

4 Practising Forgiveness

God is with us in the mess and complexity of trying to put forgiveness into practice in our relationships.

Three key points:

- 1** As people forgiven by God, we are released into a transformed, intimate relationship with him.
- 2** Jesus teaches that forgiveness is at the heart of what it means to follow him. But one of the reasons it is so powerful is that it is costly and it is hard to live out.
- 3** Forgiveness is not just for the big moments; it is also a basic, everyday need.



Reflection

i Read this ahead of the session to prepare yourself to host the group.

Two words sum up our identity as Christians and as reconcilers: 'forgiven forgivers'. God, in Jesus, has freely forgiven us and it is because we are forgiven that we are able to forgive others.

Every experience of painful relationships is different. Sometimes forgiveness feels challenging but not impossible. In other situations, forgiveness is a much longer and thornier process. In some cases, the perpetrator may be unknown or may not be alive, making closure and complete reconciliation impossible. This session provides an opportunity to explore the complexity of both forgiving and asking for forgiveness.

Despite how difficult it is (or perhaps because of it) forgiveness is a liberating, heart-expanding, game-changing opportunity for us as we seek to be reconcilers. Forgiveness does not excuse the wrong. Instead, it is powerful because we recognise a wrong has been done to us and choose to allow God to transform that destructive memory, releasing ourselves and others. But it takes courage, hope and grace, and it cannot be rushed.

We might often focus on the big moments of forgiveness, but we are also invited to make forgiveness part of the daily rhythm of our lives. In the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, we are encouraged to pray for our daily bread and then to pray to be forgiven as we forgive others. Practising the three habits with ourselves and others can help us make forgiveness an integral part not only of our behaviour but of our character.

i **Note:** *The topic of forgiveness can be particularly emotive for some people. In this short session, we don't advise participants discuss experiences of trauma for which they have not received any prior support. Be prepared with further support outside of your group for participants, should any of them need it.*

Session starts here

Welcome

 **10 mins**
▶▶ 5 mins

 00:00

Feedback

 **5 mins**
▶▶ 3 mins

Ask participants to share briefly an experience they've had over the past week relating to the previous session. Have your own example to share.

Introduction

 **5 mins**
▶▶ 2 mins

■ Tell participants:

In this session we'll explore the power and the complexity of forgiveness in our relationships, learning how to see forgiveness as an everyday act.

Pray

Open the session with prayer, inviting participants to bring to mind situations or relationships where they hope for forgiveness and asking God to be at work as they explore what it means to practise forgiveness.

difference.

 Slide 1





Signpost

▶▶ *Skip this if you are running an hour-long session*

Jesus teaches again and again about forgiveness in the Gospels. This suggests two things: firstly, that it is a crucial part of finding life in all its fullness; secondly, that forgiveness is pretty hard to get our heads around and even harder to live out every day. Despite how difficult it is (or perhaps because of it) forgiveness is a powerfully releasing experience. Forgiveness does not excuse the wrong. Instead, it is powerful because we recognise a wrong has been done. This session is about allowing ourselves to be open to the possibilities of forgiveness in our relationships, while being honest about the places we get stuck.

Story

 **35 mins**

▶▶ 20 mins

 00:00

■ Tell participants:

In this part of the session, we are going to **Be Curious** as we engage with two stories. We choose to wonder about the other person and about how God might expand our perspective.

■ Introduce the stories:

- We're going to hear the story of Craig – a Christian living in Cape Town – and his experience of forgiveness.
- Then we're going to look at the biblical account of Jesus and Peter on the beach.
- Listen out for moments in both where people practise the habits of:
 - **Being curious** Listening to others' stories and seeing the world through their eyes.

difference.

- **Being present** Encountering others with authenticity and confidence.
- **Reimagining** Finding hope and opportunity in the places where we long to see change.



Film

Craig's story

🕒 10 mins
➡ 5 mins

1) Watch the film

➡ *Skip this if you are running an hour-long session*

2) As a group, discuss:

Q What does Craig's story say to you about practising forgiveness?

🖥️ Slide 2



🖥️ Slide 3



Bible passage

Jesus and Peter on the Beach

(John 21:1–19)

Background

🕒 10 mins
➡ 5 mins

3) Share the background

➡ *Skip this if you are running an hour-long session*

- This is the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. Before Jesus was executed, Peter said that he didn't know Jesus three times, even though he had promised to be loyal to him through thick and thin.
- This is the first recorded conversation between Jesus and Peter since this happened.
- Peter's three denials are mirrored by Jesus' three questions. The overwhelming catch of fish reminds us of when Jesus first called Peter to follow him.

🖥️ Slide 4



- Peter must have felt at least a bit nervous, embarrassed and ashamed about encountering Jesus after his betrayal, but he still takes the initiative – he jumps into the water and goes towards Jesus.
- Jesus creates an environment (breakfast on the beach) where he and Peter can meet and connect at a deeper level.

4) Invite a volunteer to read the passage



Small groups

🕒 15 mins
▶ 5 mins

5) Discuss in small groups:



What do you learn about Jesus in this story?



In Craig's story and the Bible passage, how do the three habits help people practise forgiveness?

If time allows, two or three people feedback a highlight to the whole group.

🖥️ Slide 5



Signpost

These stories show both how joyful and how messy forgiveness can be. Giving and receiving forgiveness can be transformational, but it does not feel comfortable – it makes us vulnerable, as both Peter and Craig experienced. The complexity of forgiveness is not a surprise to God and we can be assured of his unfailing presence with us as we wrestle with it in our own lives.

i **Note:** *These activities are designed to show the power of forgiveness to transform relationships and move them forward, as well as the complexity of our lived experience of forgiveness. You may want to acknowledge that bringing experiences of forgiveness to mind can sometimes be difficult and reassure your group that there is no pressure to share anything they do not want to. We don't advise you discuss experiences of trauma for which participants have not received any prior support.*

🗨️ **Tell participants:**

In this part of the session, we are going to **Be Present** as we engage with an activity. We become aware of ourselves, our surroundings, the people we share this space with and of God's presence with us.



Activity

Stepping into the story 🕒 15 mins

1 Tell your group that you are now going to 'step into' the story of Jesus and Peter on the beach.

2 🗨️ Read the following reflection to guide your group:

Imagine that you are Peter:

You have gone out fishing. The events of the last few days are fresh in your mind as you handle the boat, the oars, the net. You have seen Jesus – your friend, mentor and the one you believe is the Messiah – taken away and killed. You said you'd never abandon him, but when it came to the crunch it got too much and you pretended that you didn't know him at all.

You catch nothing – it's pointless. Then, your attention is drawn to a man on the shore. He calls out and suddenly the fish start pouring in. You know it has to be Jesus. Nothing else matters now. You jump straight into the water to go to him.



3

■ Read the following questions, allowing time for personal reflection in between:

- How do you feel as you move through the water towards Jesus?
- What does it mean for you to eat breakfast with Jesus on this beach?
- How do you know that Jesus has forgiven you?
- How does this moment change the way you see:
 - yourself?
 - your relationship with Jesus?
 - your relationship with others when they let you down?

4

■ As a group discuss:

- What surprised or struck you as you reflected on this?
- What did 'forgiveness' mean here? What words or phrases come to mind?



Signpost

In the Lord's Prayer, the prayer to forgive and be forgiven comes straight after the prayer for daily bread. There is the suggestion that forgiveness is a daily and essential need we all share. Every person's experience of forgiveness is different. Sharing these unique stories can help us tease out how to nurture forgiveness in our own lives.



Small groups

🕒 15 mins
▶▶ 10 mins

1. Explain to the group that you are going to read a quote for the group to reflect on.
2. 🗨️ Introduce and read the quotation:
 - Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter Reverend Canon Mpho Tutu lived through apartheid in South Africa and wrote about forgiveness.
 - The following quote is from their book, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*.

🗨️ *'When I cultivate forgiveness in my small everyday encounters, I am preparing for a time when a much larger act of forgiveness will be asked of me, as it most certainly will... When I develop a mindset of forgiveness, rather than a mindset of grievance, I don't just forgive a particular act; I become a more forgiving person... What was once a reason for rupture and alienation becomes an opportunity for repair and greater intimacy.'*
3. 🗨️ Ask the group to think about the words:
 - What resonates with your own experience?
 - What do you find challenging?
4. Stay as a whole group to discuss these questions if you are running an hour-long session

Slide 7





Signpost

Our experiences shape our understanding of forgiveness and we are each at different stages of our own unique journey. Taking steps to **Be Curious**, **Be Present** and to **Reimagine** can move us forward in making forgiveness part of our daily life. This doesn't mean it will be easy. Sometimes the most we can do is pray and ask God for the desire to forgive the one who has hurt us. But when forgiveness is able to break through in our relationships, it has unique power to heal, humanise and release us, restoring trust and opening up new possibilities.

Sanctuary

 **10 mins**
▶▶ 5 mins

 00:00

 **Note:** *Reading each of the reflections that follow, guide this time of prayer in whatever way works best for your group. For silent prayer, we suggest leaving at least one minute of silence between each paragraph to allow people to pray.*

Tell participants:

In this part of the session, we are going to **Reimagine**, noticing where we are most in need of renewed hope.

As we pray, we invite the Holy Spirit to expand our imaginations of what is possible, as individuals and as a community.

 Slide 8





Prayer

Offering our story to God

An important part of our identity in Christ is that we are 'forgiven forgivers'. God, in Jesus, has forgiven us and forgiveness is a gift that we are entrusted to share generously with those around us, helped by the Holy Spirit.

Think back to Craig's story. Bring before God any relationships suffering from past hurts. Ask for God's help to **Be Curious** about the hurts, the other person or where God is at work.

Think back to the story of Jesus and Peter at the beach. Ask God where being present with another – or allowing them to **Be Present** with you – might help to transform the relationship.

Thank God for his forgiveness and his understanding of where you are at. Ask God to help you take a step forward if you feel in a difficult place. Where do you most need God to help you **Reimagine**?

Loving God, fill us with your Spirit now,

Help us to **Be Curious** about others' stories – listening as often as we speak.

Give us the courage to **Be Present** – engaging our whole and unique selves.

Inspire us to **Reimagine** what's possible – finding hope by glimpsing you at work.

In Jesus' name. Amen.



Top Takeaway

Invite one or two people to share a one-line takeaway from the session or something they feel inspired to do between now and the next session.

Suggested actions for your group:

1 Be Curious

about the story of someone who has hurt you and about your own feelings towards them. (You might ask yourself, 'I wonder what's going on for them?' or 'I wonder why this made me feel like that?')

2 Be Present

Seek God's presence in places or relationships where there is pain or injustice.

3 Reimagine

a relationship or situation where forgiveness seems impossible. Pray for hope and for God to change the situation.

i **Remind participants** to make notes in their **Guide** following the session, perhaps writing or drawing something they want to take away from this session and what they want to do in their daily lives as a result.

Heads up

Risking Hope

At the end of this session, encourage participants to reflect on a situation or relationship where they are hoping for change but feeling stuck. There will be an opportunity to explore this further in the next session.

🖥️ Slide 9



▶▶ Note

End your session with slide 9 on the screen if you are running an hour-long session.

Write any notes you may have here...