers.

Rocks of resentment accumulated in my bag on a regular basis.

When my father became romantically involved with my mother, he was more than twice her age. Unbeknownst to her, he was a married man with six children, the second-born being her age. My mother’s father had died of tuberculosis when she was just three years old; therefore, I believe she lived with a father-void in her

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**Reshaping a Hardened Heart**

*Flint* is a hard, sedimentary form of quartz with a glassy appearance, and its color can vary—dark brown, gray, blue, or black. When struck against metal, its sparks ignite gunpowder. When hit with another hard object, its “splinters” or “blades” can be shaped into sharp arrowheads and knives. For centuries, flint has also been used to build stone walls.

Unforgiveness can make your heart hard and dark like flint, and over time, you can amass enough bitterness to build an impenetrable wall around your soul. But when you surrender your hardened heart to the Master Stonecutter, He reshapes your heart to look like His—sensitive to the needs of others.

Only by dislodging the flint from your fortified wall and giving it to the Lord will He refigure your heart to be like His. Realize that rather than condemnation, He offers compassion. Rather than judgment, He extends mercy. By releasing the flint into His hands—the flint of unforgiveness—He will reshape your hardened heart and make it like His.
heart. This void made her vulnerable to a persistent, persuasive father-figure—even after she became aware that the relationship was wrong.

We lived as his covert family on the side—Mother and we four children, me being the second-born. Over time, our secret became a big rock to bear, eroding my sense of security.

For the first 12 years of my life, I grew up with a different last name—I was June Wright. Dad said we were “the Wright family” because he and Mother were doing what was right. However, for years Mother lived with both unrelenting guilt and horrendous shame.

Every Sunday, she drove us to church, and although she deeply longed to go inside, she felt much too unworthy. She would walk us children to the door, but then she would stay outside. Shame poured from every pore of her being. Many times I saw agony on her face. Her tender heart was no match for my father’s power, abuse, and fear tactics. She felt trapped with no way out.

All during those early years, I ached for my mother—she had no friend, no confidant. Although I was not a Christian at the time, I remember praying, “God, please give my mother a friend.” She felt afraid to have friends because she was fearful of bringing shame upon them.

One December, a year after Dad’s first wife died, he brought us all to live in his house. The following November, Dad married Mother and soon afterward, I became known as June Hunt.

You would think this change in circumstance would have made things simpler, but it didn’t. Sometimes I got stuck not knowing how to answer sensitive family questions such as, “Is he your real father or not?” My “new name” was difficult to explain because my birth certificate already read Ruth June Hunt. No one coached me.

Subsequently, my bag of rocks only grew increasingly heavy.

Dad was excessively possessive of Mother. Beautiful, submissive, and charming, she was the classic “trophy wife.” He proudly showed her off to his frequent dinner guests. She shone like a jewel against the dark backdrop of my father’s granite disposition.
We four were forbidden to speak at mealtimes—“Children are to be seen, not heard”—unless there was a topic of conversation that would be of interest to everyone. Since nothing we said was ever of interest to Dad, we rarely spoke. Many stones of aggravation fell into my bag, especially during dinner. What’s more, Dad told me numerous times, “You are a bad influence on your mother.” Or sometimes he would say, “All of you children are a bad influence on your mother!” So immediately after dinner we had to go upstairs, stay in our rooms, and study. We were not allowed to see Mother.

This nightly restriction created sizeable stones to bear—especially for my younger sisters, Helen and Swanee.

Mother’s heart ached over Dad’s possessiveness and all his prohibitions. After dinner, she would use any excuse to run upstairs in order to make the rounds, room by room…checking on us, hugging us, encouraging us. Nurturing our tender hearts was her true priority—although Dad denied her that right.

In contrast, the compassion required to nurture a child was not found in Dad.

Our family had a little silver poodle named Bambi. I loved her dearly. She was my best friend—the only one with whom I had ever shared my heart. As a freshman in high school, I needed to write an English paper. For the first time ever, I decided to get inspiration at a nearby lake.

Paper finished and walking back, I saw something unidentifiable in the road. As I got closer, all I could exclaim was, “No…no…no!” I had no idea that Bambi had followed me. To my horror, my little confidant had been hit by a car and killed.

My heart was crushed. Sobbing with grief, I picked up her limp body and slowly walked back home in a daze. As I approached the door, Dad walked up from the opposite direction, having just arrived from work. He saw me sobbing with lifeless Bambi in my arms.

Rather than offering words of comfort, he tore into me. “How could you be so stupid? Bambi is dead because of you! Look what you did!”
His scathing rebuke spewed forth like lava scorching my already broken heart. Bam!

To make matters worse, hurtful words gushed out again, “Crying is a sign of mental illness—stop crying!” At that moment, in my traumatized state, I knew I must not cry one more tear—so I didn’t. And for years, I would not allow myself to cry, even though I knew such suppression was unhealthy.

Dad’s repeated volcanic eruptions culminated in layer upon layer of solidified molten rock in my emotional bag.

It’s hard to admit, but I hated my father with a seething rage. At age 15, I posed a veiled question to a friend’s father who was a lawyer. “If a 15-year-old boy commits murder, what would happen to him?”

“Well, at 15, he’s a minor, so he would probably be sent to juvenile detention until he’s 18, and then released.” That’s all I needed to know.

Two weeks later, I approached Mother with a proposition. “Mom, I need to talk with you. I’ve figured out a way to kill Dad. There won’t be much repercussion on me because I’m a minor.” I was dead serious.

I’m so grateful for my mother’s response. She did not chide me, laugh at me, or ridicule me. Instead, she sympathetically said, “No, honey, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but that really won’t be necessary.” It’s not that I wanted to commit murder—I just wanted the pain to stop.

Perhaps getting rid of Dad would help me get rid of all my rocks, stones, and boulders.

In truth, my mother and I experienced a role reversal as I tried to be her protector. But no matter how hard I tried, I didn’t have the power to keep her safe. Sometimes Dad would come into my bedroom and dogmatically allege, “Your mother is mentally ill today.” Cringing at his words, I knew to take his words seriously—his eldest son from his first marriage had been institutionalized for years with paranoid schizophrenia.
Rocks of rancor fell into my bag every time he made such frightening statements.

I knew on one particular day, Mother had tears in her eyes because Dad was flaunting one of his “women friends” named Ginger. I knew tears were not a sign of mental illness. However, my concern was this: Dad had money, money buys power, power buys people. I was deathly afraid Dad would buy off a psychiatrist to institutionalize Mother.

Dad terrorized Mother, not just by asserting she was mentally ill, but also by taking her to different psychiatrists. Although no doctor ever diagnosed Mother with any kind of mental disorder, just the mention of mental illness struck terror in her heart—and mine. For years, these boulders weighed me down.

When I came home from school each day, I never knew if Mother would be there. I feared Dad really would have her institutionalized one day. Early on, I began my defense fund. I knew if he ever had her committed, I’d need to hire a lawyer to get her out. For years I would never buy a Coke or candy bar. Instead, every penny I possessed went into “The Defense Fund.”

I lived in daily dread of what might happen to Mom. Until one day, in the midst of one of Dad’s rampages about Mother’s mental state, I lost it. “Has it ever occurred to you that you might be the one mentally ill?” I sniped.

Instantly, my father retaliated physically. I was stunned. His actions devastated me. Yet I was determined he would not make me cry, and he didn’t. I won!…until the next morning, and then bam—the biggest boulder of all fell into my already-bulging bag. My father sent me away to boarding school for several months. I was only ten minutes away from home, but I might as well have been in Siberia.

Dad often spat out accusations toward or about all of us.
summers in a row he matter-of-factly stated to me, “You and your sisters are bad influences on your mother. I’m sending you away to camp.”

To get to go to camp is one matter—being sent away to camp is another. Because this camp was in Colorado, every mention of Colorado evoked a sickening feeling within me. While at camp, I never knew if Mother would be permanently gone when I returned home.

The “bad influence” accusations, the threats to have Mom institutionalized, the isolation of boarding school, being exiled to summer camp—the stones of disdain continued to pile up, one on top of another.

I know what it’s like to literally think, I may be going crazy. As a newly licensed teenager, I remember driving our car across a bridge, thinking, I could just turn the wheel and go over the side. I could end my life right now. But then I feared I could cripple myself, and that would be worse on Mom.

Dad’s perpetual pummeling was driving me to the edge.

Finding God in the Darkness

Over time, I began hearing people in several places talk about the difference between having a religion versus a relationship with God. I had no idea what they meant. Although I had attended church, I never had heard about true salvation, never read the Bible, never learned about authentic Christianity.

For six months, I closely observed a number of these people who clearly had “something” I didn’t have but wanted. As a result, I began to seriously examine the claims of Christ. For months I grappled with question after question and wrestled with issue after issue until I finally decided to entrust my life to Jesus and give Him control of my life.

To my surprise, Christ inside me started changing me—inside out. My distorted view of life began to be corrected. My entire
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perspective started to change as I understood who Jesus was and what He said.

Changing My Attitude Toward Dad

But there was one issue that plagued me. Because I loved math and equations, I had this formula all worked out: God hates sin. Dad is sinning. God hates Dad. I hate Dad. My formula was all so very logical—I naturally should hate Dad because God hates Dad.

Being a new Christian, I began devouring truth from God’s Word. I began to learn a lot about love: We are to love one another and even love our enemies. However, I truly believed my situation was the exception, that my negative feelings toward Dad were legitimate, and that God “understood.” I didn’t feel like forgiving, so I didn’t.

Then I was stopped dead in my tracks by this scripture: “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness…. whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.”¹

Obviously, that verse explicitly refers to hatred. I thought, Well, that’s true…but God knows my situation. He knows I can’t help but hate Dad!

But there was only one problem—God has a standard: Hate no one. God does not set aside His holy standard based on anyone’s situation. There are no “situation ethics” regarding the Bible—it’s either true or it’s not. I came to realize that God wasn’t going to make an exception for me just because of a father with a heart of stone.

By this point, my mother was growing dramatically in her Christian faith because of her intimate relationship with Jesus, meaningful Bible study, and strong Christian friends who had come into her life and loved her unconditionally.
One day, when feeling perturbed at Dad, I went to Mom and asked, “How can you be so nice to him?” Never will I forget her response—spoken with the utmost tenderness and compassion. “Oh, honey, he doesn’t have the Lord. If he just had the Lord, he wouldn’t be that way.”

I was stunned. How could my mother, who had been mercilessly mistreated, be so genuinely loving? The answer was simple: She looked beyond his fault and saw his need. And clearly, he needed the Lord in his life. Her Christlike perspective enabled me to begin looking beyond his fault to see his need for the Savior.

**Getting Rid of the Rocks**

Though I will never have all my questions answered as to what motivated my father’s abusive behavior, years after his death I discovered a telling truth: Dad himself was raised in a home filled with emotional and physical abuse.

And because his own father was physically violent, he had no modeling of how to be a caring, nurturing father. This discovery provided great insight. His home had been built on shifting sand rather than solid rock—the rock of biblical truth.

Through my growing-up years, I carried an emotionally heavy bag filled with stones of scorn, rocks of wrath, and boulders of bitterness. However, God’s power enabled me to do what I thought I could not do: truly and completely forgive my father.

Unforgiveness weighed me down and kept me in bondage, whereas forgiveness emptied my load and set me free. Getting rid of the rocks—the rocks of resentment—liberated me to experience lightness within my soul and true peace with God.