

Someone told me she was betrayed by a friend — and that friend seemed not the least bit sorry. The woman said she wanted to forgive, but she had tried and tried and couldn't. She couldn't will away the hurt she still felt. What was she supposed to do?

Forgiveness, of course, can mean many things. Some people use it as a synonym for reconciliation; and many times that's exactly what forgiveness entails. But that's not what I mean here. Some people use forgiveness to mean a lack of accountability, and that's not what I mean either. What I mean here is the grace it would take for this woman to be free of the power her friend still holds over her.

Sometimes the problem is that a person confuses forgiveness with a feeling he or she associates with forgiveness. We may assume forgiveness happens in one dramatic act—and afterward we see the forgiven person just as we would if the hurt had never happened. Sometimes that's the case. But often forgiveness is a choice we repeat over and over. Even then, it is not necessarily a warm feeling. The most forgiving people I know often pray something along the lines of “Lord, I'm remembering again what they did to me, and I am feeling angry. Help me.”

Sometimes forgiveness does not come with justice. One's desire for justice is not wrong. The problem comes with the way we want to experience that justice — and that is usually because our time frame is by definition short-term, meaning the span of our trackable lives. Even when we do see someone who hurt us get some comeuppance, it will still leave us empty, because no amount of justice seems to rise to our level of hurt.

Ernst Jünger wrote in the middle of last century that bitterness and resentment don't really settle in because of a sense of having been hurt. Rather, he wrote, they come from a sense of an ongoing debt we are owed — perpetual suspense that the hurt will be rectified personally and the wrong undone. And because that almost never happens the person who was hurt often seeks redress in some other way. Sometimes that's just internal rumination that governs the person's life. Sometimes that's choosing a scapegoat on whom to pour out anger and disappointment.

To be free, though, you have to know the difference between what you lost and who you are. You can genuinely mourn what was lost and still realize that freedom will ultimately mean being defined by something other than what you lost. That's hard to do. Peter told Jesus, in what reads like almost-palpable frustration, “We have left everything and followed you” (Mark 10:28). If you believe you are nothing beyond what can be seized, then whoever controls those conditions controls you completely.

Another obstacle to forgiveness is the desire for some sense of narrative closure. You might not think the hurt will be redressed, but you want it to make sense in the story of your life. Again, that's not wrong in and of itself.

In the Book of Genesis, Joseph's brothers attacked him and trafficked him into slavery. They encountered him years later after he had become a ruler over Egypt, running a famine food-

storage program that ultimately saved their lives as they sought relief from potential starvation. After the death of their father, Jacob, the brothers quite legitimately worried that Joseph would take his revenge. They even workshopped some rather manipulative talking points, saying the father had told them on his deathbed to ask Joseph to forgive them.

Joseph famously said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). Few Bible verses are as abused by unmooring them from context as this one. If the brothers had said, *Look how this has all turned out for good!* that would have been morally repugnant self-justification. Joseph—the one harmed—is the one who said this, and he never classified what they did as anything but evil. He did not justify their means by the end. He simply acknowledged that he trusted God and that he was not clamoring for vengeance for what was past.

The problem, though, is that it is very rare to find that kind of retroactive meaning. To forgive, you must trust that God is at work for your good—mostly in ways that are invisible and incomprehensible to you. That doesn’t minimize what was done, but it dethrones it from its power as the central story of your life. Sometimes you get the apology you’ve always wanted to hear, but often you don’t. People move on with their lives as though they’ve forgotten what they did. Sometimes they even die without acknowledging it. That means not that the story ended unresolved but rather that you can’t see to the end.

Yet another obstacle to forgiveness can be a sense of powerlessness. Again, if you define power as the ability to undo what was done wrong, you will never get it. At the same time, if you try to just “move on,” you will never overcome the loss. But you can redirect that longing for power.

Frederick Buechner wrote years ago about a man who told him, “You have had a good deal of pain in your life, and you have been a good steward of it.” Stewardship is power too. Even when you can’t undo what’s been done against you, you can prevent those same things from happening to others—or you can be the consoling presence you needed but never had. If nothing else, you can resolve to do your best never to hurt anyone else the way you were hurt. The most forgiving people I’ve known are not those who deny the pain, nor those who are defined wholly by it, but those who steward it—as a kind of monastic vow to pay attention to others with similar stories.

The recognition of a need for grace is itself a grace. The desire to forgive is itself an essential first step to forgiveness. Just because you stumble back into bitterness or resentment does not mean your initial forgiveness was a sham. Indeed, you will need ongoing grace to forgive—not just one charge of it.

God is more forgiving than we are. He doesn’t view our forgiveness as a feat to please him. He is a Father who wants the best for us. He knows forgiveness is hard for us. It is not hard for him.

So when you find forgiveness difficult, pray as the man with Jesus once did about his unbelief (Mark 9:24): I forgive; help my unforgiveness.