



The Road to Forgiveness—Lesson 7

THE DUNGEON OF DESPAIR

Your Journey So Far

In your travels on *The Road to Forgiveness*, you may or may not have experienced depression or bitterness. However, there is a third potential pitfall that can consume incredible amounts of emotional energy and hinder your progress—The Dungeon of Despair.

*There are dungeons beneath the castles
of despair.*

—Charles Spurgeon

Today's Travel Route

Anger is one of a wide range of normal, God-given emotions. But it's an emotional state that God intends only as a short-term stopover, not a long-term residence. If you experience anger, but refuse to release it, you'll eventually discover yourself trapped in...The Dungeon of Despair.

Anger has power—the power to free and the power to imprison. Short-term anger, expressed in a measured way, can release pain and lead to constructive resolution. But long-term anger, even if it doesn't putrefy into bitterness, can become a dungeon with walls of your own making.

So much has been taken away that you feel you have the right to be angry...and to stay that way. This creates a sense of control; you experience power in not forgiving. To the one who hurt you, and maybe to the cruel world at large, you say, *I am not your victim, you are **my** victim.*

Anger, cherished and hoarded, is a cold and lonely prison, a dead end street, a place of self-pity. It's a perpetual spin cycle, going round and round and round the same images and arguments and complaints, tumbling them and exploring every angle. This endless wallowing may feel like self-care, seeming to strengthen and empower you, but this is counterfeit power; the negative energy of resentful self-pity will emotionally drain you.

If you find yourself in the Dungeon, consider this message of hope: Your sentence can end whenever you wish. Life exists on the outside. You will laugh and sing again, but you must first choose to move through the resentment and create a better post-injustice existence. Releasing the right to be angry is not easy. Some never do. They're perfectly content to remain in the Dungeon. Thus they become emotional slaves to someone else's injustice, sacrificing self-determination, granting power over their lives to someone else's wrongful actions.

Now is the time to decide: Walk out of the Dungeon and move on with your life. Talk to the jailor. He holds the key and can open the door.

The jailor is you.

Mental Messages We Play Over and Over Again in the Dungeon

- ✓ This isn't fair!
- ✓ Will they ever be held accountable?
- ✓ The truth will never be known.
- ✓ If only...
- ✓ Why didn't I...?
- ✓ How can I hurt them back?

Hatred is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat.

—Harry Emerson Fosdick

Having resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

—Malachy McCourt

Warm-Up

1. Describe a time you experienced a “tame” obsession. Maybe you lost something—you really didn't need it right now, but you couldn't stop looking. Or someone had a secret, and you couldn't rest until you knew what it was.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.

—Author unknown

2. How did it feel? What kept you there? How did you escape (if you ever did)?

There is no torment like the inner torment of an unfor-giving spirit. It refuses to be soothed, it refuses to be healed, it refuses to forget.

—Charles Swindoll

Trail Map

3. Summarize in your own words the message of Psalm 37:8 and James 1:19–20.

Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing.

—Psalm 37:8

Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

—James 1:19–20

Optional Study:

Learn more about returning good for evil in 1 Peter 3:8–13. Learn more about revenge and God’s intervention in Deuteronomy 32:35; Proverbs 20:22.

4. According to Romans 12:17–21, revenge belongs to God. Read this passage. What might your actions be saying about God if you pursue vengeance?

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:17–21

5. Which qualities are preferable to vengeance? (Include the character quality you think verse 20 is teaching.)

Background:

Regarding “heap burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20): In *Strange Scriptures That Perplex the Western Mind*, Barbara M. Bowen says that in Bible times people carried almost everything on their heads with relative ease. “In many homes the only fire they have is kept in a brazier which they use for simple cooking as well as for warmth. If it should go out, some member of the family will take the brazier to a neighbor’s house to borrow fire. If the neighbor is a generous woman, she will heap the brazier full of coals” (pages 31–32).

6. How might we expect our good to “overcome” another person’s evil? (Romans 12:21)

7. In Matthew 6:12, 14–15, is Jesus saying that God’s forgiveness of us in our daily walk is conditional upon our willingness to forgive others? Why or why not?

Pray, then, in this way: “...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors....” For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

—Jesus in Matthew 6:9, 12, 14–15

8. What practical implications do you draw from this passage that impacts your practice of receiving and extending forgiveness?

Optional Study:

Read I Samuel 24. How did David respond when he had opportunity to seek revenge? What was Saul’s response?

Psalms 37 and 73 are two of the best Bible passages for people who are deeply troubled by injustice in the world. Read one or both of these. What new perspective do you gain on injustice? In your own practical terms, what do these teachings exhort you to do? Why is this a good idea?

Walking the Talk

9. If you’ve ever spent time in the Dungeon, describe your feelings and thoughts during that time.

Thought and Discussion:

What are the differences between (a) honestly expressing your pain and loss to yourself and to others, and (b) over-indulgent self-pity?

10. Can you identify any good results from your stay in the Dungeon? Any harmful results? Explain.

*When you blame others,
you give up your power to
change.*

—Anonymous

11. If you have been on the receiving end of injustice, you probably feel like you have the right to seek revenge. But God says to let Him settle the issue in His time and in His way. What are your thoughts and feelings about leaving it up to Him?

12. What is your understanding of the Chinese proverb, “The one who pursues revenge should dig two graves”?

Remember, as you extend forgiveness, you are not saying that the one who hurt you was right, but rather that God is Just and that what He will do is right.

Your Next Step

13. Choose at least one step of action you will take in the next day or two to help you walk out of the Dungeon of Despair, or what you might do now in order to avoid a future stay in the Dungeon.

Rest Stop

If you've wrestled significantly with the issues of this lesson, then you might have a lot of mixed feelings and thoughts inside. Justice versus mercy. Holding on to anger versus wishing you could let it go. Self-pity versus compassion for others.

What we *know* is true doesn't always blend well with what *feels* true. And sometimes even our feelings seem to contradict each other. Fortunately, God is always available to help untangle our confusing thoughts and emotions.

- *Take any amount of time you need to voice your thoughts and emotions as you come away from this lesson. (Pause.)*
- *Affirm to God that, no matter how you feel, you know He cares about you and He is just. (Pause.)*
- *Ask Him to work inside you, helping you find resolution about issues you can figure out...and helping you trust Him with the ones you can't.*

Scouting Ahead

Before the next lesson, consider: Is denial more often your friend or your enemy? Is acceptance more often your friend or your enemy?



I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once the hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

—James Baldwin

It is easier to hurt than to heal.

—German Proverb

There is no passion in the human heart that promises so much and pays so little as revenge.

—Josh Billings

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

—Frederick Buechner

I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him.

—Booker T. Washington