

The Road to Forgiveness Bible Study

Leader's Notes

The following notes are intended to give you a few pointers and suggestions for guiding your group through each discussion. While we encourage you to make use of this input, you are the shepherd of your group, you are the person on the scene, and you are the one who must make the final decisions about what is best for your group. (If something arises that goes beyond your experience or resources, please immediately contact your church staff for help, and refer individuals as appropriate to trained Christian mental health professionals.)

In each lesson, the first question (or two) is a “Warm-Up” question designed as some type of lighter-duty ice breaker, for easing your people into discussion through a relatively safe question or exercise. This or something like it is always a good way to start your discussion time, rather than diving straight into Bible study and application.

Most groups will find it difficult to adequately discuss every question in every lesson. We’ve knowingly provided an abundance of content, so that groups may tailor their discussion emphases to the needs of their unique group. As you prepare to lead discussion, certain questions may stand out as especially important for your group. However, we’ve also provided below, for each lesson, several suggested key questions, in case you have trouble deciding.

A different approach is to stretch some lessons over two or three weeks. Your group might prefer to do this routinely, with all lessons, or selectively, with only those lessons the group wants to explore in special detail.

Some groups will function best by working through the lesson together for the first time, with little or no advance preparation (perhaps just using the previous lesson’s Scouting Ahead exercise for mental preparation). This might be true for groups with extremely busy members, or members who simply have trouble committing to midweek study.

You might assign only part of the lesson for completion before the group discusses it. For example, ask everyone to read *Your Journey So Far and Today’s Travel Route* before the meeting. Or part or all of the Bible study in the Trail Map section. In the meeting you would discuss your people’s insights from this preparation, then venture together into other parts of the lesson. The more advance preparation your people do, the deeper your discussion will be able to go. But some groups will be significantly challenged by even some of the most basic of insights, so great depth and vulnerability might not be appropriate in some groups.

Finally, your group might choose to complete the whole lesson before each meeting. Keep in mind that completing the lesson doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll see written notes on the pages. Some people don’t do their best mental processing through writing. You should give your members freedom to interact with the lesson in the way that best suits their learning style and their unique ways of thinking.

Part I

Starting on the Right Foot

Lesson 1: Forgiveness: Preparing for the Journey

Tip: If this is your group's first or second meeting, take extra time for getting acquainted, and spend more time on the Warm-Up exercise than on the other questions. If your group has already been together for at least a few weeks, then you can spend less time on relationship building, and more time on study and application.

Some time early in the meeting, take a couple of minutes to review the two ground rules on page 6; make sure everyone understands them and why they're important.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover questions 1, 2, 3 (Luke 6:37 and Scenario A), 4, 5, and 8.

Questions 1-2. The purpose of this exercise is partly to give everyone a lighter-duty, nonthreatening entrée into the lesson, especially for new groups. Once people begin to talk and open up about a relatively safe topic, they're much more likely to feel confident sharing later in the discussion.

This exercise broaches the topic of forgiveness through common phrases and sayings. Question 2 prompts them to begin thinking more carefully about the words that often flow thoughtlessly out of our mouths. As people begin sharing their opinions, remind everyone to be good listeners, even if they disagree. And start right off by modeling exactly the kind of listening you're talking about—affirm every person for being willing to share, and label every answer as a “good answer,” because it reflects honestly what the individual thinks and feels inside.

3. These passages and scenarios are meant to stir a little controversy. They demonstrate that forgiveness isn't always as simple as it's made out to be. Many life situations aren't solved with pat answers—that is, oversimplifications of complex realities. God's Word certainly provides the principles that we are to apply to life, but we must sometimes apply them with lots of prayer, care, patience, and counsel.

Try to discuss at least two different passages or issues (to get a taste of the variety of possible controversies), but don't feel pressured to discuss them all. Luke 6:37 is a great example to include, because Jesus' command here is often misused as a shield against simple truth telling that has no judgmental attitude behind it. Jesus is by no means telling us not to be discerning about other people's sin, nor is He prohibiting confrontation of sin or defense of righteousness, when done with a pure motive.

4-6. This sequence helps people to recognize that granting forgiveness may often involve a price, but that the benefits of healthy forgiveness outweigh the cost. It's important to acknowledge the cost, rather than ignore it, so that we go into the practice of forgiveness with eyes open, ready to accept some pain and loss. It's when the cost surprises us that we lose heart and give up, thus missing out on the benefit of obedience.

Some people may answer question 6 with the second or third choices, rather than thinking of forgiveness as “a great deal.” It’s important to allow these brave souls to feel safe in their honesty, so affirm every answer, even if some of them are given with obvious anger and resentment. Thank everyone for their authenticity, especially those who share responses that Christians often label as “unspiritual.” We have to be honest about where we are before we can go far along The Road to Forgiveness.

7-8. These questions help prepare your group members to make a significant personal investment in this series. Using the word picture of financial investment, we illustrate the reality that the return we get from a spiritual exercise depends on the spiritual investment we make in the first place. If, by the end of this series, your people want to experience the freedom and healing of forgiveness, then they should plan to invest time, commitment to the group, commitment to seeking God’s answers in Scripture, and so on. They may need to sacrifice pride, be willing to revisit some painful memories, and take the risk of softening a heart that has been hardened in self-protection.

Your Next Step. Your group members are most likely to ponder question 9 during the week if you prompt them to prime the pump now. Before the meeting ends, consider guarding a few minutes. Read through all four paragraphs under “Your Next Step,” taking time to ensure that everyone understands the last two paragraphs.

Then give your group just a minute or two to (privately) write down at least one tentative answer to question 9. Emphasize that they’re not making a concrete commitment at this point; they’re just getting the ball rolling. No one needs to share their responses with anyone else. But simply taking a couple of minutes’ thought now makes it more likely that the question will continue to process in the back of our minds throughout the week.

Ask everyone to come to your next meeting with a firmer answer to question 9. (Even at that point no one’s choice of application topic is set in concrete; members are free to change their choice of application at any time.)

Rest Stop. Encourage group members to use this week’s Rest Stop as the focus of at least one day’s brief devotional time with God.

We also encourage you to use this exercise (or something like it) to bring your group time to a close—especially if you sense that some group members might need the calming, prayerful reminder that they’re safe in God’s hands. Some of your people are considering reopening some very sensitive wounds from their past, and they may be feeling threatened and vulnerable. You don’t need to go through all four steps of the prayer exercise in the group; if you want, you can simply choose one or two.

Scouting Ahead. Not only should your people take time to continue pondering Lesson 1 throughout the week, but invite them also to take time to Scout Ahead. They might even pull out their schedules and plan a five-minute appointment, simply to ponder their response to the Scouting Ahead questions.

Lesson 2: Identify the Injury

Tip: If this is your group's second week together, continue to spend extra time getting acquainted. The Warm-Up exercises are one way to do this, although some even more nonthreatening activities might be best.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-5, 10, 11, and 13.

Questions 1-2. This exercise helps people confront some of their reasons for resisting God's path toward healing and freedom. Even though identifying their injury is the necessary way to begin the journey along The Road to Forgiveness, we humans are sometimes reluctant to proceed. Why? Some reasons might include...

...false assumptions from Christian teaching or family upbringing. Some of us assume, for example, that dwelling on the negative is wrong, or that pointing fingers at others is merely vindictive and never constructive.

...fear of resurrecting painful memories, after successfully burying them under denial.

...reluctance to "hurt someone else"—namely, the person who caused the original injury.

Your people might see this connection and begin discussing these forgiveness-related issues on their own. But even if their discussion of these questions proceed no further than the time they wouldn't take their antibiotics, or the time their sister refused to schedule surgery, that's fine. They're still dealing with the basic problem of putting off what we know is both good for us and right in God's eyes.

3-9. These Trail Map questions show how Joseph and Jesus might have worked through the three steps of identifying their injuries. If you have time to discuss only one of these examples, Joseph might be the preferable choice—partly because we'll be following his story throughout this series, and partly because some members might not identify as closely with Jesus in His humanity. (Some people have trouble believing that Jesus experienced the pains of life in the same way we do.)

Use these questions to help your group become more familiar with the three steps described in Today's Travel Route. You might say things like, "This is the way Joseph might have worked through the first step of identifying his injury. Can you imagine yourself in his sandals doing this?"

10-13. These Walking the Talk questions explore the whys of the three steps of Identifying the Injury. Each of the three steps serves an important purpose, and we're more likely to actually do them if they make sense to us—if we can understand to some degree the reasons they will benefit us. Question 10 addresses the first step (What happened when you were injured?). Question 11 addresses the third step (Who caused your injury?). And questions 12-13 address the second step (What feelings did you experience then, or do you experience now as a result of your injury?).

Regarding questions 12-13, God has designed us so that we are able to experience both physical numbness (endorphins, physical shock) and emotional numbness (dissociation, emotional shock) for a limited period after a physical or emotional trauma. This is a survival trait He has built into us. However, if we survive the initial trauma, He intends physical and

emotional feelings—including pain—to serve a constructive purpose, prompting us to take action that will remove us from further danger, helping us learn lessons for wiser and better living. So while denial of our feelings may serve a healthy purpose for a time, long-term denial is destructive. The best way of living, including forgiving, requires our willingness to express our feelings honestly in an appropriate setting (e.g., in prayer before God, with a health care professional, with a mature, trusted friend).

Your Next Step. The primary purpose of this exercise is to help group members become familiar with these steps by actual practice. The very best learning technique is *doing*. Even if they practice on a relatively “safe” injury, the activity will aid them toward applying the steps to deeper injuries later.

Keeping in mind the sensitive and personal nature of question 14, you might choose one of a couple of ways for handling it in your group. If you know your group well, and you know that all of your members have safe and trusting relationships in the group, you might divide up into groups of two or three (allowing members to choose their own partners), and invite them to work through this exercise together. Urge them to choose an injury that they can discuss without being re-traumatized, and remind them that discussion should stop immediately if anyone begins to experience serious anxiety.

The safer route, especially if your group is fairly new or if you know some members are too fragile, is to ask everyone to complete the exercise as homework—just with God, or with a trusted partner of their choosing.

Rest Stop. Allow some time at the end of your meeting to help people ease the emotional turmoil that may have been stirred during discussion. This is a time for cooling, calming, and reconnecting with the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). You might use part or all of this exercise, or one of your own devising. Encourage your people to use the Rest Stop during the week.

Scouting Ahead. Urge everyone to spend time before the next meeting wrestling for at least five or ten minutes with this brief exercise. You might ask them to write an appointment in their schedule before they leave this meeting.

Lesson 3: Calculate the Losses

Tip: The greatest challenge in this lesson for some people will be accepting the need to revisit the details of our past losses. “Why dredge up all that junk? It’s past. Let’s just leave it there.” It brings to mind the stereotypical picture of the Freudian psychologist sitting—wearing wire-rimmed spectacles and smoking a pipe, one knee crossed over the other, frowning as he furiously applies pen to spiral-bound pad—with the patient reclining on a couch, facing away from the psychologist, gratuitously reciting every dream and memory in gruesome detail.

However, when we calculate the losses with a constructive purpose in mind—to release them completely—we avoid the path of the meaningless memoir. In order to help your group better understand the healthy purpose for calculating the losses, you might read together the analogy in the Part I introduction (page 9).

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-4 and 7.

Questions 1-2. Some people might resist calculating the losses simply because they're not, by nature, detail-oriented people. This Warm-Up exercise helps everyone understand and value the need for an occasional focus on details. Thus your group might embark on this stage of The Road to Forgiveness with greater motivation. This is also an opportunity for the big-picture people to explain how difficult it is for them to deal with details, and for the detail-oriented people to show patience and support for the big-picture people.

3-5. Here we continue Joseph's story from Lesson 2 (which will also be further developed in later lessons). Questions 3 and 4 help us practice using a couple of different methods for categorizing our losses. We're more likely to take a complete inventory if we're prompted by some types of "handles" on the different aspects of our losses. Without some type of category system, we might overlook and fail to release certain aspects of our injuries.

6-7. These questions provide your members an opportunity to wrestle with the whys of calculating the losses (see the first Tip above). Some groups might be convinced by now, so you may not need much time on these questions. Others might need more time and discussion to understand and accept this stage of the forgiveness journey.

8. This is a specialized question for those who are still carrying the burden of childhood wounds. The overwhelming prevalence of unresolved childhood pain makes this a key issue for many group members. Only rare groups, who have developed strong security with each other and who have a trained professional present, should risk opening this door very far.

When we experience emotional trauma in childhood and later try to access the memories in adulthood, we tend to revert to the level of emotional immaturity and limited understanding that was ours at the time of injury. Since a young child's sense of reality is defined by the adults in his life, and he has little capacity for discerning truth from falsehood, he responds to the trauma with raw, survival-level panic, even if the situation is not life-threatening. The unhealed adult is likely to respond this same way when he revisits the trauma. That's why healing of serious childhood wounds must be handled very carefully, and mishandling them can cause additional harm.

Your Next Step. See our notes for Your Next Step in Lesson 2, where we've discussed various ways of handling this type of sensitive, personal application exercise, in or outside of group. However you handle it, it's important that everyone practice this stage on The Road to Forgiveness. Some members might still be struggling through an earlier stage with their deeper injuries. Then suggest that they practice this exercise with a lesser injury, just to get the feel for how it works.

Rest Stop. Different options for different people are built into this exercise. As you wrap up your group discussion, allow time for your group to "decompress" before God. Some might need to talk over their loss inventory with God, while others (who feel threatened) might need to pull away from the very idea and escape into a few moments of "ignorant bliss" in God's comforting presence. Remind your members to return to this "reentry" exercise during the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to commit to a few minutes preparing for next week's discussion by pondering this question.

Lesson 4: Own Your Burden

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1, 2, and 4-6. Reading together the bottom of page 29 and the top of page 30 will focus and center your group in understanding the importance of this phase of the journey.

Questions 1-2. Both physically and emotionally, we are capable of carrying burdens without being consciously aware of the toll the burden is taking on us. When it comes to the emotional burden due to our unhealed past injuries, we have an amazing capacity for defining "normal" according to the burdened lifestyle. We think that everyone is as tired or pessimistic or depressed as we feel all the time. We develop coping strategies for sustaining our burdens, including manipulating others, denial, self-medication (with alcohol, drugs, unhealthy relationships, media and tech, and much more), critical attitudes, apathy, among many others. The burdened lifestyle may seem "normal" because we've never experienced anything else.

But when we listen to God and wake up to the fact that we're not experiencing freedom and health, and when we learn to take personal ownership of the burden we've been carrying, then we become able to release it. We can't let go of an emotional load that we don't believe we're supporting.

Once we become unburdened, the seeming weightlessness is one of our first tastes of heaven. Joy, relief, purpose, perspective...as we never thought possible. We never imagined we could experience anything better than "normal." But God is a super-normal God, and He calls us to super-normal health and freedom.

3-5. We continue Joseph's story from Genesis. We don't know the details of Joseph's years in Egypt, or how long it took him to work his way along The Road to Forgiveness. But in Genesis 40:15, we see him pleading his case, saying in no uncertain terms, "I was wronged. I was injured. Yes, this happened to me." And the fact that he was able to "forget" (not literally, but emotionally) his troubles (Genesis 41:50-52) shows that he had taken personal ownership of his burden of pain and loss, enabling him to release the burden.

6. This is a very important question. Please allow your group time to dwell on it. We are a culture characterized by anxiety and burnout. That's why these three passages are among the most comforting and attractive in our Scriptural "vocabulary." We long for the peace and relief God promises, but before we can give God our burden, we have to acknowledge that it's there, and that it has been weighing us down. That's what this stage of the forgiveness journey is all about. Simply saying, "Yes, this happened to me; I was injured, and it is affecting me still," as a necessary step toward saying, "Lord, take my burden."

7. When we practice explaining a difficult idea to someone else, we learn how to explain it to ourselves. Emphasize this question if your group includes members who are having trouble grasping the concept of or the reasons for owning one's burden.

8. From this point on, the questions are sensitive and personal enough that many groups should take care to protect members from sharing too openly with too many people, risking becoming re-traumatized. This question prompts us to acknowledge unhealthy habits or patterns in our lives and to look for possible connections between them and our past injuries. What past emotional wounds drive one person to embark on a series of serial relationships, seeking acceptance that she won't grant herself? What past injuries make alcohol seem irresistible to another person as he seeks shelter from his pain?

9-10. An honest cost-benefit comparison may encourage some people to take a step they've been resisting. When we recognize that owning our burden, while risky and possibly costly, will pay off abundantly, then we may find courage to assume that ownership.

Your Next Step. As with any of the questions in this series, some people might prefer to use a method other than writing. Anyone is free to audio record, dictate, paint, draw, or video record their personal statement of ownership, but it's important that they create some type of enduring record of the statement, so that they can return and be reminded. The act of creating a lasting statement is, in itself, an attitude-changing experience, giving a sense of solidness and reality to our ownership of our burden.

Rest Stop. Feel free to use part or all of this exercise to help your people come down emotionally from any peaks of anxiety or apprehension raised during discussion. Many of your members may feel *more* burdened as a result of this lesson, so remind them of God's power in helping them support their burden, and keep their focus on the future release of the burden. Encourage them to return to this exercise throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Part II

Three Emotional Quagmires

Lesson 5: The Valley of Depression

Special note:

Depression is a very common response to pain or loss. It's almost as if the body "slows down" in order to try to assimilate the emotional consequences of the event. However, depression involves other factors as well.

Stress in our bodies is designed to be very time-limited. There is such a thing as good stress (that can help motivate people to complete a project), and then there is such a thing as prolonged

stress. It's the latter that causes problems. When stress becomes unremitting, it produces cortisol in our bodies. Too much cortisol and we become depressed.

Anger that is turned inward can also cause depression. Often when there is prolonged depression, unresolved anger can be an underlying factor. This may not always be the case, but it is certainly one of the factors that needs to be considered.

We have a freeway system of neurotransmission that goes on in our brains at an incredible rate. Neurotransmitters deliver messages to us to the tune of one million messages per second. Serotonin, dopamine, acetylcholine, et. al., are moving at incredible speeds. When depression lingers over time, traffic lights go out on the freeway system; messages don't get through as quickly, nerves start "honking their horns." The depressed person tends to forget things; it's difficult to focus and concentrate; sleep patterns are affected; sequencing simple things becomes a huge task. One can sleep too much, too little, or experience sleep that is not restful. All of these can be the residuals of depression.

Numerous physical disorders can cause depression: Lupus, Graves disease, hypoglycemia, diabetes, mononucleosis, hypothyroidism, fibromyalgia, etc. Some people may struggle with Dysthymia—a long term form of depression that usually involves genetic loading. They may say something like, "I have always felt depressed."

Certain medications can cause depression as well.

Sin can also be a cause of depression. In Psalm 32:1-5, David readily admits to the physical and emotional (not to mention spiritual) consequences of hiding his sin with Bathsheba.

Be prepared to discuss a balanced and comprehensive picture of depression—for example, "Since our complex God created us as multifaceted beings in His image, we're taking a multifaceted approach to depression. This approach is completely biblical." Looking at depression holistically and comprehensively—factoring in the physical, emotional, vocational, spiritual, relational and psychological—honors the very One who made us." To compartmentalize depression or give simplistic answers to what may have an organic root, would not be the part of wisdom.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1, 2, and 3-8 (emphasizing the Ts that seem most important for your members).

Questions 1-2. If people are honest, they will come up with different answers to both questions. Encourage this, and draw attention to it. The group should understand that people aren't all the same, and different approaches will either annoy or help different people. The key to knowing how to help (and what kind of help you need): Get to know each other and yourself, so you know what helps and hurts. And be willing to tell others how they can best help you.

3-8. When God orchestrated Elijah's experience (and the recording of his story), He was providing us with a case study of depression and its treatment. Questions 4-8 point to the five Ts,

introduced earlier in the lesson, as God led Elijah toward emotional healing. Note that Elijah sank into depression immediately on the heels of a huge victory. Talk about a paradoxical response! But this illustrates the fact that depression can take us down when we least expect it, and we would do well to recognize its symptoms.

Keep in mind that there are varying degrees and varying manifestations of depression. Some depression looks lethargic, while other depression is agitated. Full-blown depression can involve complete loss of motivation and energy; manic or paranoid thinking; and suicidal ideation. But many people don't acknowledge the lesser degrees of depression that can subtly affect our attitudes, our relationships with people, and our relationship with God. Some people live with minor depression for decades. Some get better. Some go up and down. Some stay there throughout their lives. And for some, minor depression is a precursor to major depression. In all cases, we must face it honestly and deal with it.

Anyone experiencing depression should visit their general practitioner for a thorough physical checkup. This is part of tending to the body, and it might turn up surprising causes of emotional problems. For some people, tending to the body might also include medication prescribed by a medical doctor. Contrary to the assumptions of some, appropriate medicine is absolutely consistent with God's teaching in Scripture.

9-10. These questions of self-evaluation and application venture into the sensitive and personal part of the lesson. Some groups might be secure enough for limited group discussion and brainstorming—especially if the group can brainstorm a variety of creative ways of applying the five Ts, without getting into personal sharing that's too vulnerable for the group setting. You might spend some time in groups of two or three. Or send everyone home to complete these questions as homework, perhaps with a trusted partner.

Your Next Step. While question 10 is meant to stimulate a variety of ideas, question 11 now asks each person to narrow down and commit to one or two steps they will take now. Of course, this exercise may not apply to some, who are not experiencing depression, or who aren't prepared to address their depression. Since future depression can sometimes be warded off or minimized by good habits established ahead of time, those who are depression-free might use this lesson as an opportunity to start or reinforce one of these preventative habits.

Rest Stop. Return your corporate focus to God, perhaps even in the middle of your discussion if appropriate, but certainly as you bring your meeting to a close. This or a similar exercise will help your group bring their minds and emotions to the God of comfort and healing, both during your meeting and throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 6: The Bitterness Tree

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 10.

Question 3. Possible responses: Like a root, bitterness can grow like a living entity, it can be invisible (“underground”), it can cause damage before we realize it.

4. In Christian circles, we tend to focus on God’s grace as that which forgives our wrongs and gives us gifts that we don’t deserve. And indeed, when we become overwhelmed with awareness of God’s forgiveness toward us, we find forgiveness easier to grant to those who have injured us.

But by His grace, God also provides us strength for godly living (see “Background” sidebar). This latter sense of the word is at least part of the answer to question 4. “Coming short of the grace of God” is, in part, failing to draw upon God’s strength and wisdom to resist bitterness and to perform the difficult task of forgiving.

5. The Greek word for “trouble” in Hebrews 12:15 literally means “to crowd in,” or to annoy. The word for “defile” is much stronger, meaning literally “to stain, pollute, or contaminate,” in this case to contaminate oneself and others with sin. We sometimes believe that we have a right to our own attitudes, as long as they don’t bother anyone else, but this is a faulty assumption, even when we try to keep our bitterness private. Discuss with your group the ways that one person’s bitterness can affect others around him or her, in various circles, near and far.

6. The New Testament concept of peace implies not only the individual’s inner peace, but also interpersonal peace in relationships. Peace between people doesn’t necessarily mean the absence of all conflict; it means handling conflict—inevitable in virtually all relationship—in a healthy, constructive way. “Holiness” means “different, distinct, set apart for a special purpose.” So pursuing holiness means seeking ways to live distinctly and differently from those around us, in a way that we remain suitable for God’s special purposes.

7. This question is the heart of the lesson. God wants us to “take off” bitterness and “put on” forgiveness. Now, keep in mind that in this series we haven’t yet surveyed the entire Road to Forgiveness, so some stages of that journey are still unfamiliar to some in your group. But God can still work changes in our hearts when we invite Him to replace bitterness with forgiveness, even if we don’t fully understand what He’s doing or what we should do. Guide your group toward reliance on God for this “change of clothes.”

9-10. Here we prompt a cost-benefit analysis. What benefits (or perceived benefits) do we gain from bitterness, and what does it cost? This further begs the question, What are benefits of releasing bitterness? We hope that people will be repelled by the costs of bitterness, and motivated by the benefits of forgiveness, so that they might take action and forgive.

11-12. These questions invite us to look for signs of bitterness in ourselves, as well as its possible causes in our past or present pain. As you decide how much of this discussion to handle in group, in subgroups, or as homework, use the approach that is appropriate for shepherding and guarding the hearts of your unique people.

Your Next Step. You might ask your people to privately write a tentative response to question 13, then to consider it more carefully during the week. In any case, encourage them to be specific. The way each individual addresses bitterness and practices forgiveness is somewhat

different from that of others. Some might seek counseling, some might memorize Scripture passages and meditate on them, some might commit to daily prayer about their attitude in a specific relationship, and others might seek reconciliation with someone else. The application might take time, so ask them to focus on the first step this week.

For those who aren't currently wrestling with bitterness, invite them to brainstorm ways they might "bitter-proof" their hearts in preparation for future injuries.

Rest Stop. This lesson might have opened the door to deep, long-held anger and pain in some individuals. Give them an opportunity to put their vulnerable hearts and minds in God's healing hands, so they don't walk away with raw emotional wounds gaping open. Encourage them also to practice this faith-focusing exercise or something like it during the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 7: The Dungeon of Despair

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-6.

Questions 1-2. This lesson deals with the emotional tapes we play. Long-term anger, resentment, the "unfairness" of it all, is rehearsed over and over again. It's almost as if we tell ourselves that if we play the tape over and over again, we can somehow change the outcome. Use this discussion to bring to light a few common elements of rehearsing unfairness—how it can happen to any of us, how easily we can become blinded by it, how foolish it might appear from a different vantage point, what motivates it, how to escape it, how it feels, the energy it takes, and how freedom feels afterward.

4. When we pursue revenge, we're taking on ourselves the prerogative that belongs solely to God. Not only is this offensive to God, but it also overburdens us and is practically ineffective. It doesn't solve anything. (*Important distinction:* Be careful not to confuse vengeance, which is selfishly motivated, with justifiable self-defense, defense of others, or participation in the legitimate exercise of justice toward wrongdoers. All of these are delegated to us by God.)

5-6. Possible responses to question 6: Desire for peace in relationships; confidence in God's justice (in His timing, in His way); compassion; love; forgiveness; focus on resisting the evil in ourselves, rather than focus on the evil in others. All of these are supernatural responses; we can't consistently practice them in our own power, but must draw upon the enabling, transforming grace of God inside us.

Many people have stories illustrating the principle of Romans 12:21. And several movies have at their heart an act of goodness toward an enemy or offender. Such acts of grace are sometimes life-changing for both parties.

7-8. God's forgiveness is unconditional toward those who ask for it and accept it from Him (1 John 1:9). Chronic unwillingness to forgive reveals an underlying resistance to or a failure to comprehend God's forgiveness.

9-12. Determine prayerfully how much of this personal application discussion is appropriate for your group's level of security and trust. As needed, assign some of these questions for homework or subgroup discussion.

Your Next Step. As with Your Next Step questions in Lessons 5 and 6, here again we allow for the possibility that some people might currently be dwelling in the Dungeon, while others aren't. Remind your group members that we can all apply something from this lesson, either as resolution for the present, or as preparation for the future. Encourage them to be specific. Rather than "Don't seek revenge" or "Give up self-pity," their applications should be more like "Choose an accountability partner who will call me daily for a week to see if I've been obsessing on the way George hurt me."

Rest Stop. Allow some time for members to bring confusion and inner conflict before God, and urge them to continue handing these burdens over to God throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Part III

Moving from the Past to the Future

Lesson 8: Mourn the Loss

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least question 1 and your choice of 2-5 or 6-8.

Question 1. In this lesson we learn that mourning a loss is all about learning to accept it. This Warm-Up question touches on this experience in a relatively safe way. Games are simulations of real life, and we learn a lot about our real-life strategies by observing ourselves playing games. When we begin to realize that we're likely to lose a game (whether a sporting event, a board game, a debate, a spelling bee, or whatever), we are confronted with the reality of loss. Some go into denial, some renew their efforts (and perhaps even come back and win), some become resigned and resentful, and some accept the inevitable and laugh it off good-naturedly. Your group may come up with other types of responses.

After this discussion, transition into the rest of the lesson by showing that many of these are also responses we might exhibit toward painful losses in life.

2-5. Tragedy and loss is, and always will be, a major theme running through the human experience. How gracious of God to provide us, through His Word, with numerous models of

people dealing with loss. Many of the psalms offer us such models. Help your people recognize that healthy mourning is completely honest (especially before God), and yet also, in time, involves steps of faith and hope.

The process of mourning not only acknowledges the reality of our losses, but also the reality of God's healing and His hope-filled future. Remember, grief comes naturally. It is a normal response to pain and loss. It normally focuses on the past. As people begin to heal, their language often shifts to focusing on the future, change and hope. This is an indication that mourning and acceptance are taking place.

The experience of mourning means choosing to feel, process, and accept the pain void of resentment. We express our mourning in different ways. Show unconditional acceptance to the mourner—this alone is a huge healing tool, because the mourner sometimes feels so alone. And as long as the mourner's behavior is not dangerous to self or others, simply try to express understanding for his or her pain. Eventually you'll probably begin to see signs of acceptance in the mourner. This is the time to come along him or her with your own gentle messages of hope.

6-8. The supreme struggle of Jesus serves to comfort us when we experience inner conflict. It's completely normal to feel resistance to painful reality, while at the same time wanting to accept reality honestly. Jesus' struggle in the Garden was, perhaps, the greatest example illustrating how He "is [able] to sympathize with our weaknesses...[as] one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NIV).

If the Son of God needed strengthening from heaven (Luke 22.43), we can be sure that our healthy mourning and acceptance of our pain will require God's help.

9. This application question is safe for group discussion, because it invites discussion about the experience of "people" in general, rather than the individual's experience. Some people may choose to share their own experience. Possible responses: "Why dig up buried pain?... Why stir up trouble?... Let's just leave the past in the past.... What good is it going to do?"

10-12. These application questions may be safe for group discussion; they're not as "intrusive" into the individual's present experience as many application questions in this series. So if your group has developed trust and security, or if you can direct discussion toward "safe" levels of sharing and away from the too-sensitive, these may be suitable for group discussion.

For in-depth, personal responses to these questions, use greater care. Consider the various options suggested in previous leaders' notes—careful in-group discussion, subgroup discussion, or individual homework (possibly with a trusted partner).

Your Next Step. It's safe for you to help your members privately get a start on question 13 before your meeting ends. You can invite them to take a minute simply to consider which painful event they may use for this exercise and write down one or more tentative possibilities. Then urge them to make an appointment during the week to complete the exercise. Some may choose to share their expression of mourning with a trusted partner, or possibly even with the group at the next meeting. It's best to let this come at the member's initiative, rather than ask people to share.

Rest Stop. Watch for signs that some group members might be feeling overwhelmed or threatened during this lesson. Those who are harboring deep trauma may feel more vulnerable

than you realize. You can use the first or third items from this Rest Stop exercise to help your people find security and stability in God's acceptance and strength. Ask your people also to use this exercise, or something like it, during the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 9: Decide Your Identity

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-3, 5, and 7.

Questions 2-4. If Joseph had chosen an identity that orbited around his injuries, he might have thought of himself as a hopeless loser, the universe's perpetual victim. But instead, he continued to believe he was a man belonging to God, for whom God had a purpose. We know this because he remained faithful and reputable in the eyes of the jailor, and he drew upon God's guidance to interpret the cupbearer's and baker's dreams.

5. When Joseph stood before Pharaoh, his pain and losses had strengthened, not weakened, his character and his confidence in God. He knew without shadow of doubt that even this powerful man—leader of the world power, was only a creation of God, and that God was almighty and sovereign over all people, nations, and circumstances. With this peace-inducing perspective he was able to act and speak as God's tool, to fulfill God's plan, not just for Joseph's life, but for Egypt and the course of near-future human history.

6. Possible responses: Maturity, confidence, integrity, leadership strengths, wisdom, peace, divine authority. These and other positive character traits can become ours, too, if we choose a constructive identity drawn from pain as opportunity, rather than as an excuse for defeat.

8-10. These application questions are somewhat sensitive. You might discuss them in group if your group has established trust and security, or if you can direct discussion toward "safer" levels of sharing (e.g., reword question 8: "How might an injured person see himself or herself if they let their injury become their identity?"). Injuries fall into several categories and degrees of severity—betrayal, broken promises, neglect, dishonesty...by one's spouse or best friend, by parents, by siblings or acquaintances, by employers or other authority, by strangers, or by impersonal circumstances. You'll provide your people a variety of ideas for applying these principles to their unique situations if you address a variety of types of injuries in your discussion.

11-12. These questions are potentially very sensitive and should be assigned as homework, unless your group has established strong trust and security. Members should read both questions before responding to question 11. This will help them understand that they should list changes that are positive, negative, mixed, and neutral. This will help them recognize more changes than they might otherwise—for example, optimists are more likely to recognize and list negative changes, while pessimists are more likely to acknowledge positive changes.

Your Next Step. As with questions 11-12, this exercise should be handled with extreme sensitivity. Even if you don't discuss it in group, you can take time during your meeting to invite members to privately jot down a few thoughts as a starting point, then complete their statement as homework. In order for this statement of identity to have its greatest impact on their lives, they would do well to share it with at least one trusted friend. They should also review it often—preferably memorize it—in order for it to soak down into their minds and hearts and influence their conscious and unconscious thoughts about themselves. Invite them to consider writing it on a card that they carry with them, or put it on their bathroom mirror or in some location they'll see on a regular basis.

Rest Stop. This exercise involves quite a bit of vulnerable personal sharing, so use it only if it's appropriate to your group's trust level. It would be good to end your group with a time of prayerful reminder of God's love, acceptance, and healing strength.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 10: The Profile of True Forgiveness

Tip: This lesson is an opportunity to clarify the gospel to those who may never have understood it or accept God's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life. Even if all of your members claim to be Christians, be careful about assuming this is true. Some people—who have been raised in church, who can quote the Bible, and who go through all the right motions—have never gained an accurate understanding of the gospel. These often-well-intentioned folks don't realize that they've never chosen to accept Christ's sacrifice as payment for their sins. They harbor life-and-death misconceptions without knowing it.

So as you prepare for and lead this discussion, keep in mind that someone in the discussion may be separated from God by unforgiven sin, and may never have experienced God's amazing grace. Watch for opportunities to clarify even the most basic points of the gospel and God's forgiveness; this is where people get stuck. And if you see evidence that someone in the group might not yet have trusted Christ as Savior, make an opportunity outside the meeting to talk with them privately about their relationship with God, or to connect them with another mature believer who can do so.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8.

Questions 2-5. We best understand what forgiveness is and how to exercise it by looking at God's forgiveness toward us. That's why we've begun this lesson with several questions to help us understand God's forgiveness. Not only does this focus help us *understand* forgiveness, but gaining a greater grasp on God's forgiveness toward us gives us stronger *motivation* to practice forgiveness toward others. So allow plenty of time for your group to dwell on these questions. Let them bathe in God's grace and love, the absolute freedom from guilt that is ours when we

accept the gift from Him. This is the starting point for our own forgiveness toward others, and anyone who doesn't get it is going to have trouble forgiving. Don't be surprised if some members make breakthroughs before your eyes, grasping God's forgiveness for the first time, or understanding it at a new level. A gift so precious and so free is hard for us skeptics to believe, and the dissolving of our resistance is sometimes sudden and overwhelming.

6-8. Having taken time to focus solely on God's forgiveness, we now make the transition to our own practice of forgiveness. The main point of these questions is that God is our model for forgiving, and His forgiveness toward us is our main motivation for forgiving others. The more Christlike we become in our spiritual growth, the more our practice of forgiveness looks like God's. Over time, we also realize that we benefit more than anyone else by forgiving, and so our growing wisdom comes to see forgiving as the only smart thing to do (not just the only right thing).

9. This question is somewhat safe to discuss in group. Discussion can be kept at a "safe" level if appropriate, still dealing with important principles of application to life, but avoiding too-sensitive personal sharing that might be inappropriate for your particular group. Help your people think of new ways to imitate God's forgiveness—ways that they don't already practice, or that might push them a little past their usual comfort zone.

Story: "Forgive Yourself?" Forgiving ourselves is really the completion of our acceptance of God's forgiveness. We can accept God's forgiveness with our minds, as an act of will, and God grants it. But although God's forgiveness is complete, our emotions can lag behind. We can be genuinely and thoroughly forgiven, and yet remain trapped in false guilt feelings, failing to enjoy the complete experience of God's forgiveness. Forgiving ourselves is the process of allowing the truth to inform our entire experience—the experience of our mind, our will, and our emotions.

You may want to make time for your group to read and discuss this story, especially if some of your members struggle with allowing God's forgiveness to take hold of them completely.

Your Next Step. When your people complete this exercise, they aren't being prompted to actually practice forgiveness toward their offender. Rather, this exercise helps them prepare for the act of forgiveness, sorting out misconceptions about forgiveness from the truth of what forgiveness is. It helps them avoid incomplete or misguided "forgiveness" and prepare for healthy, complete, and truth-guided forgiveness toward their offender, when that moment comes.

Compared to most other Your Next Step exercises, this one is less likely to be inappropriate for some level of group discussion. Even if your group was new to each other at the beginning of this series, they've probably established a significant level of trust with each other by now. And this exercise, while dealing directly with some specifics of each person's injury, involves sharing that may not be as sensitive as in other lessons. Still, be careful, and consider the option of assigning it as homework.

Rest Stop. If nothing else, your group will profit by spending time praising and thanking God for His forgiveness toward us. If appropriate, prompt your people to pray also for God's help as they forgive others. And for any who may feel traumatized by sharing and discussion, you might spend some time revisiting in prayer the security and healing we have in Christ.

Ask everyone to keep these themes in mind as they talk to God throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Part IV Choice Ahead

Lesson 11: How to Ask for Forgiveness

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-3 and 6-8.

Question 1. Examples of possible responses: "My bad" during a pick-up basketball game, a nod and a wave when we've made a mistake in traffic.

3. Note that in this passage, Jesus does not tell us to never "judge" others (that is, to recognize and confront the wrongdoings of others). Rather, he says that before we do, we should judge ourselves. This addresses a common misconception about Jesus' teaching here. We should recognize and confront sin and evil, but always in an appropriate way. In part, that means we do it with humility rather than arrogant self-righteousness. And the best exercise for cultivating humility in oneself is to examine one's own sins and shortcomings. When we become honest with ourselves, with God, and with others about ourselves, then we enter into confrontation of others with more gentleness and compassion (when appropriate) and more confidence and authority (when appropriate).

4-7. Here we examine two examples relating to owning our sin and asking forgiveness—the negative example of Adam and Eve, and the positive example of David. Help your people see the avoidance of responsibility and the self-defensive superficiality of Adam and Eve. In contrast, lead your group toward an appreciation of David's gut-level honesty before God (and even before other people, as we see throughout the story of his life). We find it astounding that a man can commit adultery and murder, and still be declared a man after God's heart...*by God Himself!* But the reason God could say this was that David was never far from deep personal identification with the heart of God. The reason that Psalm 51 (like so many other psalms of David) is so passionate and effusive is that he lived so close to God that he knew God's heart—he thought and felt about sin, including his own, as God does. And it grieved him to the extreme. But to the same degree, we see David's (and God's) supreme joy in forgiveness and renewed righteousness.

8. This application question is safe for group discussion, and it is very important in the context of this lesson. In order for any of us to receive and grant forgiveness, we must accept and enjoy the experience of God's forgiveness. Note 1 John 1:9: Even if we've been saved from condemnation and eternal death by the sacrificial death of Jesus, we must keep an ongoing open relationship with our heavenly Father by confessing our sins regularly. (The Greek verbs in this verse are in the present tense, which in Greek implies ongoing, habitual action. So we should read the verse,

“If we *keep on* confessing our sins, he...will *keep on* forgiving us our sins and *keep on* purifying us from all unrighteousness.” This is a healthy practice in any relationship—keeping the “air” clear of offenses that can hinder the relationship—and it applies as much as ever in our relationship with God, as we seek to draw ever closer to Him.

9-11. These questions—especially 10 and 11—are more sensitive and personal, and you should gauge your degree of group discussion to the security and trust level in the group. If anyone has difficulty asking forgiveness from God, question 9 is important; it helps us confront misconceptions and emotional barriers that keep us from this healing practice. Questions 10 and 11 (and 12) guide us through the process of practicing the three steps of asking forgiveness. Even if it seems silly to some people, urge everyone to practice question 11 in private (maybe in front of a mirror). The best technique for learning and becoming comfortable with a new habit is *doing it*. Make sure everyone knows this is very important.

Your Next Step. And here is where each member chooses one relationship and one offense for which to ask forgiveness. Some members might not yet be ready for this step; they may still be struggling through an earlier stage of The Road to Forgiveness. Don’t pressure anyone. However, even these individuals might be able to seek forgiveness for a relatively light offense (e.g., forgetting a birthday or saying something hurtful in anger to a trusted friend). If appropriate for your group, it would be good to have each member share next week how their experience went—perhaps with a trusted partner, perhaps with the group in some cases.

Rest Stop. Some people will need God’s strength to overcome huge emotional hurdles to asking forgiveness. These might include insecurity about their personal worth or their moral goodness/badness, risks involved in becoming vulnerable to others, or other such issues. Other people will need God’s help discerning the difference between ineffective (superficial, avoidance-based) and effective (vulnerable, honest) methods of asking forgiveness. You might use the Rest Stop time in group to invite God’s help in these respects, or simply to help bring down the stirred-up emotions in the group. Encourage everyone to keep in touch with God throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 12: Releasing the Injustice Alone

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you’re not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-3, 6-9.

Questions 1-2. These Warm-Up questions are meant to help people prepare to overcome emotional barriers to the final, practical steps along The Road to Forgiveness—and particularly the steps required of those who are faced with releasing an injustice alone. If they can remember times they made a choice based on what they *knew* was true, even though it didn’t *feel* true, and if they can get in touch with the (usually) positive outcomes, they may begin to see past the emotional barriers to the positive results of forgiveness.

3. Responses might include honest expressions of Joseph’s pain, anger, sorrow, and other emotions, as well as prayers for emotional healing, for the supernatural ability to forgive his brothers, for peace, or for strength to release the right for vengeance to God (and to keep releasing it).

4-7. In these questions, and the Bible passages they present, we see God as our example for releasing our injustices alone. He did it completely, unconditionally, setting out a gift of forgiveness for any who would accept it. In order for us to appreciate the magnitude of God’s gesture, we must gain a mental grasp of God as person, a being with emotions, feelings that can be deeply hurt. God has, amazingly, made Himself subject to emotional pain inflicted by His creations. Throughout the Bible we see examples of all three persons of the Trinity enduring emotional pain and sorrow that we have caused (e.g., 1 Chronicles 21:15; Hosea 11:1-5; God as the jilted spouse of His idolatrous people in Jeremiah 3:6-10; Luke 19:41-44; Ephesians 4:30). God, who made us in His image, is like us in many ways we don’t often consider. And when He forgives our offenses against Him, He does it with heart, with deep love, and at great cost to Himself. We’ve wounded Him deeply, and His forgiveness is no small or easy thing.

It’s easier for us to appreciate the forgiving example of God-in-flesh, Jesus during His earthly life. That’s one of the reasons God became man—namely, so that we could identify with God in ways that we would otherwise have difficulty doing. Just consider how far God went, just to “speak our language” in the form of a man who could live the character and heart of God in our midst, on our level. What a loving God!

Only when we get in touch with the heart of God behind these truths (and many others in Scripture) can we find the best understanding, motivation, and strength for following His example in our relationships toward those who have injured us.

8-10. These application questions are safe for group discussion. They help us come to terms with the feeling of incompleteness when we don’t get to face our offender, when we don’t enjoy the satisfaction of hearing their request for forgiveness, or anything approximating it. Forgiveness is a unilateral action by the injured party. Even when the offender is involved, we still make the decision to forgive in complete independence of their actions or words. This is all the more apparent when we release an injustice alone.

Possible responses to question 10: Study God’s example of unilateral forgiveness toward us; memorize Scripture passages about the ways we benefit by releasing injustices; pray for God’s inner healing, that we might enjoy the freedom of forgiveness toward others. Encourage your group to think creatively about other possible answers.

11-12. These questions are more sensitive and personal. Handle them as best suits your unique group. Question 11 serves as preparation for action, allowing your people to map out a series of steps, while question 13 will ask them to take the first specific step of application for this week. Question 12 serves to provide a dose of motivation to move ahead, even if it’s difficult, keeping our eyes fixed on the benefits we will gain on the other side of forgiveness.

Your Next Step. Some group members may not have chosen, as their main focus for this series, an injury that they will release alone. Encourage these individuals to choose some injury—even if it doesn’t feel like a significant one—that fits this pattern, just for practice. Maybe an offense

by a deceased relative, or a harsh word from a childhood acquaintance, whose name may be long forgotten. This way, everyone in your group can still take a little time this week to consider how they would go about releasing an injustice alone.

Don't neglect the second part of question 13, especially for those who are dealing with deep emotional wounds. All of us can at least use the prayers of our fellow forgivers, and some may need handholding (literally and figuratively) as we take difficult steps of forgiveness.

Rest Stop. Keep a dual focus during a closing prayer time—focusing both on God's forgiveness toward us and our forgiveness toward others. And remind your people to keep this prayerful attitude throughout the week.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 13: The Road Less Traveled

Tip: The most important principle in this lesson is the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Clustered together with reconciliation are also the concepts of trust and restoration of an offender's previous rights and responsibilities; all of these are independent of forgiveness...completely separate considerations. To forgive an offender in no way implies that you've also made any of these other determinations, and forgiveness can be complete without reconciliation, renewed trust, or restoration. In fact, granting the latter may be very unwise in some situations.

If your people get nothing else out of this lesson, they should get this. Of course, we also want them to move ahead with steps of forgiveness and attempts at reconciliation, but the lesson will still be worthwhile if they walk away with the one valuable insight.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover at least questions 1-6.

Question 1. Some relationships may be beyond reconciliation. But in many cases we won't know until we try to rescue them. This Warm-Up question causes us to maintain hope for reconciliation when we're tempted to give up.

2. This question should actually be the first question in the Trail Map section, but was erroneously placed under Warm-Up.

3-4. Here we consider the practical distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph wisely allowed his brothers several opportunities to show that they had changed. If he had immediately revealed himself to them, they may have ingratiated themselves to him, possibly without sincerity.

When we're considering the wisdom of reconciling our broken relationships, we shouldn't use the technique of tricking the other person as our first resort; this is likely to cause offense and distrust in the other direction. But if we have serious reservations about the

trustworthiness of the other person, we should follow Joseph's example of allowing time and observation to show us whether the offender is someone who is worthy of our renewed trust.

5-6. Here we learn from Joseph's example of initiative and honesty in granting forgiveness.

7. One of the benefits the forgiver reaps is an unhindered relationship with God.

8-9. Ideally, the process of in-person forgiveness involves initiative and gracious attitudes from both parties. Does this always happen? No. But this type of two-way-giving is a scenario worth keeping in view as a goal. When you grant forgiveness in person, look for ways to allow the other person to participate. And when they do, try to understand the value of what they're offering you, and the cost they may be paying to offer it. Show respect and appreciation where they're due, even if the other person's offering is stumbling and imperfect.

10-12. Question 12 is safe for group discussion, while questions 10-11 may be safe in some groups.

13-14. These questions are even more personal and sensitive, although you might handle them in group discussion with a degree of impersonal objectivity. For example, you might discuss question 14 without anyone sharing specifics of their painful experiences (e.g., "What kinds of signs or conditions—in general—might we consider as evidence that our offenders are becoming trustworthy?"). Your people are likely to feel safer brainstorming "generic" answers in group, and considering specific, personalized answers in private or with a trusted partner.

Your Next Step. As with Your Next Step in the previous lesson, you may have some group members for whom this type of forgiveness is not their central application focus at the moment. Invite them, at least, to choose an example of an offense they could forgive in person. They may or may not actually follow through with it in real life, but they can at least mentally rehearse the steps involved, to increase their familiarity and comfort level with these steps. Then, when they face such an opportunity, that part of The Road to Forgiveness will not be alien territory.

Rest Stop. Pay special attention to those who are considering active steps this week toward in-person forgiveness and possible reconciliation with someone who has hurt them. These people may be especially frightened, and they need the group's (or at least a partner's) prayers, encouragement, and support. They may even need someone present during the planned encounter. Keep these tender hearts in mind as you close your meeting, allowing time for God's peace and love-directed power to pervade your hearts. Consider Paul's counsel in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 as you seek to shepherd each individual according to his or her specific needs.

Scouting Ahead. Ask everyone to set an appointment during the day or two before your next meeting to spend between five and fifteen minutes Scouting Ahead for the next lesson.

Lesson 14: Moving Forward

Tip: If this is your group's last (or even second-to-last) meeting, be sure to set aside time to reminisce and review. Think back on the truths you've studied and the events of the group's life. Celebrate together in at least some small way. It's best if you can end the group with a social event that involves no heavy study, but focuses on the relationships and some specific take-home challenge for each group member, applying something you've learned.

Tip: We encourage you to choose the questions that you think are most important for your group to discuss. If you're not sure, we suggest guarding time to cover questions ##1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10.

Question 1. The central point of this lesson is the value of sharing our stories of injury, healing, and growth with each other. In this way, God can use our past losses as lessons for mutual strengthening and encouragement. This Warm-Up question points your people in this general direction by drawing a parallel with our physical scars and the differences—sometimes positive—that they can have in our life-after-healing.

2-3. People who have been injured often hesitate to venture out into community, and see themselves as damaged goods, unlikely to have positive impact in the lives of others. However, as these Scripture passages point out, God can use our past injuries to *prepare* and *equip* us to positively impact the lives of others. These questions are worth emphasis if your group includes individuals who don't perceive themselves as capable of touching lives for God.

4-7. To underscore the preceding questions, question 4 lists several ways that God's Word instructs us to invest in each other's lives. Throughout the healing process, each of us has probably benefited by some of these ministries from others. And, in turn, our past difficulties and our journeys to healing often equip us to fulfill these roles in others' lives. As you discuss questions 4-7, encourage your people to watch for one or two passages from this list that stand out as ways God may be calling them to make a difference in community. Also, if they are in need of one or more of these "one anothers," how can each member make their need known and receive from community?

8-10. These questions help your members to review and summarize the entire Road to Forgiveness study. Focusing on the positive benefits, questions 8 and 9 prompt each member to identify one or two new lessons learned and new successes achieved. As your people share, celebrate what God has done, and help each person see the significance of even their seemingly small steps of obedience and growth. Questions 10 (and 11 and 12) directs and challenges them toward their ongoing application of one key principle or skill from the series. Urge your group to view The Road to Forgiveness as an ongoing journey leading to more and more healing, growth, and maturity...rather than "a study we once did" and left behind.

Your Next Step. Using these questions, your members are encouraged to establish their individual plans for the next few weeks or months, practicing the principles and skills from this series, launching into a lifelong habit of forgiveness. If your group is going to stay together for some time to come, you can design ongoing encouragement, support and accountability into your future relationships. If your group is ending, then you might establish ongoing partnerships for this purpose, or possibly periodic group reunions to celebrate new victories and to stimulate each other toward even greater forgiveness and good works.

Rest Stop. For most groups, a time to worship and praise God for His work in and through the group would be a fitting way to end the series. Remind your group that this worship and praise doesn't have to end when you disperse; it is a way of life, an ongoing conversation with God, a continual sacrifice of joyful praise for His loving partnership in our lives.