



Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds

Chris Brauns

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Helps readers move beyond the wounds and baggage of bitterness, disagreements, and broken relationships.

"True or false: most Christian pastors and counselors agree on what forgiveness is and how it should take place." This question is part of Chris Brauns's Forgiveness Quiz that draws readers into his book and gets them thinking about the subject of forgiveness. The truth is, pastors and counselors disagree profoundly on this subject. *Unpacking Forgiveness* combines sound theological thinking and honesty about the complicated questions many face to provide readers with a solid understanding of biblical forgiveness.

Only God's Word can unpack forgiveness. The wounds are too deep for us to find healing on our own, and the questions are too complex to be unraveled by anything but the wisdom of God. This book goes beyond a feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness, balancing the beauty of God's grace and the necessity of forgiveness with the teaching that forgiveness must take place in a way that is consistent with justice.

Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds **Details**

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From Reader Review Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds for online ebook

Ryan Shelton says

Brauns writes a good and faithful primer on Biblical teaching on forgiveness, especially in its thorough and illuminating exposition of Matthew 18. However, sometimes the application feels thin, especially as it relates to the "complex questions and deep wounds" alluded to in the subtitle. Brauns talks about how forgiveness does not always release from consequences, and I think this needs to be massively developed, especially as it relates to what reconciliation means in light of extreme violations (abuse, victimization). I would gladly hand this book to someone dealing with "run of the mill" forgiveness issues, but as the book stands, it seems woefully inadequate and tone-deaf for more extreme cases.

Brian Collins says

The thesis of Chris Brauns's work on forgiveness is: "God expects believers to forgive others in the way that he forgives them" (44). That thesis may seem fairly basic until one begins to probe how God forgives believers. Brauns defines God's forgiveness as: "A commitment by the one true God to pardon graciously those who repent and believe so that they are reconciled to him, although this commitment does not eliminate all consequences" (51). Note that God's forgiveness is freely and graciously offered, yet conditional upon repentance and belief. Note also that when God offers forgiveness, he is committed to pardon and to reconcile with the sinner. But Brauns draws a distinction between punishment and discipline. Thus forgiveness does not mean that no consequences follow for sin (Brauns points to the consequences David faced for his sin with Bathsheba even after he repented and was forgiven).

Given this, Brauns defines human forgiveness as: "A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated" (55). The very NT word that Paul often uses for forgiveness indicates that forgiveness is offered graciously. "Christians should always have a disposition of grace towards those who offend them" (55). Yet, the Christian cannot actually forgive, that is pardon and reconcile with, an offender apart from that person's repentance. The offer of forgiveness needs to present, but the actual forgiveness is conditional. On the other side, if the person is repentant, Brauns teaches that forgiveness is more than a promise to let things pass. It is a commitment to reconciliation.

Brauns contrasts this understanding of forgiveness with what he calls "therapeutic forgiveness." Therapeutic forgiveness is an effort to free oneself from bitterness. There are no conditions placed on the offender, and it can be done within the mind of the offended individual. There is no reconciliation required. Brauns lists a number of objections to therapeutic forgiveness. The most significant, apart from the fact that it does not align with the biblical model, are that it fails to reckon with the seriousness of evil and that it fails to force Christians to deal with their own sin.

Brauns's understanding of forgiveness raises a number of important questions. Forgiveness is more difficult under the biblical model than under the therapeutic model. It cannot be done merely within one's own mind. It involves interaction and reconciliation between two people. So what if a person is not willing to forgive? Matthew 18 provides the answer to this question. First, Jesus teaches that there should be no limit to the forgiveness offered. Second Jesus teaches that no matter how bad the offense is against us—and Brauns does not minimize the awful sinful ways that some people have been treated—God has suffered the far greater offenses. As God forgives, so must we forgive. Finally, Brauns notes the severe warnings given to those who will not forgive in Matthew 6:14-15; 7:1-2; 18:34-35. "Those unwilling or unable to forgive should fear for their salvation" (123).

On the other hand, if forgiveness is only rendered when a person repents, how should the Christian respond

when a person will not repent. Brauns turns to Romans 12:17-21 to answer this question. He discerns three principles in this passage: "Principle #1: Resolve Not to Take Revenge" (130; Rom. 12:17a, 19, 21). "Principle #2: Proactively Show Love" (134; Rom. 12:17b-18, 20). "Principle #3: Don't Forgive the Unrepentant, but Leave Room for the Wrath of God" (143; Rom. 12:19). When a Christian does this Brauns says he should not "be overcome by hatred." Instead the Christian must warn the offender that he places himself in the path of God's judgment. "There is a way to lovingly remind people that God's judgment is certain (Hebrews 9:27)" (144).

Those who have been grievously sinned against often struggle with bitterness. Brauns also provides biblical counsel in this matter. First, "Wait for God's justice, and trust his providence" (155; Ps. 73:4-9, 17-27; Prov 24:19-20; Rom. 8:28). Second, "Listen to wise people" (160; Prov. 19:20). Third, "Pursue God's blessing for yourself and those close to you" (161; Ps. 73:15; Heb. 12:15-17)/ Fourth, "Call bitterness what it is. . . . It may seem like stating the obvious to say that bitterness is sin. But it needs to be said" (162).

Closely connected to bitterness is the mind that often goes back to think about the wrong. Brauns provides counsel on how to not dwell on past wrongs. First, "Burn into your mind what the Bible teaches about forgiveness" (171). Here Brauns summarizes the basic teaching of the book as the primary way to stop thinking about the wrong you have suffered:

"The most basic forgiveness principle is that Christians should forgive others as God forgave them. (See Matthew 6:12; 7:2; Ephesians 4:32.)"

"Christians should have an attitude or disposition of grace toward all people even as God offers forgiveness to all who receive it. God does not forgive all people, but he does offer grace and forgiveness to all. (See John 1:12; 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9.)"

"Therefore, Christians must be willing to forgive all who ask for forgiveness. (See Luke 17:3-4.) Remember: whatever anyone has done to offend you will always pale in comparison to what you have done to offend God."

"Christians can conquer bitterness by trusting in the justice and providence of God. God is just. Vengeance belongs to him. He will repay. God providentially works all things together for good for those who know him. This includes the // acts of people who intend to harm us. You are not ultimately a victim (See Romans 12:19; 8:28; Genesis 45:5-7.)"

"Never excuse bitterness or an unwillingness to forgive. Those unable or unwilling to forgive should question their salvation. Read this sentence aloud: 'Saying 'I cannot or will not forgive' is another way of saying 'I am thinking about going to hell.' (See Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35.)" (171-72)

Second, "Take a look at Christ in his Word . . . stop scrutinizing your own situation" (172; Heb. 12:1-3; Ps. 77; 121:1-2). Third, "Pray, pray, pray" (173; Phil. 4:2-7). Third, "Say and do the right things" (174). Brauns's point is that apart from seeking counsel or prayer, "talking about a wrong done to you will make it far more difficult to stop thinking about the matter." Fourth, "Participate in the God-given means of grace" (174). By this Brauns means fellowship with the people of God, hearing the ministry of the Word, worshipping with God's people, studying the Bible, and praying.

Finally, Brauns looks at Acts 15:36-41 as a case study in what to do when good Christians don't agree.

This is a careful yet highly accessible book on an unescapable topic. Since every Christian will be faced with the need to forgive and be forgiven, this is a book that is easy to recommend to every Christian.

Kim says

I started this book a while ago, and then put it down because other things intruded. I am so thankful I picked it up again. This book is excellent. Like his other book Bound Together, Brauns's pastor's heart is evident in this book that exposes and evaluates forgiveness.

Brauns defines forgiveness, and then proceeds to build a case for Christians to practice forgiveness as God

does. This does not mean completely unconditional forgiveness. He is adamant about the reality that despite there being forgiveness, there may be consequences. He also points out the crucial connection between repentance and forgiveness.

This book is a far cry from simple injunctions like "follow Matthew 18." Brauns points out that forgiveness may be uncomplicated for God, but for fallen man, it certainly is not.

The strength of this book is his discussion of forgiving those who do are not repentant, and dealing with the potential for bitterness. Brauns has such a wonderful way of distilling complicated situations into straightforward ones.

There are excellent discussion questions at the end of each chapter, and he uses footnotes instead of endnotes, a bonus. There is also a bibliography at the end of the book for further reading.

I can't recommend this enough.

Ryan Griffith says

Excellent resource on understanding the dynamics of forgiveness

Seeking and granting forgiveness is a major component of the Christian life. Brauns helpfully examines Scripture's teaching to demonstrate that our therapeutic notions of forgiveness are not what the Bible demands. In failing to practice biblical forgiveness, we miss God's transformative power and healing grace.

Dan Mason says

This is not an earth-shattering work that will change your understanding of forgiveness, but it is scripturally grounded and Brauns' discussion of biblical forgiveness being conditional is particularly helpful.

Dana Perkins says

The most clear, helpful book on forgiveness

Clear, indirectly, complete, and fair to differing views. I love the appendices and find them answering almost every question about forgiveness that I had. Braun's treatment relies heavily on scripture. He includes many great and helpful stories.

Melissa says

Phenomenal book. The author has a good sense of humor, which is helpful when dealing with such a heavy topic. I found myself arguing with the author and having to talk things I read out with my husband. This book has discussion questions to help you better solidify your understanding of what you just read and many MANY examples on how to walk folks through forgiveness. I think this book is a needed tool in any

Christian's library - both for ourselves and for the brothers and sisters we encounter.

Anne says

Excellent! Thoroughly biblical, this is a must-read. I've marked up my copy and will be returning to it again.

Becky Pliego says

Biblical and practical. Highly recommended.

Jarred Edgecombe says

"Unpacking Forgiveness" is the best book on forgiveness I have ever read.

Brauns defines two ways: "God's forgiveness and human forgiveness. He defines God's forgiveness as follows: A commitment by the one true God to pardon graciously those who repent and believe so that they are reconciled to him, although this commitment does not eliminate all consequences."

He links forgiveness for Christians to Divine forgiveness: "A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all the consequences are necessarily eliminated."

One of the strengths of the book is that Brauns links forgiveness to reconciliation. This is something many books don't do. Additionally, Brauns has two chapters dealing with how the reader should interact with the unrepentant. Another strength is the chapter that deals with overcoming bitterness.

Brauns other strength is how he uses illustrations bring the reader think about real life examples of forgiveness and what it might look like in their lives.

I would highly recommend this book to counselors. Because so much of marital counseling involves bitterness and forgiveness, it would be especially helpful to go through the book with counselees.

Bambi Moore says

Biblical, helpful, challenging, practical for those who have aches at what life has held for them (that would be everyone). Many questions answered such as the difference in therapeutic forgiveness (forgiveness is a "feeling", a "ceasing to feel resentment or bitterness") versus biblical forgiveness, should we "get to the bottom" of all disagreements (no), am I required to forgive the unrepentant (no), does that mean that I can hold a grudge or seek revenge (no), how to stop thinking about the offense or pain you have been caused, consequences of bitterness and more. So much good here and sprinkled throughout are heartbreaking, guy-wrenching contemporary stories of biblical forgiveness and reconciliation that have no explanation but the grace of God. The author is even able to write with some humor, but not so much that it dampens the sensitive topic. Highly recommend this.

Luann says

This excellent book clears up current misunderstandings about biblical forgiveness and is well worth any Christian's time. And don't skip the appendices, which are as rich as the rest of the book.

Esther says

While there were some good points in the book, I think the author put too much emphasis on our repentance rather than on God's mercy. Some of the conclusions he drew, I think, were not biblical and were more man-centered rather than God-centered. While some parts of it were good, the major tenets I think were flawed. I would never give this to another believer.

Todd Daily says

Excellent and very thorough explanation of the biblical teaching of forgiveness. The author gives careful consideration of all passages that deal with forgiveness and practical application for the principles. "What do I do, if...?"

Maggie Boyd says

It took me a while to write this review because I really needed to let this book sink in:

To start with the good: My favorite "good" was the author's discussion of justice. *We are created with a standard of justice written on our hearts (p.147)* Brauns tells us and I think he is right. Most of us want fairness (which is what we see as justice) and I think part of the collective anger in our country and the world is confusion as to what we see as injustice all around us.

Another good was the discussion on how long the feeling of having forgiven someone can take: *The battle for your mind will not be won easily or instantaneously. C. S. Lewis described how long it took him to win one mental battle. In his book Letters to Malcolm he wrote, "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered— or felt as if I did— that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years."* If it took C.S. Lewis thirty years it will probably take some time for most of us. This, I should add, shouldn't be the length of time for the action period, just the emotional after effects if you will.

I'll add that the teachings from Dietrich Bonhoffer that were included were absolutely lovely. From the first quote: *Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance to the last Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and the unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was rarely ever heard.* Bonhoffer does a lovely job of showing how that led to Nazi Germany and a church which bowed to that government rather than fighting it.

The author's theory of forgiveness in his own words: *Christians should offer grace to all people. We should wrap up forgiveness as a present and make it available to anyone who will accept, regardless of the offense. But it is not the offense that conditions forgiveness but the repentant heart. Whether or not they unwrap the present and accept the gift so that forgiveness takes place is up to them.*

He would insist that this is not the same as therapeutic forgiveness (see Lewis B. Smedes **Forgive and Forget**) and in a sense I agree. Therapeutic forgiveness offers forgiveness even to those who have not offended us. It places you in the position of God as you graciously forgive anyone who has ever caused you a hurt feeling. That said, the two theories are more alike than he will accept. This is essentially semantics, from the forgivers standpoint there really is no difference. The issue comes in only for the forgiven. My biggest problem with the book came in from the examples. For example ;-)

Chapter 7 He considered peace more important than the church dealing with a gossip who had anger management issues. I strongly disagree with this. Gossip is a sin which often tears churches apart, it should always be dealt with.

Chapter 10 The author speaks of the Amish showing love to the widow and children of Charles Roberts as showing love to the one who harmed them. Actually, they showed love to the other victims. The perpetrator no one but God could do anything for. He is dead and now in the hands of the Lord.

And just for the record, we don't place on trial the families of Auschwitz prison guards or the family of Seung-Hui Cho (VA tech shooter). Perhaps we should do more as communities to be kind to them but "even the heathen" know better than to blame them.

Chapter 11 His interpretation of Jesus' forgiveness on the cross is simply wrong. Jesus forgave the men who crucified Him because they didn't know what they did. It is right there in black and white. Jesus did not pardon them for every sin, He did not say, "Your sins are forgiven" but He forgave them **that** sin. A lot of speculation can surround the hows and whys but there is no "if" to it. He said it.

I also disagree with the author's point on reconciliation. There is an endless stream of people insisting that reconciliation means returning to what was before. I disagree. God reconciled with us but he did not sweep us back into Eden. When we forgive someone we no longer hold the sin against them but that doesn't mean the relationship somehow goes back in time to become what it was before. On page 36 of **Speaking the Truth in Love** the author talks about making choices in our relationships. We all constantly do this whether it is because we move or change jobs or simply find out that with our kids grown we no longer have anything in common with the other soccer moms. Relationships have natural breaks and sometimes that break will be a forgivable offense. We will forgive but there is no reason to force an unnatural reconciliation. For example, a wife whose husband cheats on her and marries another woman may forgive him and let him know that. Doesn't mean she has to become best buds with the new wife.

So, the book had good and bad. Thought the reconciliation teaching went a bit far but I still found it a valuable read.