



*the*  
*Bridge of Forgiveness*

**The Forgiveness Journey**  
Study Guide

## Introduction

We believe that the strongest marriages are those that have found a way to integrate seven foundational attributes of a healthy relationship. We like to call those attributes The Seven Bridges. Bridges help us get from where we are to where we want to go, and help us to avoid unnecessary obstacles. They connect two parts of a singular journey.

Relationships are also a journey. Along that journey there are many gaps, gorges, obstacles and other impediments. These obstacles make it more difficult to continue on that journey. Some of those obstacles are so challenging that many people give up before they reach their destination. Some couples just need a bridge in their relationship.

The Seven Bridges represent the relational characteristics of God found in a covenant relationship. God often describes his covenant relationship with his people as a marriage. A marriage that is thriving and exhilarating. By taking the time to understand the relational characteristics of God, we will begin to gain some insights into what a healthy relationship looks like. When we apply these attributes into our relationship with our spouse, and with God, we will start to experience the kind of relationship that only a perfect and almighty God can design. The Seven Bridges are:

The Bridge of Fellowship  
The Bridge of Purpose  
The Bridge of Celebration  
The Bridge of Humility

The Bridge of Healing  
The Bridge of Forgiveness  
The Bridge of Patience

We cross a bridge one step at a time. Some bridges take longer than others. The goal is to have a clearly defined path where we can begin to move forward.

## Journeys

We have developed a study guide for each of The Seven Bridges to help you more fully understand these relational characteristics of God. They are great for couples to explore together or for use in small groups. Each Journey has seven steps and will allow you to understand how these characteristics apply in a marriage. We hope that they will also help you develop a greater appreciation of the relationship God desires with you.

## Step One: What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is one of the most important aspects of a healthy relationship. It either strengthens or weakens the bond between individuals. It is also something that every person will be confronted with throughout their lifetime. One's perspective on forgiveness not only impacts the health of their relationships, but also their own emotional, physical and spiritual health.

**Couple Discussion:** How would you describe forgiveness?

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## Atonement

One of the misconceptions about forgiveness is that it has no accountability. That is, many people struggle with forgiveness because they believe that means that the person being forgiven is getting off "scott-free."

**Read:** Hebrews 9:22

Scripture is very clear that forgiveness does not happen without the shedding of blood. In other words, forgiveness requires atonement. This should alleviate the concerns of those that struggle with whether there should be some accountability for the hurtful actions of others. The key is to understand the nature of the atonement.

**Read:** Ephesians 1:7, Colossians 1:14 and Romans 3:25-26

The crucifixion of Jesus was the atonement for all sins. That means, when your spouse sins against you, the atonement has already been made by the crucifixion.

**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways that we have had to forgive each other in the past?

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## Release

Once we understand that forgiveness comes about because of and after atonement, we then must understand what happens at the point of forgiveness.

**Read:** Leviticus 4:30-31, Leviticus 6:6-7, Numbers 14:19-20 and Hebrews 10:17-18

When a prisoner is punished for a crime, the prisoner is then released. Being released demonstrates a recognition that the punishment provided was acceptable and there is no longer a continuing obligation to punish the offense. The freedom provided to the prisoner is a result of being released. The key is the actual release.

Similarly, forgiveness is about releasing someone from further punishment. Not only does it provide freedom for the person being forgiven, but it provides freedom for the person that forgives so that they no longer have to continue the punishment. In other words, forgiveness is not merely for the benefit of the offender, but for the benefit of the offende.

**Couple Discussion:** Why is it important to release yourself from the obligation to punish?

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## Step Two: Why is Forgiveness Important?

### Commanded

The most important reason to forgive is because we are commanded to do it.

**Read:** Matthew 6:14-15, Matthew 18:21-22, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37, and John 20:23

Scripture is clear that we have no right to withhold our forgiveness of others. If we accept the forgiveness of our sins by God, then we must demonstrate that same willingness to forgive others that have sinned against us. Remember, it is up to the other person to accept your forgiveness. You are just commanded to forgive.

**Couple Discussion:** What have been the hardest things for you to forgive and why?

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**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think God wants us to offer the same forgiveness to others that we have received from him?

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### Recognition

**Read:** Psalm 50:6, Acts 10:42, Romans 2:1, Romans 14:10 and 1 Corinthians 4:5

When we offer immediate and unconditional forgiveness, we demonstrate our recognition that God is the judge of all sin, and we are not putting ourselves in the place of overriding God's perfect judgment. We are not to determine the punishment of those that sin against us. That right is given to God alone.

# The Forgiveness Journey

**Couple Discussion:** What impact will recognizing God's perfect judgments increase your emotional, physical and spiritual health?

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**Couple Discussion:** In what ways do you find it challenging to let God be the judge of the sins committed by others against you?

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## Closeness

**Read:** Matthew 5:23-26, Luke 1:76-78 and Luke 7:40-47

God makes us aware of salvation through the forgiveness of our sins. Once we become aware of the salvation available because of his forgiveness, it draws us close to him to accept that forgiveness through Christ. Similarly, the act of forgiveness by each one of us will draw others closer to us in a healthy relationship. It creates a greater ability and desire to show similar love to others.

**Couple Discussion:** How are we drawn closer together through acts of forgiveness?

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## Restoration

When we forgive others, we allow the restoration of a relationship to occur. Without forgiveness, restoration is not possible. We are called to do our part to live at peace with everyone. This means that if a relationship has been torn, we need to do everything in our power to mend the relationship, which includes forgiveness.

**Read:** Romans 12:18

**Couple Discussion:** What relationships do you have that may need some mending?  
What are some actions you could take to help mend the relationship?

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## Step Three: What Hinders Forgiveness?

### Harboring Offense

When we become offended and are unwilling to let go of that offense, we will be unable to offer forgiveness. When we hold onto our offenses, we will eventually become bitter and it will tear apart our relationships.

**Read:** Isaiah 44:22, Proverbs 19:11, Matthew 18:35

**Couple Discussion:** What are some of the things done by others that offend you the most?

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We become offended when we believe that we are owed something and we do not receive what we are owed. Our expectations of those determine what we believe we are owed.

**Couple Discussion:** What expectations do we have of each other and how could they be damaging to our relationship?

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### Anger

**Read:** Ephesians 4:26-27

When we hold onto our anger, we make it more difficult for us to forgive. The reason is that while we are angry, we begin to justify all the reasons that we are offended and why the other person was so wrong. As this list grows, we add more bricks in the walls that we put up between our relationships. This begins to separate the relationship over time, further increasing the challenge of forgiveness.

# The Forgiveness Journey

It is important to recognize that reconciliation and forgiveness can be a process, which may take time for ultimate resolution. However, Ephesians 4:26-27 is a call to immediately start that process. It calls us to get rid of our anger, which happens when we accept that Christ's atonement was sufficient.

**Couple Discussion:** What are some of the things we do that tend to prolong our anger?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some things we could do to help remove our anger as quickly as possible?

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## Pride

**Read:** Psalm 10:4, Proverbs 13:10

The selfishness that is imbedded in pride is one of the greatest inhibitors to forgiveness. Pride causes more problems in strained relationships in the same way as fuel to a fire.

**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think pride has such a damaging effect on forgiveness?

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**Read:** Romans 3:23, Philippians 2:3 and Matthew 7:3

We need to see that we are just as guilty as everyone else and we all have our own struggles. When we consider others better than ourselves, we recognize that our own sinfulness prevents us from looking down on others in their struggles. We need to be mindful of the log in our own eyes. When we maintain a mindset of humility to

prevent pride from ruling our actions, then we begin to allow ourselves to be open to forgiveness.

**Couple Discussion:** When was a time that you were shown forgiveness? How did it make you feel?

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**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think that people often fail to recognize their sinfulness and spend more time accusing others?

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## Step Four: What Promotes Forgiveness?

### Humility

**Read:** Psalm 25:9, James 4:6, 10 and 1 Peter 3:8

Forgiveness often requires our humility so that God can guide us through a difficult time of personal sacrifice. When we are humble, we make ourselves teachable by God and allow his grace to work in our lives. God understands that his expectations for us to forgive are challenging, so he makes himself available to give us the strength and guidance to forgive others when we are hurt. Humility also enables us to create an environment when we can live at peace with one another. Not only does it allow us to forgive, but it makes it easier for others to ask forgiveness without fear of condemnation. Romans 8:1 makes it clear that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus. Humility allows us to give up the perceived right to offer our own condemnation of others, which has already been satisfied by the crucifixion.

**Couple Discussion:** What are some characteristics of a humble spouse?

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**Couple Discussion:** When is it most difficult for us to demonstrate humility?

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### Love

**Read:** Number 14:18-20, John 3:16, Romans 5:8

When the people of Israel began to rebel and treat God with contempt, God was prepared to bring a severe punishment upon them. However, because of his love, he forgave them. Forgiveness requires love. It was because of God's love of mankind that he gave his son to die for our sins.

**Couple Discussion:** What are ways that you try to demonstrate your love for your spouse?

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**Read:** Romans 12:9-10 and 1 Corinthians 13

Couples that want to create an environment where forgiveness comes more naturally need to focus on creating an environment of love in their home. They need to learn how to show love for their spouse so that their spouse feels loved. It is not enough to just say I love my spouse if they don't feel it.

**Couple Discussion:** How would you rate the environment of love in your home?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways your spouse makes you feel loved?

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**Read:** Ephesians 5:22-33

This is one of the most challenging passages in scripture. It makes a clear call to married couples to be imitators of God's relationship with mankind. Wives are called to respect the authority of their husbands in the same manner as they respect the authority of Christ. We respect Christ because we love him, recognizing what he has done for us. This command to be imitators of Christ also establishes an expectation that the husband should respond to that respect in the same manner as Christ does through his love of the church by his forgiveness.

**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways that we show our respect for Christ?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some of the ways that Christ showed his love toward mankind?

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## Repentance

**Read:** Luke 3:3, Luke 17:3-4, and Acts 3:19

Repentance is an important part of forgiveness. Simply, it is the act of going in the opposite direction of our prior sinful actions. When we recognize our wrongs and demonstrate our sincerity about turning away from continuing those actions, it makes it easier for others to forgive us. However, it is important to recognize that we are called to forgive in spite of others repentance. Their repentance is for their benefit as it allows them to accept the forgiveness being offered.

**Couple Discussion:** Do we make it easy for each other to repent and ask forgiveness?

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# The Forgiveness Journey

## Step Five: How is Forgiveness Demonstrated by God?

### Timing

Another misconception that many people have about forgiveness is that the person that caused the harm must say, "I'm sorry" before being forgiven. If we look at how God demonstrates forgiveness, we can gain a better appreciation for how we should also view our forgiveness of others.

**Read:** Psalm 86:5, Daniel 9:9, Romans 5:8 and Colossians 2:13-14

God by his very nature is forgiving. God's forgiveness was made "when you were dead in your sins." He did not wait until we said, "I'm sorry" before he made his forgiveness available through the atonement of Christ's death. His death on the cross made forgiveness immediately available. However, the acceptance of that forgiveness by the sinner is what is necessary for their salvation.

**Couple Discussion:** In what ways do you find it easy or difficult to accept God's forgiveness of your sins?

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**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think it is important to offer forgiveness before someone says that they are sorry"?

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## Compassion

**Read:** Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the prodigal son provides many insights into the relationship between God and mankind. One of the humbling points is the picture of the father (God) running to his son (mankind) before his son even spoke a word. It reveals the passion and willingness that God has to forgive and his desire to have fellowship with us. God runs to us with compassion and acceptance even before we say, "I'm sorry."

**Couple Discussion:** How does it make you feel when someone is eager to show you forgiveness and accept you as you are?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways you can demonstrate to your spouse the tenderness and acceptance of the father in the parable of the prodigal son?

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## Delight

**Read:** Micah 7:18

How often do we approach forgiveness grudgingly? We face internal torment trying to decide when we can gather the nerve to forgive and how to suppress our desire for retribution. God, in contrast, delights in showing mercy through his forgiveness! When we are able to change our mindset so that we are anxious to forgive, we will then begin to experience the joy in all circumstances that God desires for each of us.

# The Forgiveness Journey

**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think so many people view forgiveness as a difficult thing to offer?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways that would help you delight in showing mercy and forgiveness?

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## Step Six: How is Forgiveness Demonstrated in Marriage?

### Acceptance

God forgave us because of the acceptable atonement of Christ's death on the cross, not because of any act of atonement on our part.

**Read:** 1 John 2:2, 1 John 4:10, and Hebrews 10:10

**Couple Discussion:** Why was Christ's death on the cross an acceptable atonement for our sins?

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The challenge placed before each of us is whether we are willing to accept the atonement that has been made for our spouse and others. If we accept that atonement, then we must forgive.

**Read:** Romans 15:7

Jesus accepted each of us with our sin, because of the atonement that he made on our behalf. He calls each of us to then accept others based on the atonement that Jesus also made for them.

**Couple Discussion:** In what ways is it difficult to accept that Christ's crucifixion was a sufficient atonement for the actions of those that hurt us?

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**Couple Discussion:** Do we tend to demonstrate a willingness to forgive or a desire to add to the punishment already provided by the crucifixion?

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## Comfort

Whenever we offer forgiveness, it is crucial that we handle that forgiveness appropriately. It should be a time of reconciliation and support of each other. It is very easy to take a selfish joy as we offer forgiveness and then watch the other person grieve. Once we forgive, we must be willing to then offer comfort to our spouse to let them know that our love for them has not wavered. We need to build each other up so that through our challenges we become stronger.

**Read:** 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 and Ephesians 4:29-32

**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways that you could show comfort and support after offering forgiveness?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some things that can hinder you from showing comfort and support after offering forgiveness?

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## Grin and Bear It!

**Read:** Colossians 3:13 and Matthew 26:36-46

Forgiving is not always easy. Even Christ struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane with walking to the cross. God never said that forgiving would be easy for us. Sometimes we just need to pray with the same passion as Christ and then show our obedience to the calling of God.

**Couple Discussion:** What would make it easier for you to forgive when you don't want to forgive?

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## Don't Escalate

**Read:** James 1:19 and Galatians 5:15

Escalation occurs when couples go back and forth with verbal assaults and each response intended to show greater power, resulting in a more hostile environment.

**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think couples tend to escalate their arguments?

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**Couple Discussion:** How can escalation create an environment that is harder to forgive?

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**Couple Discussion:** What are some ways to prevent escalation?

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## Step Seven: Steps to Forgiveness

### Pray

**Read:** Ephesians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:22

Forgiveness often requires an inner strength that we are not able to reach on our own. God will provide the strength necessary to forgive if we ask him in prayer. We also need to go to God with sincerity. Be honest in your prayers with God. If you don't want to forgive, then let God know that and ask him to help you soften your heart.

**Couple Discussion:** In what ways do you find it easy or difficult to pray when you are angry at others?

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**Couple Discussion:** Why do you think God wants to be involved in your process of forgiving others?

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### Soften Your Heart

**Read:** Proverbs 28:14, Daniel 5:20, Matthew 5:43-45, Ephesians 4:18 and Philippians 4:8-9

Whenever we allow our hearts to harden, we separate ourselves from God making it more difficult to forgive. Our hearts become hardened when we focus on our bitterness and anger. When we instead take the time to focus on the positive traits of the person(s) with whom we are angry, we will allow our hearts to soften. We need to see others as God sees them and was willing to forgive them.

# The Forgiveness Journey

**Couple Discussion:** What are some positive things you could focus on when you are angry at someone?

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## Remember

**Read:** Psalm 105:4-5, Ephesians 2:12-13, Romans 3:23 and Matthew 18:21-35

When we take the time to remember that we too are sinners and that Christ has forgiven us, then it makes it easier to forgive others. In the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18, Jesus explains the importance of remembering our forgiveness and offering that same forgiveness towards others.

**Couple Discussion:** Do you find it easy or difficult to comprehend how much God has forgiven you?

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**Couple Discussion:** Do you tend to hold others to a higher standard than you have held yourself?

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## Prevention

**Read:** Ephesians 4:26

When we work to resolve our anger quickly we prevent Satan from using that anger to create bitterness in our hearts making it more difficult to forgive. When we hold onto our anger, we constantly relive the painful event and build resentment towards others. This anger and resentment makes us feel justified in wanting to further punish the other person.

**Couple Discussion:** What are some steps you could take to help each other quickly release your anger?

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SEVEN BRIDGES