

LIVING BEYOND OFFENSE



Doing the Hard Work
of Forgiveness God's Way

YANA JENAY CONNER

FOREWORD BY ELIZABETH WOODSON

“This book holds ancient truths for our current times and beyond that need our attention. Truths about forgiveness, mercy, healing, and love that are at the center of the gospel message many of us have forgotten. This book is for anyone who has been harmed—which is all of us—and who wants to live in a more Christ-like way despite his or her wounds. It’s for the person who wants to really be free and is bold enough to acknowledge freedom can’t exist without forgiveness.”

—**Pricelis Dominguez**, author of *Being a Sanctuary*,
pastor, and founder of Full Collective

“If you’re looking for clarity on forgiveness, including its scope and the distinctions between sinful offenses and personal preferences while learning to navigate relationship challenges with love and resilience, then *Living Beyond Offense* is the perfect resource for you. Yana engages her audience with wisdom, grace, competence, and compassion. *Living Beyond Offense* is ideal for anyone struggling with forgiveness while striving to obey God’s command to love Him and others as oneself.”

—**Leonard Omar King**, MDiv, EdD candidate, Bridgehaven
Counseling Associates, staff counselor

“Unforgiveness is a silent and deadly cancer lurking in the hearts of many people both inside and outside the church. In this practical and theologically rich work, Yana Conner shows us how to pull bitterness up by its roots. Forgiveness is at the very center of Christianity. But, ironically, very few of us can articulate what it is—or how to actually forgive. This book grounds our forgiveness in the grace of Jesus and gives an incredibly practical roadmap for this difficult but life-giving journey.”

—**J.D. Greear**, pastor, the Summit Church; author,
Gospel: Recovering the Power That Made Christianity Revolutionary

“Yana Conner has blessed us with so much more than familiar language on forgiveness. Instead, she’s given us a roadmap, a travel companion in herself, and sweet hope wrapped in the light of the gospel to help us see a beautiful life beyond offense. If you’ve tried to forgive but still feel stuck by offense, I implore you to read *Living Beyond Offense*. Yana’s writing is approachable, empathic, and laced with what we need most—the words of Scripture to reorient us to Jesus’s kingdom culture and the way of shalom.”

—**Dr. Sarita T. Lyons**, preacher, Bible teacher, church leader,
psychotherapist, and author of *Church Girl: A Gospel Vision
to Encourage and Challenge Black Christian Women*.

“Living Beyond Offense is a theologically rich and compassionate call to the costly, freeing path of forgiveness. Yana Jenay Conner speaks with clarity and courage into the real tensions of abuse, boundaries, and obedience. This book is a needed guide for anyone serious about following Jesus.”

—**Brenna Blain**, contemporary theologian and bestselling author

“Yana’s words in Living Beyond Offense are timely and transformational. Not many books can bring me to tears, challenge and convict me, and leave me feeling hopeful all at the same time, but this book has done it. Her explanation of what it means to ‘turn the other cheek’ and how to forgive when you can’t forget will sit with me for a long time. Living Beyond Offense is a masterful work that is theologically robust yet also practical. This book is one of the best teachings I have ever heard on forgiveness and is a must read.”

—**Lisa Fields**, author of *When Faith Disappoints* and CEO and founder of the Jude 3 Project

“Yana goes straight to the heart of one of the core causes of ruptured relationships: offense. She approaches the topic with a rare blend of biblical depth, compassionate challenge, and tender kindness. She doesn’t shy away from the truth or from the gentle care so many of us need as we navigate the painful realities of deep relationships. This book is an essential guide for anyone longing to build healthy relationships with others without sacrificing their own well-being. Yana asks and answers the questions we all wrestle with as we navigate hardship in relationships. Living Beyond Offense offers both wisdom and warmth to those committed to healing and cultivating meaningful connection within community. Many will be blessed by this powerful and timely work.”

—**Kobe Campbell**, trauma therapist, author, and speaker

“What Yana Conner has accomplished with her work in Living Beyond Offense is nothing short of brilliant, timely, and refreshing. Yana captures both the heart and the hope of biblical forgiveness. This book offers a comprehensive understanding of the truth of forgiveness while navigating the challenges we all have with forgiveness. While Yana’s authentic transparency makes the book accessible, her biblical clarity makes the subject of forgiveness approachable. Healing, hope, and help are found in every chapter!”

—**Ryan Brooks**, lead pastor, Vertical Church; author of *I Am Called: Answering the Call of God with a Life on Mission*

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To Ma

*None of this is possible apart from
your unwavering love.*

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FOREWORD

Early in my career, I found myself caught in the middle of a conflict, unfairly cast as the scapegoat for a situation I hadn't caused. To make matters worse, several of my coworkers chose to believe the false information being spread about me and responded by giving me the silent treatment for months. To say that their response took a toll on me mentally and emotionally would be an understatement. The silence was devastating, leaving me with a thin slice of hope that things would turn around.

But one day, they did.

While standing in line for a staff training, I found myself right behind one of the coworkers who had distanced themselves from me. Upon seeing me, she smiled and suddenly began to make small talk. At first I was perplexed, wondering why she had decided to start talking to me again. However, my curiosity quickly wore off, and anger took its place. Her mistreatment of me had caused me so much internal damage, and her newfound "friendliness" failed to acknowledge it. She wanted to jump back into our relationship as though nothing had happened, and I was not about to let that slide.

That's when I heard the Lord impress upon my heart two simple words: *Forgive her.*

He quickly reminded me that He loved her as much as He loved me and that I needed to reflect His love by walking in forgiveness. At that moment, I was being driven by my woundedness and desire for

vengeance. God's words stopped me right in my tracks and reminded me of a truth I could not get past: Since God had forgiven me, I had to extend that same forgiveness to anyone who wronged me. No exceptions or exempt clauses would let me hide from my responsibility to forgive.

If I'm honest, I don't think I'm the only one who has tried to hide from their forgiveness responsibilities. You probably have too; that's part of the reason you picked up this book. Forgiveness is one of the spiritual disciplines we'd like to skip over. We easily find rationalizations for why our specific situation is exempt from Jesus's command to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15). We've become skilled at living in the gray area of forgiveness, treating it like an ideal that is only achievable for super spiritual Christians.

Often this is because the call to forgive comes when we are still in pain. Taking this step of obedience while we are carrying deep anger or trying to heal from the wounds inflicted by someone else's sinful actions is incredibly difficult. It is hard to release our grip on what we are owed, trusting that God will make all things right. This kind of release doesn't come naturally; it must be learned. And even then, forgiveness is not a onetime choice, but one we must make repeatedly.

This book will help you learn how to do this, and your guide is well acquainted with the difficulty of the task. Yana is one of my dearest friends, and I have seen her wrestle with the truth she has included in these pages. Her faith is both contemplative and courageous. She doesn't settle for easy answers, but instead does the hard work that has produced a spiritual tree whose roots run deep and wide (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

What you will find in this book is the fruit of her labor: wisdom that is coated in vulnerability, conviction, and compassion. Instead of giving you a shallow how-to guide, Yana invites you to explore the true meaning of forgiveness, why it matters, and how it leads to flourishing not only for others but also for yourself.

To do this, she draws on a rich theology of shalom—the beautiful wholeness we were created to experience and the one Christ invites us to cultivate as we wait for Him to restore it in full. Yana and I have spent countless conversations basking in the beauty of shalom. We have wrestled with our imperfect experience of it, rejoiced when God has used us to help share it with someone else, and seen our faith be held together by shalom when the storms of life tried to knock us down.

Since she is a talented writer, Yana makes her theological reflection practical by graciously sharing her own stories. Sprinkled throughout the book are snippets from her life that are encouraging, challenging, and at times heartbreaking. Her sacrifice of honesty proves she has lived out the wisdom principles she will share with you. Her experience also allows her to shine a light into the corners where we try to hide from our forgiveness responsibilities. She knows all the excuses and “get out of forgiveness” passes we try to give ourselves. She pulls them into the light of the gospel for God to heal and restore.

Friend, you picked up this book to learn how to forgive, but you will leave with so much more. You are about to embark on a life-changing journey. It won't be easy, but it will be more than worth it because forgiveness isn't just a choice we make to free ourselves; it's a choice we make to live in the way of the Kingdom of God, bearing witness to our glorious King as we eagerly wait for Him to return.

—Elizabeth Woodson

INTRODUCTION

My father was my first teacher in forgiveness. His frequent absence, sporadic contributions to assist my mom with my care, and unfair ability to win you over with a smile even though you knew he would hurt you again made him the primary vehicle God would use to teach me my very first lessons on forgiveness. When my dad entered a room, I lit up. When he didn't, I painfully longed for his presence. I was a daddy's girl without a dad. I spent countless days standing behind the screen door, waiting for him to make good on his promise to come. Though I had the unwavering love and sufficient care of my mother and grandmother, I spent most of my childhood trying to answer this nagging question: *Why isn't my dad here?*

The answers were in the tingly smell that often came with his hugs and the slur of his tongue on the rare occasion he called. But as a kid, you don't know the signs of alcoholism; you don't even know the word for it. All you know is the pain that's there when your father isn't. With no definitive answer, I subscribed to the "It Is What It Is" method for coping with my pain. Fatherlessness was common among my family members and friends. Who was I to sulk over my daddy wounds? However, as you can imagine, this coping method only worked for so long.

In 2008, while interning with a campus ministry right out of college, I was asked to give a presentation on the felt needs of Black college students. During my preparation, I came across this statistic: 73

percent of African American children are born into a single-parent home.¹ My usual response to this kind of information was to shrug my shoulders with indifference. But on this day, I cried. First, for the 73 percent. Then, for me. For the first time, I allowed myself to feel the pain. To fully feel the ache of my dad's absence and honestly acknowledge its impact on my life. As I cried, God's presence tangibly moved in on me, helping me to see that just because something's common doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. My father's absence hurt, and it should.

I often jokingly refer to the days and years following this tender moment with God as the "Dark Ages." Though honestly acknowledging my pain was a necessary step for the journey of forgiveness ahead, it unleashed the anger I had suppressed for years. That following Sunday, I went to church, sat in the back, and impatiently waited for the pastor to invite people down for prayer. My newfound anger left me feeling fragile, on edge, and unsure of how to move forward. I wanted relief. But I would quickly learn that forgiveness and healing don't magically appear at the end of every *amen*.

Understanding what I did not, the elder who prayed for me suggested I consider counseling to address my daddy wounds. After three sessions, I felt worse, not better, and quit. The counselor asked me questions I wasn't ready to answer and uncovered emotions I wasn't ready to explore. Those unanswered questions and suppressed feelings were maintaining my fragile sense of safety. Would I be able to recover if I honestly went *there*? I wasn't ready to take the risk. I wasn't ready to get that close to the pain. However, this also meant I wasn't anywhere close to being ready to forgive.

While I couldn't really do much about not being ready to dive headfirst into the pain and the work of forgiveness, this came at a cost. My family members and close friends often found themselves on the other side of my anger and pain. They paid for the failings of my father *and* my inability to forgive. But, unlike my father, they

didn't abandon me. They didn't leave. They stayed. And I can honestly say it was their trustworthy love, gentle questioning, and gracious correction that prepared my heart to forgive my dad 11 years later.

At times I feel a deep sense of shame that it took that long for me to forgive. I mean, wasn't I a Christian? Didn't the Spirit of the living God reside within me? Why couldn't I just forgive? Though there were seasons within that 11-year span where I made a concerted effort to forgive my dad with holiday phone calls, Father's Day cards, and attempts to get breakfast when I was in town, forgiveness seemed elusive. It was hard to move past the memories of drunken phone calls, traumatic weekend visits, and eagerly waiting to be picked up only to be forgotten. It was also hard because nothing was changing. Not dad or my feelings. Forgiveness felt impossible.

Paul, in Philippians 3:15-16, provides a helpful explanation for my 11-year struggle. After sharing his resolve to forget what lies behind and press toward the prize before him, he writes:

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. *Only let us hold true to what we have attained* (emphasis mine).

Yes, I was a Christian, and the Spirit of God lived within me. But at this point in my walk with Christ, I was still very much a spiritual toddler. I could only hold true—live up—to what I had attained. And what I had attained up until this point in my walk with God was a fuzzy understanding of Jesus's command to forgive. I knew I was called to do it, but I didn't entirely understand why or know how.

It's possible you've picked up this book because even though you know Jesus calls His followers to forgive, you don't fully understand why or how either. You read verses about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies (Matthew 5:39, 44), and you say to yourself or

God, “Why?” Or maybe you’ve been a Christian for a while, have heard some good sermons on these topics, and walk out of church inspired to forgive, but are not sure how to go about it. You’ve tried forgetting, ignoring, or forcing your feelings to change, but nothing works. If this is your struggle, this book has been written with you in mind. My fervent prayer is that with each page turn, you will gain more clarity on why Jesus calls you to forgive and how to do it. My hope is that with each chapter, you will encounter the *compelling whys* and *practical hows* you need to do the hard work of forgiveness God’s way.

However, I didn’t write this book as an expert on forgiveness. I can honestly say I have not excelled spiritually in this area and almost didn’t write this book because of it. Consider me less of an expert and more of a fellow weary traveler, wandering alongside you in the wilderness of suffering and trying to live out her faith. In so many of these chapters, I am working out my theology, wrestling with my feelings, and seeking to live in response to Jesus’s command to forgive. As you read this book, I invite you to do the same. When you encounter Jesus’s teaching on how we are called to live in His world, consider what you believe and why you believe it. As I share my own stories of forgiveness and those of others, let them lead you to reflect on your own. And as I attempt to put language to what God taught me through His Word about the hard work of forgiveness, join me in seeking to respond in faith and obedience. However, do so at a pace that allows you to hold true—live up—to the truth you attain as you read this book.

Walking through the pain of offense and engaging in the work of forgiveness can be emotionally taxing. You will need to pace yourself. If you get to the end of a section within a chapter and need to take a break, take it. Though I believe there is a true finish line to the work of forgiveness, you’re in a marathon, not a sprint. You may need to take this book slow to work out your theology—your view of God,

self, and how God created the world to work—and make space to wrestle with your past hurts. To help you do this, at the end of each chapter, you will be invited to *selah*—to pause and think about what you just read and sit with whatever God might be bringing to the surface. Often our lives are moving fast and we either don't *have* or don't *make* the time to process them. But if you are going to live beyond offense, you will need to slow down to talk to God and allow God to talk to you. As my good sis Pricelis Dominguez, a champion of the *selah* practice, explains, you will need to “live slower...process Scripture slower, and become more introspective *in light of the presence of God*.”² You may be tempted to skip these parts, but I encourage you not to. Make time to sit in the light of God's presence long enough for Him to heal the place within you that feels broken. Give your soul the space to feel what it feels. And as you do, may God be ever so gracious to you, revealing to you the truths you need to forgive and live beyond offense.



PART 1

WE LIVE IN A STORY

You and I live in a story much grander than our own. The rising and falling action of our individual narratives is all swept up in the metanarrative found in our Bibles. This metanarrative progresses in four overarching movements—God’s creation, humanity’s fall, Christ’s rescue, and humanity’s resurrection. Each movement not only reveals to us the glory of the gospel story, but also provides us with the source material we need to make sense of life.

In the opening pages of our Bibles, we find the good intentions of God’s heart and the life we’re all longing for. *God creates* a world absent of imperfections. A world filled with harmony and unbridled love. However, things quickly take a bad turn. *Humanity falls* away from God’s law. Sin enters God’s good and perfect world, bringing death, conflict, and suffering along with it. This part of the story creates a new reality: one we weren’t made for and desperately want to escape.

Though humanity falls away from God, He doesn’t fall away from them. Instead, He doubles down on His love and sends His Son,

Jesus. Here, the metanarrative reaches its climax. Jesus enters the story answering the questions: Is there a better way to live? Does God care? And is there any hope? His answer to all of them is a resounding yes! Through His sinless life, Jesus gives us a renewed vision for how to live in relationship with God and others. Through His death, *Christ rescues* all who would believe in Him from the pending debt of their sins, revealing the eternal depths of God's care for us. Through His resurrection, He secures the coming of *humanity's resurrection*, giving them a hope and a future they don't deserve.

Beloved, if you are a Christian, this is your story. This is your song. In the final pages of our Bibles, we are told that all who tether their narratives to this metanarrative will share its end. Sin, death, conflict, and suffering will not be the end of their story; glory will. The beginning of God's story will be restored, and they will enjoy eternity with Christ in a new creation absent of imperfection.

In this section, we are going to explore this story to make sense of why our human relationships are often less than ideal and discover who Christ calls us to be as we wait for our resurrection. We are going to talk about, as Charaia Rush puts it in her book *Courageously Soft*, the "tension that exists as our beings tread this space between the garden and glory."¹ Much of living beyond offense is predicated on how we believe we are meant to live in this tension. And the question hanging over this tension and the entirety of this book is this: Will you allow the story God is telling to shape the way you live, or will you choose another story?

A TRUTH WE MUST ACCEPT

No one is good except God alone.

JESUS, LUKE 18:19

We live in a broken world with fallen people. *People will fail us. We will fail people.* People will, knowingly or unknowingly, fall short of meeting our very reasonable expectations. Even the ones who love us dearly will inevitably hurt our feelings and sin against us. And we, them. There are even times when we deeply harm one another, leaving each other with scars that make it difficult to move in the world without an intrusive amount of anger, anxiety, and shame. We live in a broken world with fallen people. This is where we are in the biblical story that is unfolding, and this is the biblical truth we must accept. However, when our lives collide with this truth, it hurts and is a painful reminder that this isn't the world our good and perfect God created us for.

WE WERE CREATED FOR SHALOM

In Genesis 1–2, we find Adam and Eve standing face-to-face, naked and unashamed. Though naked literally means to be “unclothed,” Adam and Eve’s nakedness surpassed what could be physically seen. Both their inner and outer person laid bare before the other. With

no feelings of shame, neither felt the need to hide from one another or God. Free of insecurities, neither was so preoccupied with how their hair looked that they couldn't be enamored of the beauty of the other. They weren't sizing each other up in comparison or competition, for they understood that in God's good and perfect creation, there was enough space for them both. In God's lush garden, Adam and Eve felt and were truly safe with one another. Hurt and harm weren't conceivable or possible. For they lived in a reality filled with uninterrupted shalom.

In our English Bibles, the Hebrew word *shalom* is often translated as "peace." In our modern context, peace is primarily understood as a sense of tranquility. However, in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the definition of shalom encompasses much more. Shalom is a state of complete and utter wholeness. It's a reality where everyone has what they need to survive and thrive. Nothing is broken or in danger of harm. Where shalom exists, bodies are well, and relationships are whole. Peace—feelings of tranquility and quiet—flow because in the presence of shalom, the fear of death is unfounded, the temptation to sin is nonexistent, and relational and societal conflict is unimaginable. Shalom is a world completely at rest, absent of any tear, crack, or break. In such a place, humans are free to run wholeheartedly naked without shame.

A PEOPLE MARKED BY SELF-CONSCIOUS, SELF-CENTERED SELF-PRESERVATION

We know nothing of this naked and unashamed bliss. Instead of enjoying relationships filled with shalom, we wearifully tarry with ones marked by some measure of *self-conscious, self-centered self-preservation*. The very moment Adam and Eve sinned against God, the shalom they once enjoyed began to unravel. Immediately they became aware of their nakedness and became shamefully *self-conscious*. They

stitched fig leaves together to conceal parts of themselves that once thrived unhidden. Their human need for acceptance was introduced to the fear of rejection, and now they felt a strong need to protect their hearts. As overly self-conscious beings, they also became painfully *self-centered*. Their ability to love one another freely was now constrained by consuming thoughts of self. Their commitment to having one another's back became complicated by the deep sense of needing to look out for their own, which is exactly what Adam did next in the Genesis story.

When God approached Adam to get clarity as to why they collectively rejected His command, Adam shifted the blame. The woman he once sang over as his greatest complement, he now claimed was his greatest liability. When asked by God, "Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Genesis 3:11 CSB), Adam replied, "The woman you gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12 CSB). My good friend Josh Reed calls this a classic case of *self-preservation*. Adam, taking no responsibility for his actions or inaction, threw the "bone of [his] bones" under the bus in a faulty attempt to preserve his right standing before God (Genesis 2:23). He tried to absolve himself of any responsibility and shame by shaming and blaming his wife, making her solely responsible for their shared sin. What began as a fracture in their relationship with stitched fig leaves was now utterly broken with Adam's *self-conscious, self-centered, self-preserving* betrayal.

From Genesis 3 onward, we encounter story after story of human relationships marked by *self-conscious, self-centered self-preservation*. Cain, Adam's son, out of competition and comparison, killed his brother, Abel, to cover his *self-conscious* insecurities (Genesis 4). Shechem, without care or consent, took the body of Jacob's daughter, Dinah, to satisfy *his own* sexual desires. In bringing pleasure to his body, he traumatized Dinah's whole personhood—physically, emotionally, and socially (Genesis 34). Pharoah's hard, *self-conscious, self-centered*, and

self-preserving heart led him to seek the genocide of an entire nation (Exodus 1). King David, after taking Bathsheba's body without her permission, killed her husband to preserve his reputation (2 Samuel 11). The people of Israel, looking out for their own interest, failed to obey God's commands to care for the poor, welcome the foreigner, and love their neighbor as they loved themselves.

Jesus entered the story and ushered in a new Kingdom, but the stories of *self-conscious, self-centered self-preservation* continued. Though Jesus willingly went to Calvary, the Pharisees' self-conscious envy, Judas's self-centered greed, Pilate's self-preserving cowardness, and an angry crowd's rejection paved the way. Though His sacrificial death and powerful resurrection provided a way for shalom to be restored between us, God, and one another, what we found after Jesus's ascension to heaven wasn't a quick fix. Even Paul, who wrote the majority of the New Testament, found himself contending with the reality of living in a broken world with fallen people. God had set him and Barnabas apart during a prayer gathering to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, but after a "sharp disagreement," their relational shalom unraveled (Acts 15:36-41). Even Paul and Barnabas, who were filled with the Spirit and fruitful in ministry, were unable to escape their broken reality. And, for now, neither can we.

Over the past 21 centuries, we've added countless stories of self-conscious, self-centered self-preservation to the human record. Being overly self-conscious, we attempt to conceal our true selves with lies. Living in a world structured by the "isms" of race, sex, and class, self-preservation is a way of life. To preserve our egos or sense of safety, to protect ourselves, or to ensure the people who've sinned against us experience the same amount of pain they've caused, we use words with sharp edges. We no longer innately enjoy one another uninterrupted. Instead, we get annoyed, fight, bicker, belittle, use, and abuse one another for personal gain—even if that personal gain is as petty as getting the last word in an argument. As a result, we become

both victims and perpetrators of acts of self-conscious, self-centered self-preservation.

THE TRUTH WE MUST ACCEPT

Beloved, you live in a broken world with broken people, and because this is your reality, you need to abandon the expectation for our relationships to be absent of imperfections, struggles, or offense. However, the invitation to accept this truth isn't meant to lead you into isolation. I get the strategy. I've tried it. It doesn't work. Isolation depresses the soul. You and I were created for relationships. We were created in the image of a relational God and are inherently relational. Yes, people can make you angry, but they can also fill your life with joy. Yes, they possess the ability to hurt you. But they are also often the very ones you need to heal. At their best, they are compassionate, trustworthy, and a lot of fun. If you distance yourselves from others in fear of experiencing pain, you won't let people get close enough for you to experience the gift of being loved. Choosing isolation or keeping people around but passively at bay is not how we should respond to this truth. Here are two sober ways we should respond.

1. Don't be shocked.

No one is good but God (Mark 10:18). In this broken world with fallen people, people will hurt and even fail us. Offense will happen. It's inevitable. Though we should not live in fear of getting hurt, we do need to live in awareness that it will happen. While being shocked is a warranted response to offense, especially in our closest relationships, this awareness helps us not be so shocked that we are unable or unwilling to do the hard work of forgiveness. It also helps us create enough space in our relationships for people to be less than perfect. Not harmful, but imperfect.

2. Be Prepared to do the work of forgiveness.

Trauma therapist Kobe Campbell writes,

Every meaningful, intimate, and trusting relationship will experience what is known as a rupture. . . it's an unavoidable part of every relationship. No matter how much love, care, or intention we bring, we will, at some point, hurt or be hurt by those we are in a relationship with. The strength of a relationship is not determined by the absence of rupture but by the presence of repair.¹

If we want “meaningful, intimate, and trusting” relationships, we must prepare our hearts for the days we will need to repair the ruptures that naturally occur. If we want our relationships to live beyond offense, we will need to learn how to thoughtfully address conflict, communicating our hurts, asking curious questions, and being eager to restore relational shalom. If we want long-lasting relationships, we must learn how to forgive. In this broken and fallen world, forgiveness is a necessary survival skill.

THE STARTING POINT

After a stint of going missing, my dad called. Since I was in a season of making a concerted effort to forgive, I answered. Immediately, I regretted it. My dad was drunk and within minutes said something hurtful. I wanted to hang up on him, but with the Spirit's help, I hurried him off the phone instead. While trying to bring my heart rate down before I transitioned to the next thing, I started to plot my relational exit strategy. No more phone calls. No more attempts to see him when I was in town. But before I could get too far along in my planning, God's presence tangibly moved in on me as it did before. However, this time, it wasn't an invitation

to give me more space to express my feelings. It was an invitation to extend more grace.

My dad was a fallen human being. Alcoholism had stifled his ability to be the kind of dad he had proven he could be when he was sober. He also was a fallen human being who had yet to experience the life change that comes through faith in Jesus. The Spirit of God did not reside within him, empowering him to resist the urge to drink or compelling him to bridle his tongue. Though his actions were harmful and wrong, and I didn't need to abandon my desires for a sober father, I was holding him to a standard he was ill-equipped to meet. I needed to adjust my expectations and create more space for him to be a fallen and yet-to-be-redeemed human.

While I still had a long way to go in my journey of forgiving my father, accepting the truth that my dad was a fallen human being was the starting point. For the first time, my anger was joined by compassion. From that moment forward, I let go of my expectations of having a perfect father and embraced the one I had—and that the one I had needed forgiving.

SELAH: At the end of each chapter, you will have an opportunity to *selah*—pause and think—about your own story and how it interacts with the truths shared. My prayer is that with each *selah* you would encounter God through His Word, better understand your pain, and find your way closer to forgiving those who've offended you. To help with this, each *selah* will be framed by *Lectio Divina*, the ancient meditative practice. This practice of reading and rereading God's Word helps move the truths of Scripture from your head to your heart, fueling fruitful and faith-filled obedience. During this practice, you will *read* a passage of Scripture, *reflect* on your story, *respond* to the Word's truths, and *rest* in God's promises. For our first *selah*, we'll spend time mediating on Psalm 103:8-14:

⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
¹⁴ *For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust* (emphasis mine).

READ: Read Psalm 103:8-14 slowly and pause over any words or phrases that stand out to you.

REFLECT: Read Psalm 103:8-14 slowly and pause over the last verse. Consider the evidence in your life that testifies to the truth that God has remembered you are dust and has been compassionate toward you.

RESPOND: Read Psalm 103:13-14 slowly. Consider what faulty expectations you have put on your relationships and those who are made of dust.

- What faulty expectations of your relationships do you need to abandon to accept the truth that you live in a broken world with fallen people?

- Who are you holding to standards they are likely ill-equipped to meet because of their dusty frame?
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REST: Celebrate and rest in the truth that God is merciful, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Allow yourself to be swept up in the picture of Him as your compassionate Father, remembering that you are only dust.