

“From the first page to the last, I read this book with a lump in my throat and sometimes tears in my eyes. I experienced what I think most readers will experience as they read it—a connection to its stories and truths as one who has both resisted extending forgiveness and needed to be forgiven. While admitting that it might take time and will likely be messy and complex, Wendy makes the miracle of grace required for forgiveness, confession, repentance, and release seem possible. This is the hope we all need to take a step forward.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author and Bible Teacher

“This is an honest book. Alsup is not writing an abstract treatise on forgiveness and reconciliation, but has rather interwoven the deeply personal threads of her own story with a profound and extended meditation on the life of Joseph and his protracted reconciliation with his brothers. If you’ve been wounded and need a patient friend on the fragile path of redemption, I would highly commend *I Forgive You*.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, CCEF

“In this fallen world, none of us are immune from hurt or hurting others. If we’re honest, most of us find forgiveness hard. In this easy-to-read book, Wendy Alsup gives us space to wrestle with the complexity of forgiveness and encouragement to desire it. Our eyes are lifted to the God who is sovereign, gracious, and kind—and that’s always a hope-filled place for a struggling Christian to gaze toward.”

Helen Thorne, Director of Training and Resources,
Biblical Counselling UK

“There is no better guide than Wendy Alsup to the important but difficult terrain of forgiveness and reconciliation. Drawing with honesty upon her own stories of deep hurt and bringing the Scriptures to life in profound ways, Wendy offers a deeply hopeful vision of God’s ability to bring reconciliation in seemingly impossibly broken situations and to give us peace even when our relationships fall short of God’s vision for them. A beautiful and rich reflection, shaped by deep biblical wisdom on every page.”

Kristen Deede Johnson, Professor of Theology and Christian
Formation, Western Theological Seminary

“This book reveals Wendy Alsup at her best. She has a gift for making Scripture accessible, compelling, and relevant. I’ve read dozens of books on forgiveness, and *I Forgive You* is my new favorite. It might just be the most compelling, practical, and relevant book on forgiveness you’ve ever read.”

Dorothy Greco, Author, *Making Marriage Beautiful*

“The healing power of forgiveness is well-attested, but rarely is it presented to us framed so aptly in the Scriptures. Wendy Alsup gives us more than a pat proverb or a hurried how-to. She retells at length an ancient forgiveness story both beautiful and true, interweaving it with her own story of hurt and healing. She invites us to examine our own capacity to fight to forgive by the power of the Spirit of grace that lives within us. As I read, I contemplated with fresh resolve those to whom I could grant forgiveness, and those whose forgiveness I should seek.”

Jen Wilkin, Author and Bible Teacher

“Christians rejoice in the wonderful forgiveness we have received in the Lord Jesus Christ, but often find it much harder to forgive others and restore broken relationships when we have been sinned against. This book will bring help, hope, and healing as Wendy Alsup applies biblical principles and practical wisdom from the remarkable story of Joseph to situations in which reconciliation seems impossible. She shares from her own experiences of painful relationship breakdowns and the peace that real repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation have brought.”

John Stevens, National Director, FIEC UK

“Wendy has given the church a great gift. As is her hallmark, she takes us into the Scriptures deeply—this time by immersing us in the story of Joseph. Through keen biblical insights coupled with wisdom forged from decades of following the Lord faithfully—and often at great personal cost—she has written a book that will help make us wiser in the challenging but non-negotiable Christian vocation of loving our enemies. In a day and age when worldly voices and forces are seducing us to seek to destroy our enemies, this is a timely and welcome corrective voice.”

Rev. John Haralson, Pastor, Grace Church Seattle

“I have already found myself sharing pieces of transformative wisdom from *I Forgive You*. Joseph’s story took on a whole new layer of meaning as Wendy narrated the emotions of his painful betrayal and miraculous forgiveness. Every one of us will experience unexpected and devastating hurt—even from those we love. This book will be a worthy companion that calls wounded souls to the ultimate Healer, who also knew the sting of betrayal and showed us how to release others so we might truly live.”

Dorena Williamson, Author, *ColorFull*; Co-Planter, Strong Tower Bible Church, Nashville, TN

“Whether you’ve been wounded and are seeking to forgive or you’re the one who’s done the wounding and are wondering how to make amends, Wendy has given you a gift in writing *I Forgive You*. She leads us deeper into the gospel of Jesus, which alone has the power to fix what’s broken.”

Rev. John Mark Patrick, Pastor, Trinity Presbyterian Church,
Orangeburg, SC

“A powerful and much-needed book. Drawing from personal experience and the life of Joseph, Wendy Alsup insightfully shows us the path, process, and price of forgiveness and reconciliation. *I Forgive You* helped me acknowledge my own ambiguous losses and will undoubtedly aid countless others in their journey toward healing and wholeness. Highly recommend!”

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, Author, *Walking Through Fire:
A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*

“Wendy Alsup is a theological heavyweight who writes with the real and gentle touch of a friend. Her teaching is biblically rich, spiritually nuanced, deeply wise, and thoroughly relatable. In *I Forgive You*, she applies her powers to one of the hardest questions we face: how to forgive. In these pages, you will fill yourself on God’s word in the company of one who knows and cares about your pain. I am so grateful Wendy had the courage to take us on this journey with her—it will be a tremendous resource for us all.”

Sharon Hodde Miller, Author, *Free of Me: Why Life Is Better
When It’s Not about You*

“Wendy understands the feelings of disappointment, grief, and betrayal that linger long after a relationship is severed. She also knows there is hope for healing and restoration—even when it seems impossible. Realistic, vulnerable, and biblically faithful, she is a wise and compassionate guide on the path to forgiveness.”

Carolyn Lacey, Author, *Extraordinary Hospitality
(For Ordinary People)*

Wendy Alsup

I
FORGIVE
YOU

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I Forgive You

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I am indebted to my pastor, Rev. J.P. Sibley, for faithfully leading our church through the life of Joseph and willingly sharing his sermon notes with me for this book. As much as your teaching on Sunday has impacted my life, J.P., watching you live out these principles daily on the ground in our community has blessed me even more.

Introduction

“I forgive you.”

These are simple words, but hard ones. Perhaps they are words you just can't bring yourself to say. Has someone harmed you so deeply you cannot imagine releasing them of their debt to you? Or perhaps these are words you long to hear. Have you harmed a loved one? Does restoring the relationship seem impossible?

Many of us have harmed or been harmed in our marriages. Many of us have harmed or been harmed by our parents or siblings. Many of us have harmed or been harmed through racial insensitivity or downright hostility in our communities. Many of us have harmed or been harmed through church conflict. Or conflict at work. Or a thousand other possible scenarios. Do words of forgiveness—and the reconciliation that may potentially follow—feel far out of your reach?

What would you say if I told you that forgiveness is not out of your reach—that we have a God who loves reconciliation, a Savior who came into the world to reconcile us to himself,

and a Spirit who works change and healing among us? That there is hope—even for you?

It's true: there will always be aspects of reconciliation that are out of your control. You can confess your sin to the one you harmed, but you cannot guarantee they will respond with forgiveness. You can forgive the one who has harmed you, but that does not mean they will fully recognize the wrong they have done or repair in the ways that are right. Though you can release them from the place they hold in your mind, a fully reconciled relationship is not always possible.

So what hope is there? When forgiveness and reconciliation seem impossible, how might this book help?

Before we explore the answer to that question, I want to be clear what this book is not. It is not a manual on best practice in situations of continued abuse. If you are currently in an abusive situation, please tell someone who can help you—and keep telling, until someone finally believes you. Don't give up telling the truth of what is happening to you until someone steps up and helps! If you were abused in the past, I encourage you, too, to speak about it with someone you know and trust. I hope you will find the discussion of forgiveness here helpful and hopeful, and not a weight upon you, as you process how to think of the one who has harmed you in the past.

This book is also not a straightforward, step-by-step manual on how to reach reconciliation with another. Though we will go through various aspects of a process of sorts, we will find that this process is messy, with any number of complicating factors that can suddenly turn progress aside. There is no tidy linear path to reconciliation. I like to call it a stew. It helps if, up front, you expect messy complications along the way.

Over the next eight chapters, this book looks at the Bible to find hope for our broken relationships and insight for how to pursue forgiveness and healing—which are both possible,

even where full reconciliation is not. Specifically, we will look at the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis. I can think of no better story to give us practical insight for our own complicated, messy situations. In the story of Joseph, his father, and his brothers, God gives a vision of what is possible when all seems lost, when reconciliation seems impossible, and when those we love are far off, seemingly out of our reach. The story of Joseph gives us hope, too, when we are overwhelmed with guilt for the harm we have done against our loved ones.

God loves forgiveness and reconciliation. He loves it so much that he sent Jesus into the world so that he could reconcile us to himself. Jesus endured incredible agony because he loved us and longed to forgive us. And with the help of his Spirit he promises to reconcile us to each other as well.

Broken relationships have been the norm, rather than the exception, ever since Adam and Eve broke the first relationship in the Garden of Eden. But even in their story—as we'll see—God gave us hope that one would come who would defeat Satan and allow sinners to be reconciled once again to God and neighbor. Then, in the very first book of the Bible, God left us the story of Joseph and his brothers to give us insight into his ability to bring reconciliation when it seems impossible and to miraculously use for good circumstances which we can only imagine will end in utter devastation. The story of our Savior gives us hope. The story of Joseph shows us how that hope works out in real life—including *your* real life.

I have experienced many kinds of conflicts and brokenness in my life. Some have seen resolution. Some haven't, yet. Wherever you are in your own journey from brokenness to healing, this book is designed to encourage you to persevere in hope. God is for you. He sees you, and he has a good plan for your life. If you long to move forward but it seems impossible,

know that God has not left you as an orphan to navigate this situation by yourself. There is help and hope to persevere.

Before you go on, read Genesis 37 – 50 for yourself—even if you are already familiar with the story of Joseph and his brothers. May your first reading before we dive in whet your appetite for the miracles God can work: to redeem and restore you and others, even when reconciliation seems impossible.

Joseph Wept

THE PAIN OF LOSS

The young man hit the bottom of the dirt pit with a thud. Was his lip bloody? Was his body bruised? I picture him grabbing his head, spitting dirt out of his mouth. Only 17 years old, he couldn't see over the sides of the deep pit into which he had been thrown, but he could hear the voices of his brothers as they ate their dinner by the fire—the very brothers who had just thrown him into the pit. Could he hear their plot to kill him? As he cradled his throbbing head, could he comprehend what was happening to him? Was he in shock? Did he call out to his brothers for help? Was he stunned at how they ignored his cries?

I imagine the teenager hearing the sounds of men and animals moving closer. Hope of being rescued from the pit grew in his heart. Sure enough, his brothers dragged him out—but, instead of apologizing for their brutality, they pushed him into the hostile hands of traders who would only dehumanize him further, treating him as a thing to be used for their own benefit.

Bruised and bound behind a camel, did he struggle to understand this turnaround in his circumstances? Just that

morning, he had been the favored son of a man of resources. But now, he was thrust into survival mode, surrounded by men who would meet any weakness with harsh punishment, not compassionate concern. Did he have time to process the betrayal or did survival mode take over?

Genesis 37 – 50 gives us the story of this young man: Joseph, son of Jacob, great-grandson of Abraham. Less than a chapter after we meet him, he has been betrayed by his own brothers and flung into a hostile, unknown world. He will live for decades surrounded by people yet utterly alone.

His brothers' betrayal broke every relationship Joseph had had up to that point in his life, leaving him powerless to do anything except try to survive. He lost the most important things humans need to flourish. He lost love. He lost belonging. He lost trusted relationships. He was alienated from all he had known—from all the relationships that were important to him.

He would live. He would even flourish. But his losses would permanently alter his life and weigh heavily on him for decades.

JOSEPH'S AMBIGUOUS LOSS

It's helpful to have a name for our grief when we experience broken relationships as Joseph did. Therapist and researcher Pauline Boss popularized the phrase "ambiguous loss" (you can read more about it on her website: www.ambiguousloss.com). This is different from a loss such as the death of a loved one—it's less straightforward but still agonizing. It is a type of loss without a culturally recognized way to grieve or reach closure. It can involve *physical absence with psychological presence*. Divorce or estrangement from family, for example—you don't see the person anymore but they are still very present in your mind. Or it can involve *psychological absence with physical presence*. In this case, a

loved one is missing emotionally or cognitively, though you still see them regularly in person. Addiction, depression, dementia, and other chronic physical or mental illnesses can result in this type of loss.

Such losses leave us stuck while our family, church, or work relationships go on without us. Other people seem to sail on as we are left treading water in their wake. How do we navigate and grieve these losses when society does not necessarily even recognize them as real loss?

The story of Joseph is a quintessential example of ambiguous loss. Joseph was the first son of Jacob's favorite wife, though he was the eleventh son born to Jacob overall. Jacob favored Joseph over his older sons, setting his family up for jealous rivalries that tore them apart. Though his brothers originally planned to kill Joseph, they instead sold him into slavery. He experienced decades of ambiguous loss as a result—alienated from the father and little brother he loved, only to come face to face unexpectedly decades later with the very brothers that had betrayed him so callously.

For those of us who are living in the middle of unreconciled relationships, even the way Joseph's story is told gives us insight into our own feelings of grief and loss.

MOMENTS OF GRIEF

I imagine Joseph's mind slowing down as he attempted to process what was happening to him. He must have been in shock; his brothers' actions against him were so horrible as to be unimaginable to him. Yet, as time wore on, he woke up to a horror worse than any he'd previously imagined for himself—enslaved in a culture he did not know, at the whim of brutal men. Early on, he found some footing in Potiphar's house, just to lose it all again when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of rape. What was it like for Joseph to lose footing and security a second time? To be thrown into a jail cell after he

had been thrown in a pit? I know from my own experiences that the second round of loss or betrayal is much worse emotionally than the first. We have a phrase for it: Joseph was kicked when he was down.

While in jail, Joseph experienced a third betrayal on top of the first two. He interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's cupbearer, and this man promised to remember Joseph and bring his case to Pharaoh. But he forgot, leaving Joseph in what was likely the foulest place in all of Egypt for another two years. Joseph sat in that dungeon—first betrayed, then falsely accused, and finally forgotten.

Moses wrote most of Joseph's story in matter-of-fact terms. We are left to intuit Joseph's feelings. But there are four scenes that give us insight into the emotions Joseph carried day in and day out as he endured his decades of alienation from the family he loved. Four times, Joseph wept.

By the point when Scripture first tells us of Joseph's weeping, he was on stable footing, second-in-command in Egypt, and a trusted help to Pharaoh. He had a wife and children. He was rich and influential. God had blessed him greatly. Yet these instances of weeping reveal the deep emotions he had long held that were not resolved by his success in Egypt. All the blessings in Egypt could not undo the pain from the losses he had experienced.

These emotional scenes help us understand Joseph as a real person like you and me, struggling to endure his ambiguous loss in the same ways we do. In order for us to find a home in Joseph's story for ourselves, we must put off any notion that he was a superhero, unaffected by the emotional toll of his losses. Joseph struggled as we would in a similar loss. These four glimpses of Joseph's grief serve as a mirror for our own.

“

Joseph was a real person like
you and me. His grief serves
as a mirror for our own.

”

SCENE 1: THE FIRST MEETING

By Genesis 42, Joseph had finally been elevated from a slave left to rot in jail to second-in-command under Pharaoh, tasked with helping the nation through a long famine. When Joseph's brothers came to buy grain in Egypt, Joseph was the one they went to. He saw them for the first time in over two decades—and though Joseph recognized them, they did not recognize him. Joseph devised a plan to hold one of his brothers hostage to coerce them into bringing his beloved little brother, Benjamin, to him in Egypt. The scene unfolds as, after three days in prison, Joseph told his brothers,

If you are honest, let one of you be confined to the guardhouse, while the rest of you go and take grain to relieve the hunger of your households. Bring your youngest brother to me so that your words can be confirmed; then you won't die. (Genesis 42:19-20)

The brothers then had an agitated discussion among themselves, unaware that Joseph could understand them.

“Obviously, we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this trouble has come to us.”

But Reuben replied, “Didn't I tell you not to harm the boy? But you wouldn't listen. Now we must account for his blood!”
(v 21-22)

Can you imagine this moment in Joseph's heart? His last memory of his brothers—the one seared into his psyche for decades—was of their hardened hearts and deaf ears as he cried out for help. His last vision of them was that of the slave-dealers putting money into their hands as wagons pulled Joseph away from the land of his father. What a

bitter, foul memory that must have been for Joseph over the last two decades.

For the first time in Joseph's story, Moses records:

He turned away from them and wept. (v 24)

Though Joseph presented himself to his brothers as a stern authority, the reader is made aware of his deep emotional response to hearing their words. "We saw his deep distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen ... Now we must account for his blood!" His brothers were finally acknowledging the wrong they had done to him.

Can you imagine what it was like for Joseph to hear this? Perhaps you yourself have wept with relief from hearing such words. Or maybe you still wait with longing to hear the one who harmed you acknowledge what they have done. After years of living in the grief of ambiguous loss, Joseph heard his brothers finally name the harm they had done to him. They finally put words to the reality Joseph had lived. And he wept.

SCENE 2: SEEING BENJAMIN

Genesis 43 sees the brothers return to Egypt a second time, bringing Benjamin, as Joseph had requested. When Joseph saw his little brother Benjamin for the first time in decades, he again broke down weeping.

When he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother that you told me about?" Then he said, "May God be gracious to you, my son." Joseph hurried out because he was overcome with emotion for his brother, and he was about to weep. He went into an inner room and wept there. (Genesis 43:29-30)

Joseph had already come face to face with the ones who caused the losses in his life. He now came face to face with the loss itself. He had lost his relationship with his

little brother. The baby of the family, loved and protected by all, had been Joseph's brother in every sense of the word—the only other son of the wife whom their father truly loved. They were full brothers in a dysfunctional family with older half-brothers who resented them because of their father's obvious preference for them. And they had not seen one another for 22 years.

It is hard to imagine the wealth of emotions Joseph faced. Surely he was overjoyed to see his brother. But the baby brother he remembered was now grown up—a young adult. Gone were the chubby cheeks and clumsy attempts to keep up. He stood there tall yet vulnerable before Joseph's authority. There was a gulf between them, a canyon dug deep and wide by the river of more than twenty years of separate experiences.

Maybe you've felt such a gulf between yourself and those with whom you long to be reconciled. It can feel impossible to bridge. Though Joseph knew Benjamin well, did Benjamin even remember Joseph? Face to face, he didn't recognize Joseph, and Joseph wasn't yet ready to reveal himself. The weight of Joseph's ambiguous loss must have been heavy in that moment. Joseph and Benjamin were physically only feet apart. But so much more separated Joseph from this one he loved. The gulf between them was huge. And Joseph wept.

SCENE 3: JOSEPH REVEALS HIMSELF

When Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers, the dam holding his emotions broke, and he could no longer control his grief or relief.

Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants, so he called out, "Send everyone away from me!" No one was with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers. But he wept so loudly that the Egyptians

heard it, and also Pharaoh's household heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But they could not answer him because they were terrified in his presence. (Genesis 45:1-3)

In the first two scenes of weeping, Joseph had managed to bring his emotions back under control. But now the dam finally broke. Joseph "ugly cried," and everyone witnessed it.

There was no immediate falling into the arms of his brothers, though. They responded with terror, not joy, to the realization that he was still alive. We too may experience complicated, unexpected, and hurtful responses to our attempts to bridge the gulf between ourselves and those we have wronged or who have wronged us. Even when appropriate first steps are made, it is hard to trust one from whom we have been long estranged. Reconciliation in Joseph's family, too, would not be simple.

Joseph sobbed out the question that had been on his heart for decades: was his beloved father still alive? This question sets us up for the final scene of Joseph's deep emotions.

SCENE 4: SEEING HIS FATHER

After Jacob learned that Joseph was alive, he headed for Egypt with all his descendants and all he owned. As he reached the land of Goshen, on the outskirts of Egypt, Joseph heard that his father was near and could wait no longer to see him.

Joseph hitched the horses to his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel [another name for Jacob]. Joseph presented himself to him, threw his arms around him, and wept for a long time.

Then Israel said to Joseph, "I'm ready to die now because I have seen your face and you are still alive!"

(Genesis 46:29-30)

Finally, the long estrangement of Joseph from his family was over. He held his father, and his father held him—both of them unwilling to let go.

This was a different type of weeping. Joseph was finally reconciled to his long-lost father. They wept for all that had been lost in the decades that had separated them. But they also wept for relief, as the weight that had pressed them both down for so long was finally lifted.

JOSEPH'S LOSS AND YOURS

Joseph first wept at the relief of finally hearing his brothers name their sin against him. He wept the second time when he saw Benjamin and came face to face with the collateral damage of his brothers' betrayal. He wept the third time as he revealed himself to his brothers and again when he hugged the frail bones of his father. The Bible doesn't undercut the reality of the pain in Joseph's story—or your own. How do we forgive when the sins against us harm more than just us? How do we forgive for harm done to our loved ones when we can barely let go of harm done to ourselves? Joseph walks with us in this struggle.

When Joseph finally hugged his father in person, the ambiguous nature of his loss coalesced into something tangible. He faced head-on the reality of the loss, as did his father. They did it together, in each other's arms. Ambiguous loss was over, and the reality of the loss was mourned. But their tears were accompanied by smiles as well, as they hung on to each other for a long while—each finally able to physically touch the one from whom they had been separated for so long.

Perhaps this is what you long for in your own story of loss. Do you long for reconciliation—for acknowledgment of what has been done to you? Do you long to hold the one from whom you've been alienated? Do you long for an easy

relationship, for peace where there has been conflict, and for tears of joy where there have only been tears of betrayal?

Or perhaps you don't want any of those things at all. Maybe you would rather never see the person who harmed you again. You are not ready for reconciliation. The emotional toll seems too hard.

As you compare your situation with Joseph's, remember this: each of these scenes of weeping comes at the *end* of Joseph's story. We are watching repentance and restoration begin to take place, but each scene reflects emotions that Joseph had felt for more than two decades. For years, he carried the grief of ambiguous loss with no expectation of anything ever changing. Yet things did change. Joseph's story gives us a vision of how God can supernaturally bring healing even when the way seems impossible.

There were multiple moments in Joseph's story when reconciliation seemed impossible: the gulf too wide and the pain too deep to bridge. Our path to reconciliation is complicated too—and we should acknowledge up front that not all relationships will be reconciled. We feel the grief Joseph felt, but we may not get to feel the relief of reconciliation on this side of eternity. However, that does not mean it is not worth pursuing. Our God does the impossible on a regular basis. He “gives life to the dead and calls things into existence that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). This is God's character, and he is at work in our lives as he was in Joseph's. Open yourself to hope for something better.

*Look, I am about to do something new;
even now it is coming. Do you not see it?
Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)*