

Why we should forgive



Fountain of Life Booklets

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The Fountain of Life Booklets (translation from the Norwegian booklet series *Livets Kilde*) are produced as a public service and are offered free of charge. The booklets are produced in Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and now English (electronic version only).

Our readers are from various Christian denominations, as well as non-believers. The booklets seek to address important biblical topics that will be helpful to the reader.

The Worldwide Church of God in Scandinavia, as Grace Communion International is known in this area, has produced four or five booklets a year in each language since 1998, resulting in more than 80 booklets on many important biblical topics.

The production of the booklets is a team effort involving many Scandinavian church members, who are writing, translating and proofreading the booklets in each language.

The original booklets are written in Norwegian by Carl Fredrik Aas

Norwegian – proofreading: Roy Østensen

Danish – translation: Emil Madsen (–2011),
Marie (2008–) & Marianna (2017–) Laursen;
proofreading (contents): Pamela Østensen & Donald Boddie

Swedish – translation: Renée Strand;
proofreading (contents): Sissel Guleng; proofreading (language): Jonas Bauer

English – translation: Alan Beal and Eva Beal;
proofreading (contents): C F Aas; proofreading (language): John S Armstrong

Layout and printing: Eva Beal.

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THIS BOOKLET WILL ADDRESS HOW WE CAN EXPERIENCE PEACE AND happiness in our lives. The intention is to show how we can live in peace with ourselves, with our neighbour and with our God. It is intended to open our minds to God's healing joy, so that we can leave the past behind and live new lives.

We will look at forgiveness and pursue important aspects of that subject, which also involves coming to terms with the past. In order to leave the past behind it is necessary to forgive. If we cannot forgive, then we carry with us unnecessary baggage that can destroy our future.

Fountain of Life booklets seek to clarify the gospel message by making it relevant for our time. It is our desire to help individuals to understand both themselves and their relationship with God, irrespective of their religious affiliation.

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There are several aspects to this subject: God's forgiveness of our wrongdoings, our forgiveness of those who have wronged us, forgiveness of ourselves, and the acceptance of forgiveness both

*Forgiveness is a gift
you give yourself*

Bishop Desmond Tutu

from others and God. It is an important subject, and one that is emphasized in the Lord's Prayer.

Research and the latest development of cognitive neuroscience have taken the biological process of forgiveness to a new dimension. Forgiveness has been shown to impact both our psychological and physical health, and to have a positive effect related to mental problems, such as depression, stress, and more serious mental distress (*Store Norske leksikon, Forgiveness*). □

What is forgiveness?

We have all been hurt at some time in our lives. We may have been unfairly treated, let down by someone close to us, made a fool of, mobbed or abused. There are many reasons as to why we emotionally carry with us open, painful sores that continually remind us of how unclean we are, of our inferiority or failures.

FORGIVENESS IS NOT REPRESSION. THE WORD FORGIVENESS STEMS from the old Middle Saxon word “togeven”, which means: to no longer count as a burden (guilt), to rid oneself of something. It does not mean, as seem probable, to give someone something. The Greek word used in The New Testament means: to get rid of something, to put something behind oneself. To forgive we need to confront the painful experience and process it by recognizing and admitting it, and then focusing on the situation from God’s perspective. We can then put painful emotions behind us. God’s perspective on our lives is not the same as ours. To God this life is just the beginning of our eternal existence; in this life we are to learn the difference between good and evil. God is well aware of the difficulties of being human.

The painful emotions must be processed. Destructive emotions such as anger, indignation, envy, hate and vengeance must be dismissed. But it takes time. Whatever happened cannot be undone, but is now emotionally neutral. The emotional component is removed, even though the knowledge of what hurt us may not fade away. To forgive doesn’t mean that you forget what has taken place, but that you no longer harbour any negative feelings.

Forgiveness is achieved when we are at peace with what hurt us. We have then forgiven and emotionally removed that hurt. On the other hand, the person who caused us hurt must

answer to God and the laws of the land for what they have done. But where we are concerned, the matter is forgiven and out of our hands.

In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to forgive us our wrongdoings to the same degree that we forgive those who offend us (Matthew 6:12). We are to forgive others as a consequence of God having forgiven us our sins. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul tells us we are to forgive others just as Christ has forgiven us. If we ask for God's forgiveness, then we must be prepared to forgive those who have offended us! □

*Forgive us our debts,
as we also have
forgiven our debtors.*

Matthew 6:12

*Be kind and compassionate
to one another, forgiving
each other, just as in Christ
God forgave you.*

Ephesians 4:32



How God's forgiveness differs from ours

What does God's forgiveness mean?

God forgives the atrocity. That is why God's forgiveness differs from our forgiving our fellow man. When God forgives, he forgives the act itself and removes the punishment it deserves. Only God is our judge, and he only can forgive our wrongdoings and remove the punishment.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS MEANS RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THE GUILTY party and God. When God forgives us, he invites us to a fellowship with him, as if our sins have never taken place.

God's forgiveness has a high price—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus has offered to atone for our sins with his life. On the Cross he carried the sins of the world, and this is why the Father had to forsake him and let him die alone (Matthew 27:46). Because sin is a stumbling barrier in our relationship with God, the Father had to withdraw from Jesus during the last few minutes of his life. This shows the reality of Jesus taking our sins upon himself.

God's forgiveness necessitates suffering. Jesus' suffering on the cross was excruciating, and is how God took responsibility for allowing Satan to deceive mankind and causing so much suffering and pain down through history. It could be said that God is partly responsible for much of human misery, and that he could have prevented it. God could have stopped Satan's presence in Eden and the seduction of Adam and Eve. But since God created man with a free will to choose between good and evil, he had to allow Satan access to them.

God holds us responsible for any wrongdoings or lies, but forgives us when we repent and ask for forgiveness. God

doesn't force either salvation or forgiveness on us. Since God forgives the act, the atrocity, we have to confess our sin, repent and ask him to remove the penalty of death.



What does it mean to forgive someone?

Our forgiveness is less far-reaching than God's. We cannot remove the deserved punishment for any misdeeds. Only God, as our Judge, has this power. Since we are not to judge our fellow man, we cannot dismiss the penalty. We have no way of knowing all the ins and outs of other people's lives or why they act as they do. We have no way of knowing the hurt they themselves may have encountered.

SINCE WE CANNOT REMOVE THE DESERVED PUNISHMENT FOR THE misdeed, our forgiveness is different to that of God's. When we forgive others, we forgive the pain inflicted on us. But we also acknowledge that we are not their judge, and thus withdraw and leave the punishment to God, and the laws of society if the transgression violates the law of the land.

Forgiveness has a price, namely for us to relinquish any demand for justice and punishment we may feel is our right. We leave this to God and the local authorities.

Our forgiveness does not entail automatic reconciliation. It might, but not necessarily. For instance, if a woman has been abused for a long period of time by her ex-husband, her forgiveness does not mean reconciliation and her moving back to him. In her heart she can forgive the pain he has caused her, in order to gain peace of mind and rid herself of the hatred and hurtful feelings. Reconciliation is completely dependant on him changing his behaviour towards her. There can be no reconciliation if the abuse continues.

We have to forgive in our heart, even though the other person does not ask for forgiveness and has not changed, because it is not the atrocity we are forgiving, but the pain inflicted on us. Unlike God we cannot demand repentance or regret. God's forgiveness means forgiving the actual misdeed and a reconciliation that presupposes that the guilty party repents and changes his or her way of life.

The Lord's Prayer tells us that God will forgive us to the same extent as we have forgiven those who have wronged us. God is merciful, and because all need his mercy, it is his wish that we also show mercy. In Matthew 7:2 we read that God will judge us in the same way as we judge others. If we judge others harshly, God will judge us likewise. As Christians we should endeavour to show others God's love and mercy, not our own inferior love. This is why it is so important for us to forgive those who hurt us, so that they may experience God's love through us.



What happens when we forgive ourselves?

Many Christians have difficulty in forgiving themselves. For many it is easier to forgive others than to forgive self. Often the demands and expectations of our own behaviour is such that it makes us our own worst critics when we do something wrong. In addition we have an Accuser who insists that God will not forgive us our wrongdoings.

FORGIVING OURSELVES IS A CONSEQUENCE OF HAVING ACCEPTED God's forgiveness. It is not God's wish that a sin he has forgiven should continue to burden us. That is why it is so important that we as Christians are able to forgive ourselves. We have to accept that it is not we, but God, that is our Judge.

What is it that we forgive, when we forgive ourselves? We accept God's forgiveness and we forgive the pain we have inflicted on ourselves. We admit that we are not perfect, and that it is God's forgiveness that has cleansed us, so that we can stand justified before him. We admit that God—and only God is our Judge. We admit that to be able to stand clean before him, we need his mercy every day. God has forgiven our sin, and as a consequence we can now forgive ourselves. The sin is no longer a burden. We live in humility, but we live a life full of joy and in peace with God and ourselves, in the knowledge that our sin has been forgiven. □



Confess your sins to each other



In James 5:16 we read “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

PROVERBS 28:13 SAYS “HE WHO CONCEALS HIS SINS DOES NOT prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

It is God who forgives our sins, and it is to him we should turn with our confession. But there are times when we have a need for a validation of God’s forgiveness—times when a bad conscience and guilty feelings just won’t let go. There are times when we feel that praying to God is not enough. In difficult situations it can be liberating to confess your sins to a true friend, someone who will not divulge the information. In this way we are genuine, honest and transparent towards fellow Christians. We don’t put up a façade. At the same time it gives the other person an opportunity to pray for you, reflecting God’s love and mercy. This is why James ends the verse by emphasising the effectiveness and power of prayers.

James writes that if we do this, we will be healed. The Greek word used for “healed” really means “to be whole” and does not necessarily indicate healing from illness. The translators have most likely understood this to be a continuation of the previous verse, which deals with healing from illness. But James deals with many aspects in this short chapter, and we believe that he changes theme here, to show that we can become “whole” by openly confessing our sins, and not trying to hide anything or be untruthful. □

Forgiveness is a process

There are two inherent approaches to the reality of life, our intellect and our emotions. Our intellect tells us the best thing to do is to put hurt and pain behind us—to forgive. But emotionally it is more difficult and it takes longer to reach that conclusion. Hurt feelings are slow to heal.

TO CARRY HURT FROM THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE, IS A BURDEN that can lead to physical illness, dependency on alcohol or drugs, depression, or even more serious consequences. There are different stages to forgiveness and in his book *Forgiveness*, Dr. Sidney Simon mentions six stages or phases. Take the example of a young girl of five who was abused by an adult member of the family for two years. To begin with she did not really understand what had happened to her, but as she got older she experienced several of these stages. There are some who go through all of them, and yet others only the last couple.

Stage 1: We make light of or repress the hurt

As a defence mechanism we sometimes try to make light of or repress what has happened. We are not willing or able to recognize and deal with the pain. We are not willing or ready to put words to our feelings or how the situation is affecting us.

Stage 2: Self-blame

To sooth our feelings we sometimes admit that we are also to



blame, or at least partly to blame. We “deserve” what has happened to us, and the pain that follows. This causes some to turn to drink, drugs etc., to avoid the emotional pain.

Stage 3: The victim

Life is not fair. We have been victimized. We wallow in self-pity. Some remain in this stage because it makes them feel safe. It gives us a feeling of power over our perpetrators, and gives us a reason to lament and remind them of what they have done. By not forgiving we protect ourselves and justify putting blame on others. This often leads to self-destructive behaviour.

Stage 4: Anger and indignation

This is the stage where we openly unload our anger and indignation. We harbour thoughts of revenge. The perpetrators deserve to be punished. This negative attitude will eventually impact our personality and relationships with other people. Negative thoughts could in time affect our health and cause sickness.

Stage 5: Acceptance

This is where the process of forgiveness really begins. We realize that what is done is done, what is said is said. We cannot change the past, but we can impact the future. We are able to describe the offence, process the pain and then let go of the hurt. We no longer dwell on what has happened. We try to see things from God’s perspective and put ourselves in the other person’s place. We do not judge, we leave that to God. We ask God to help us accept the situation and leave the hurt behind.

Stage 6: Letting go and moving on

We let God’s peace, which we can receive through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), help us to lay the pain behind us. It will make us stronger. Through the process of forgiveness we will learn more about ourselves, about our responses, and also how to show greater empathy for others. □

Forgiven, but not forgotten?

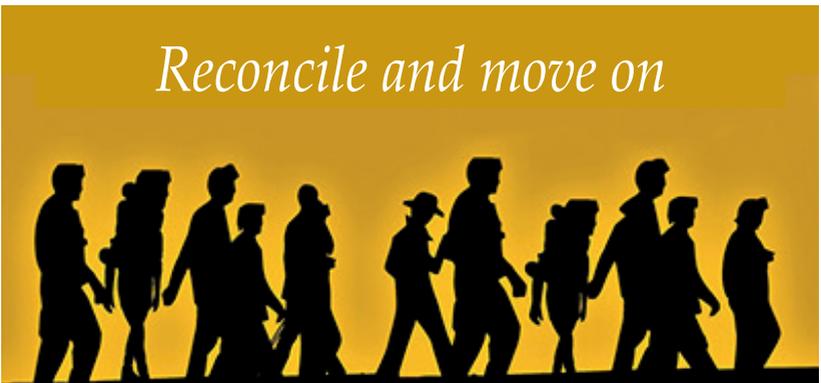
God says he not only forgives our sins, he also forgets them. That is his nature! How good it would be if we could do the same—remove our hurt so far from us that we could forget it.

TO FORGIVE MEANS THAT WE HAVE REMOVED THE NEGATIVE emotional reaction of what happened or what was said. We will most likely remember what was said and done, but if we truly have forgiven the person who hurt us, it will no longer affect us negatively.

On occasion we may hear someone say: “Well, I forgive you, but I will never forget what you have done!” That is not forgiveness. We hear the strong emotion in those words—forgiveness was not from the heart.

Some would insist that an incident that is not forgotten is not really forgiven. This is wrong, since we can still remember what has been said and done, but we have managed to put the hurt and pain behind us. □

Reconcile and move on



Forgiveness has a price

In our relationship with God, forgiveness is based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ paid for our sin with his life.

PEOPLE HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY IN FORGIVING. WHEN WE ARE treated unjustly we pay the price in forgiving, because it is we who must process our emotions and give up the right to feel offended. There is a price to pay. Possibly the most difficult thing a person can do is forgive others, or ask for forgiveness. How difficult it is to say: “I was wrong, please forgive me”. How often do we say that?

It is God’s will that we forgive others, just as Jesus forgave those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). An inability to forgive will make life difficult.

It may well be that the offender feels no remorse, or even still hates you—but that’s his problem. You have forgiven him from the heart; but he must answer, before God and/or the authorities, for the consequences of his actions. □

*How difficult
it is to say:
“I was wrong,
please
forgive me”.*



Wounds from childhood can cause problems later in life

Many have difficulty in forgiving injustice and abuse from their childhood and youth. Such experiences are buried and stored deep in the subconscious.

FROM THE DAY OF OUR BIRTH WE TRY TO INTERPRET AND understand all that happens around us. We try to put together the reality we live in, like a jigsaw puzzle. In early life we do not have sufficient maturity, or reference points to interpret the world around us, and thus perceive our experiences in black and white. We have not lived long enough to understand that there are often several ways of looking at the same situation. Our childhood experiences leave deep impressions because we have nothing to compare them with; they become the main obstacles in our understanding of the world around us.

This may cause painful episodes from our childhood to affect us even as adults, without our being aware of it. As children we don't understand or have the ability to cope with these feelings and they remain with us, in our consciousness or the subconscious, as painful sores—scars we have endeavoured to repress or forget. □



Forgiveness presupposes a positive view of the self

Scandinavians traditionally have a negative view of selves, tending to look down on themselves. It is a concept that is instilled in us from a very early age, that we are nothing “special”.

SOME CHRISTIANS LOOK UPON THEMSELVES AS SINNERS, WHO DO not deserve God’s grace. Certainly we are weak and in daily need of forgiveness for wrongdoing, but we cannot forgive others or ourselves unless we accept God’s forgiveness. Now that God has forgiven us we must forgive ourselves!

Some attitudes we may hold on to:

- I love myself, but I hate you
- I hate myself, but I love you
- I hate myself, and I hate you
- I love both you and myself

Which view should a Christian hold? Some would point to the second alternative; but if we hate ourselves we cannot accept our Creator’s forgiveness!

When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, he replied, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’*” (Matthew 22:36-39).

Many have a problem with those closing words. Some might love themselves more than their neighbour, others their neighbour more than themselves. A Christian should love both his neighbour and himself, the fourth alternative. ◻

The unpardonable sin

God desires to forgive and acquit us because he loves us as his creation and children. Some, however believe or fear that they have committed the unpardonable sin, and so find it hard to believe that God has forgiven them their wrongdoings; but they need not worry. The person who fears that they have committed the unpardonable sin has certainly not done that.

THE PERSON WHO HAS COMMITTED THE UNPARDONABLE SIN IS THE one who does not want, and cares nothing, for God's forgiveness, in spite of the fact that he or she has experienced God's love. It is someone who no longer desires his offer of forgiveness, and thereby blasphemes against God's gift of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31) and his offer of a love relationship. God will not forgive someone who rejects his forgiveness.

We are all sinners, and God longs to forgive us and redeem us (2 Peter 3:9), but he will force neither redemption nor himself on us. □



Forgiveness is the key to joy.

Anonymous

Forgiveness obliges us

God's forgiveness puts us under an obligation to live a life that honours him. Let's illustrate this with an everyday example. If you have forgiven your neighbour for driving across and ruining your lawn, you would certainly not take kindly to him continuing doing so.

THAT'S HOW IT IS IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. HE WILL forgive us, but in accepting his forgiveness we are also saying that we will make the effort not to sin in the future. That may not be possible, but it doesn't mean we don't make the effort—otherwise our remorse is just pretence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace”.

Grace is a gift to which we should attach great value. We have accepted Christ's death in our lives, and we gave our lives to him in baptism when we put away the 'old self'. We now live new lives in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3-8). □



*By his suffering
Jesus teaches us how
to forgive from love;
he shows how it is
possible to forgive in
humility. So let us be
honest with ourselves
and look into our own
hearts—to search
out any unforgiven
injustice or bitterness
that may remain.*

From *In The Silence of The Heart*, meditations by
Mother Teresa

How should we forgive?

Maybe you should first ask yourself if the offence really is something you should be so upset about? You may be the one who has misunderstood, or even caused the problem! In Proverbs 19:11 we read: "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offence." How would Jesus have reacted in your situation?

JESUS SAYS THAT BEFORE WE ATTEMPT TO REMOVE THE SPECK OF DUST from our brother's eye, we should first remove the plank from our own (Matthew 7:3-5). In other words clean up your own backyard before you take others to task.

On occasion it may not be possible to get the other party to see sense, though sometimes it is necessary so that the injustice will not be repeated. Matthew 18:15-17 describes a situation in the church, where a confrontation is necessary. To begin with, one must face the person concerned alone. If he won't listen then one takes a witness with them in a second attempt. The motive is not to show that one is right, but to regain our brother (verse 15) in order to help him see where he is wrong. You have already forgiven him from the heart. It is out of love that we go to our brother, not for revenge.

Forgiveness begins by processing our emotions, and then we require help from God's Holy Spirit to do so. Pray that he will remove the negative emotions and give you understanding of how to come to terms with your hurt. Some find it helpful to write down in detail how they feel, and then loudly repeat it to themselves several times. Some confide in a trustworthy friend. It is necessary to release the mental energy, which continually attempts to repress and deny the hurt. □

Accept forgiveness

Some have difficulty in believing that God has really forgiven them. They know the Bible says God forgives sinners—“But that’s talking about others, not me. God could never forgive me for what I have done.”

I HAVE MET MANY WITH THAT ATTITUDE, BUT WHEN I ASK IF GOD HAS forgiven Paul, the reply is often: “Yes, of course he has”, Well, since God could forgive a man who had murdered Christians and imprisoned them, then he can forgive you. Paul was more likely a bigger sinner than you!

To accept forgiveness can be difficult. We are often our own worst critics, a stricter judge than God himself.

It is God’s will that we accept forgiveness. Have you ever made the effort to forgive someone, but no matter what you say, that person does not respond? Don’t let that happen to you. If you are in need of forgiveness accept it happily, irrespective of whether it is from God or man.

How often should we forgive?



In Matthew 18:21-22 Peter asks Jesus how many times one should forgive his brother. Peter thinks seven times is sufficient, but Jesus says seventy times seven—in other words: every time. If your brother approaches you and asks for forgiveness, then forgive him. You must also, where possible, come to an agreement so that such a mistake isn’t repeated.

FORGIVENESS IS AN IMPORTANT SUBJECT FOR ALL PEOPLE, BUT IN particular for Christians since it is central to their relationship with God, with other people and themselves. God wants for us to experience his peace, joy and love (Galatians 5:22). To accomplish this, we must accept God's forgiveness, and forgive others in turn. It is never too late to begin.

That was the experience of the robber on the cross. He must have known a good deal about Jesus and his message, and during the last few hours of his life became aware of the need for forgiveness.

It is never too late to forgive or accept forgiveness—but don't put it off.

To be able to experience God's peace and love [agape] we have to accept his forgiveness and to forgive ourselves.

Reasons why we find it difficult to forgive

There are several reasons why we find it difficult to forgive. The more obvious of these are:

Why should we forgive the offence?

The problem is that the person who has been hurt continues to suffer, not the perpetrator.

We will not forgive because we prefer to retain the hurt

This sounds like something of a self-contradiction. It has to do with how we see the past. To be hurt is painful, but at the same time reassuring. We remember what was said and done to the smallest detail; it has become a part of us—our identity. We

use what has happened as an excuse to justify why our lives have become what they are. We do not forgive, because that means we must process and change our attitude in regard to what happened, and thus change the basis for our identity.

We will not forgive because we prefer not to confront the hurt

The ability to forgive requires our coming to terms with the situation that hurt us, although it may be a painful process. Perhaps we are fearful of being unable to overcome the hurt or emotional turmoil.

We will not forgive but prefer to retain the feeling of being the victim

We have reconciled ourselves with the thought of being the victim in what happened and want to preserve the feeling of being treated unjustly. Thus progress stops and the hurt remains.

We will not forgive because we feel we gain control

We feel that we are right and therefore have the upper hand in the name of fairness. We see ourselves superior to the person who hurt us.

We will not forgive because we will not risk vulnerability again

We feel we are right in blaming the other person and therefore have the upper hand. We find “strength” in a refusal to forgive—but that is just a protective shell. The hurt does not heal, we deny it and put the blame on those who hurt us.

Forgiveness requires God’s help. He will give the strength and insight necessary for you to process your emotions and confront your hurting. Forgiveness can take some time, but is a deliberate process, where we work on our emotions and come to terms with the past. □

*To forgive is tied to our
identity in Christ.*

To receive our booklets:

If you would like to order, or be on our mailing list for electronic English translations of *Fountain of Life Booklets* please contact Eva Beal: eva@bthb.se

Telephone contact:

Please call author and pastor Carl Fredrik Aas telephone nr: 00 47 64 86 93 30, or send an e-mail to: cfaas@online.no

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cfaas@online.no

Thank you!

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Translation: Alan and Eva Beal

*The most difficult thing
for mankind to do
is to forgive ourselves.*

Gordon Johnsen

*We cannot change the
past, but we can
impact the future.
It is forgiveness that
makes it possible to
put the past behind us.
It is forgiveness that
will prevent our past
from destroying
our future.*