

**Johann
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*Foreword by
Steven McDonald*

Why Forgive?

STUDY GUIDE

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Johann Christoph Arnold

A Study Guide

Since its first edition twenty years ago, *Why Forgive?* has become a valued resource for advancing the art of forgiving and nonviolent conflict resolution around the world. Its compelling stories of ordinary people who have earned the right to speak on these topics continue to open hearts and minds, as Arnold's bestselling book finds its way into readers' hands through public school anti-bullying assemblies, prison book studies, hospital chaplaincy work, and numerous other initiatives.

Storytelling is an effective tool anywhere, anytime, but its impact is greatest in a group setting. So it is no surprise that *Why Forgive?* is best utilized as a resource in the classroom or in informal roundtable gatherings. The intent of this study guide is to engender group discussion around questions designed to help unlock the full potential of the book's personal application for each reader.

Naturally, this study guide focuses on the stories Arnold weaves into the chapters of *Why Forgive?*. Across the globe, and often directly in the face of violence, men and women again and again find the strength to forgive, and their stories keep coming. In the hands of an able leader, then, this study guide becomes a springboard to further exploration and reflection on current applications and situations – most importantly those among the group itself. From there, as the author aptly concludes his book, every individual faces a clear choice:

Forgiveness is a power. It frees us from every constraint of the past, and helps us overcome every obstacle. It can heal both the forgiver and the forgiven. In fact, it would change the world if we allowed it to.

Each of us holds the keys to forgiveness in our hands. It is for us to choose whether or not we use them.

May we all be given grace to choose wisely.

The Editors
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Foreword

1. Detective Steven McDonald tells his story, including his decision to forgive the young man who shot him. He writes that everyone seemed astounded by his decision. Put yourself in his shoes. Would you forgive the shooter?
2. Now put yourself in the shoes of his fellow officers. Would you be taken aback by Steven's actions?
3. Steven refuses to make it easy for the reader. He does not answer the "why" and "how to" questions. Nor does he minimize the difficulty of forgiving. In fact, he writes that it may be the hardest thing you'll ever attempt to do. Ask yourself: Is there anyone in my life I need to forgive? If so, why have I not done so already? What would happen if I made the attempt?

Prologue

1. The author describes a terrible crime committed in his neighborhood and how he decided to visit the murderer and "confront him with the horror of his actions." He asks the question, "How can such a man ever be forgiven?" What is your answer to this question?
2. What feelings did you have as you read the story of the crime and trial?
3. Did your feelings toward the perpetrator change by the end of the account?

The Cancer of Bitterness

1. Think about the Nelson Mandela quote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemy." Does this statement apply to any situation in your life and experience? In the final analysis, who is harmed most by resentment?
2. Early on, the author asks the question, "What does forgiving really mean?" After reading the chapter, are you better able to answer this question?
3. How is the inability to forgive like cancer?
4. Consider how Brenda's refusal to lay aside hatred of her uncle caused his influence over her to continue. Was she better or worse off as a result?
5. Does revenge bring about closure? Why or why not? In what ways does Glenn's story provide an answer?

6. Chief Williams makes the provocative statement that “there’s a fine line between love and hate.” What does he mean by this? What is that fine line?
7. How does the Colemans’ story illustrate the statement that “bitterness can lead to death”?
8. Can you find examples within your own journey that illustrate the same, perhaps in a less dramatic way?

Believe in Miracles

1. Read the Seamus Heaney quote again. What role has hope played in your life? Are there situations in your life that remain unresolved for which you still have hope?
2. What do you think about Gordon Wilson’s act of forgiveness? How does its effect on the Protestant paramilitary leadership reflect on the phrase that “forgiveness is a power”?
3. Do you agree with the statement made by Piri’s father, that “everything is hard until you learn it, and then it becomes easy”? Why or why not?
4. What does Piri mean when he comments that “the cruelest prison of all is the prison of an unforgiving mind and spirit”?
5. The author makes the observation that Gordon and Piri decided to forgive on the spur of the moment and from the bottom of their hearts. He says, “Not everyone is able to forgive with such decisiveness or speed. But...that does not detract from the power of the act.” How does the ability to forgive, whether immediately or over time, relate to the title of this chapter?
6. Hashim now views the incident that paralyzed him for life not as a calamity but as “one of the best days of my life.” What does he mean by that?
7. Though perhaps to a different degree, have you experienced tragedies that have been turned into blessings?

Ending the Cycle of Hatred

1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” Do you believe that? Why or why not?
2. How does Solzhenitsyn’s statement impact the idea of “us” being different from “them”? How does it relate to forgiveness?

3. Look honestly at your own life. Can you think of times when you have been forgiven or realized you needed forgiveness?
4. What is meant by the “cycle of hatred” in the title of this chapter?
5. How did the cycle of hatred play out in the lives of Jared and Josef?
6. Josef was able to ask forgiveness of the people he wronged; Jared was not. Did that fact prevent Jared from finding peace? Why or why not?
7. Think about a specific conflict in your own life, among your friends, or in a troubled neighborhood or region of the globe. What role could forgiveness play in breaking the cycle of violence in this situation? Has it been tried? If so, to what level of success?

Bless Your Persecutors

1. Dostoevsky makes an amazing assertion when he states that humble love “can subdue the whole world.” What does he mean by that? How do the stories in this chapter reflect on that statement? Have you ever tried using “humble love” in your own life or seen it used in other lives? If so, describe the situation and the result.
2. According to the prison inmate quoted in this chapter, political action is the only viable means of transforming society’s “hellish realities” for billions of the earth’s inhabitants; it is the only way to create the conditions within which forgiveness can flourish. In your view, which should come first: political action or forgiveness? Which is more effective?
3. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted as saying that “the forgiving act must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged.” Why? How does this answer relate to the concept of being a peacemaker?
4. King also said, “Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.” What do you think about this?
5. Consider the story of Christian de Chergé. In the end, he and his fellow monks were brutally murdered, but his story lives on in the minds and hearts of thousands across the world. What does this say about the power of forgiveness? How does this story reflect back on the title of this chapter?

Forgiveness and Justice

1. This chapter deals with a fundamental misconception about forgiveness – that offering forgiveness somehow means excusing the wrong, minimizing its reality, and diminishing justice for the victim. Crimes can be horrific and their effects devastating. Pick a story from this chapter and discuss how it addresses this misconception. Reflect on your own response to this story and how it affected your understanding of forgiveness.
2. C. S. Lewis writes: “Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the person who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness.” What do you think about this statement? Is it really possible to “wholly reconcile” to a person who has committed a heinous crime?
3. Reflect on these words from Roberto Rodriguez: “I realize that we cannot be fully human if we have hatred within us – if we are consumed by anger or harbor resentment. These emotions define our lives. Especially for someone who has been brutalized and dehumanized, getting rid of these debilitating emotions is fundamental to healing. But doing that also means searching for something else to fill the void: searching for what it actually means to be human.” What does it mean to be human? How is it possible to get rid of the emotions that naturally affix themselves to us when we’ve been wronged? What is the path to healing?
4. What do you understand by the word “closure”? And how does Bill Chadwick’s story impact your understanding of this overused word? What did the role of forgiveness play in Bill’s search for closure? What examples can you think of in your own life experience where closure was found, or not? Why or why not?
5. How did Mary Foley come to the point where she could say, “In spite of what I’ve gone through, I believe that God will use this tragedy for his glory”? How has this given her purpose in life, and how has it released her from being “held down by bitterness” for the rest of her life?

The Deeds of Mercy

1. Alan Paton writes that “to punish and not to restore, that is the greatest of all offenses.” What does he mean by restoration? What does restoration mean to you? Can you find examples from your own life when, having committed some wrong, you were restored to fellowship with a parent, sibling, spouse, or friend?

2. Chris Carrier asks a very important question: “Why should anyone have to face death without family, friends, the joy of life – without hope?” How did this question affect his attitude to his attacker? What does it say about the deep human need for restoration?
3. Is it true that forgiving, and not hating, a perpetrator disgraces the memory of the victim? Describe how Ron Carlson approached this question. What do you think?
4. Who deserves mercy and who does not? Does mercy know any limits? If so, who sets those limits? How does Ron’s relationship with Karla respond to this question?
5. What does Ron and Karla’s story say about capital punishment? Do you believe the State of Texas was justified in killing Karla? Was killing her the right thing to do? Why or why not?

When Reconciling Is Impossible

1. Consider George MacDonald’s provocative statement: “It may be infinitely worse to refuse to forgive than to murder, because the latter may be an impulse of a moment of heat, whereas the former is a cold and deliberate choice of the heart.” Without minimizing the horror of murder, these words seem to throw a harsh light on holding grudges and refusing to forgive? How does this apply to your own life?
2. Marietta Jaeger argued against the death penalty for the kidnapper and killer of her young daughter. He later committed suicide. In spite of this end to his story, what impact do you think Marietta’s decision had on her own life?
3. Marietta’s story illustrates these words from the author: “The fuel of bitterness is always expended in vain. But the opposite is true, too. The love of a forgiving heart is never wasted. In fact...it is so strong that a heart merely set in the direction of forgiving can spread peace and hope, and thus bear fruit in lives beyond our own.” Have you experienced this personally? Do you know someone who has?
4. Tricia says something very important about letting go. What was it that she let go of? What role has this letting go played in her finding peace – and the ability to face an auditorium full of people with “quiet strength”?

Forgiving in Everyday Life

1. Thus far in the book, most of the stories have dealt with extreme situations and horrendous events that happen to other people. But forgiveness is also necessary in daily life,

where walls so easily build up between people and small grievances fester. Here no one is exempt from the choice to forgive or not, because every relationship will require it at some point. Do you think forgiveness is just as important at this level? Is it any easier? Why or why not?

2. C. S. Lewis seems to think that vulnerability and love go hand in hand; or, to put it the other way around, not allowing oneself to be vulnerable is the pathway to hell. What does he mean by this? How does the quote at the start of the chapter relate to your own life? Think about the past day, week, month, year. Have you allowed grudges to build up between yourself and someone in your life? If so, what are you going to do about that situation?
3. The author writes about confronting our true feelings toward those we know best. Is this easy or hard for you? Is it necessary?
4. The author's father said that, "No matter how many times you are betrayed, it is always better to forgive than to live in a spirit of anger and mistrust." What does he mean by "mistrust"? What would happen if you put these words into practice?
5. According to the author, forgiveness is a pointless gesture if we are not willing to be vulnerable. In a similar vein, Scott Peck says, "We cannot heal without being willing to be hurt." What do you feel about these thoughts? Do you find it easy to be vulnerable? Why or why not? What if the other party takes advantage of our vulnerability to do us further harm – does that mean we shouldn't risk making an attempt?

Forgiveness and Marriage

1. As the title suggests, this chapter drills further into the issue of forgiving in daily life. Why do you think Mother Teresa repeats the phrase "pray and forgive" three times in one short paragraph? What makes it particularly important in a marriage relationship?
2. Is the consequence of a marriage break-up limited to the two people immediately affected?
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quoted as saying that couples should not "find fault with each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts." Based on your own experience, or your observation of others, is it easy or difficult to find fault with a spouse? Why does Bonhoeffer use the phrase "every day" – isn't it sufficient to forgive once a month or once a year?
4. Is there some truth to the author's assertion that "many marriages could be saved by the simple realization that a spouse will never be perfect"? Or perhaps a great deal of truth?

What do you think?

5. What does the author mean when he writes that “so many couples sleep in the same bed and share the same house but remain miles apart inwardly, because they have built up a wall of resentment between themselves.” How does this reflect on your own experience or your observation of others?
6. The author ends this chapter on a hopeful note. Do you share his hope?

Forgiving a Parent

1. There is hardly a relationship stronger and yet more fragile than that of a parent with a child. How is the fragile nature of this relationship reflected in the quote from Henri Nouwen: “Forgiveness is love practiced among people who love poorly”?
2. Parent-child relationships can get horribly messy and irreparably broken. Consider an example from your own life or someone you know. What role does forgiveness play in finding some measure of happiness or healing in the midst of brokenness? How do Don’s story and Karl’s story relate to this question?
3. The author makes that point that “victim and victimizer...are prisoners of a shared darkness in which both will remain bound until someone opens the door.” What role does forgiveness play in opening that door? What does the author mean by stating that forgiveness is the only way out, even if an abuser chooses to remain in the darkness?
4. The past cannot be undone, and there is no one left unaffected by past wrongs of one kind or another. Yet we have a choice. With what choice does the author leave us at the close of the chapter? How does this choice link past and future together?

Blaming God

1. This chapter starts with a quote from the author’s grandfather, Eberhard Arnold, in which he writes that what “makes a life happy or unhappy is not outward circumstances, but our inner attitude to them.” Do you agree? What does this say about suffering and pain.
2. When did you find out that life is unfair? How did you react at the time? What do you think about your reaction now? Are there injustices you’ve experienced that burden you today? If so, have you ever spoken about them to another person?
3. The author writes that anger is a legitimate stage of grief, even when there is no clear

target for our anger: “It needs to be expressed and dealt with if we hope to find healing and move on.” Is there pent up anger in your life that you have not dealt with? If so, what steps could you take to deal with this anger?

4. While acknowledging the reality of anger, it is the author’s position that “it is fruitless to stay angry at God.” Why?

Forgiving Ourselves

1. In the final analysis, perhaps the most difficult person to forgive is yourself. Are there circumstances in your life for which you have had to forgive yourself? Or are you still burdened by something for which you feel you can never forgive yourself? In that case, how might Hannah Arendt’s words reach into that situation and help toward healing? How do these words point to a solution?
2. There is a great deal of heartache over events in our lives that we wish we could go back and undo. The author writes: “For many people, the problem of guilt cannot be solved with another’s forgiveness, or by any external means at all. For them, peace of mind comes only when they are able to forgive themselves.” Does this apply to you? Does it show the way forward?
3. Nothing hurts more than the tragic death of a loved one who died as the direct result of our action, because we can never shake off the question of guilt. That is what makes Delf’s story so compelling. In musing on Delf’s tortuous path to healing, the author writes of Delf’s deliberate decision to love. How did this decision play out in Delf’s life? How did it enable him to regain wholeness? How does his story speak into your own life? If it was possible for him to find a sense of peace, what does that say to you?
4. The author claims that “all of us yearn for the freedom to live without guilt. At some level, every one of us longs for forgiveness.” Do you think that is true? Why or why not?
5. Arnold writes that even the most earnest confession of guilt may not be enough to assure us of lasting relief or healing. Where does that leave us? Does the revelation given to John Plummer – that forgiveness can work wonders we have neither earned nor deserved – provide an answer?

Accepting Responsibility

1. There is something deep within each of us that finds it difficult to accept responsibility

for something gone wrong. Consider these words of Bonhoeffer: “In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard, we continually scheme to avoid it. Yet in the deep mental and physical pain of humiliation before a brother we experience our rescue and salvation.” What is he saying? It may not be in vogue to talk about sin, shame, remorse, humility, honesty, and confession. What do these words mean and what is their relationship to healing and restoration?

2. In the author’s view “it is dangerous to become glib about forgiveness – to act as if it could be plucked off the nearest tree.” What does he mean by that? It is a valid point?
3. Mark and Debbie’s story shows the difficulty of confrontation and the ease with which we gloss over actions in others that really should be addressed. Why is it so hard to confront sin in others? What is the difference between loving confrontation and judgmental condemnation? Why are the two often confused?
4. Letting things slide is almost always the path of least resistance; that’s why it’s often the path that is chosen. But the author seems to think that admitting our wrongdoings and pointing out the same in others is the only way to find forgiveness and restore relationships. Do you agree? Why or why not? Is it really necessary to admit our faults to another human being? Isn’t it good enough to talk to God about them? How does Steve’s story help to answer these questions?

Not a Step, but a Journey

1. If forgiving is a journey rather than a single step, nothing illustrates this better than the stories in this chapter, starting with Steven McDonald. How did the birth of the son he could not hold change his life? How did Steven open himself to the possibility of that change? What steps did he take in his journey toward forgiving his assailant?
2. Consider this passage from Steven’s story: “I forgave Shavod because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended my injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It’s bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury.” Think about your own life. Have you been wounded, either in body or spirit through the actions of others? If so, have you taken steps to prevent permanent “spiritual injury”? Or do you harbor the desire for revenge? Consider the life that Patti Ann has lived since her husband was paralyzed. How does her attitude compare to your own?

3. Steven has spoken to thousands of young people about the healing power of forgiving, often mentioning Martin Luther King Jr., who taught him “that there’s some good in the worst of us, and some evil in the best of us, and that when we learn this, we’ll be more loving and forgiving.” King also said: “Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it’s a permanent attitude.” How did King apply these thoughts in his own life? How will these words affect your own decisions in the future?
4. What decisions did Alice Calonga make, enabling her to be a stronger person following the tragic accident involving her granddaughter, Saira? What does she mean by saying that her burdens are easier to bear now that she is not carrying anger as well? Think how this may apply in your life or in the lives of those you know.
5. The author writes that for Terry, as for each of us, “it is our inmost attitude that really counts. That is what will tip the scales of our lives in the direction we really want to go, no matter how many conflicting emotions threaten to throw us off balance.” Consider this liberating thought, especially when life gets messy and hard to sort out. Does it help you in your own journey?
6. Bud Welch has become a passionate opponent of the death penalty in the United States – but only after a long internal struggle. Consider his advice: “You have to work through your anger and your hatred as long as it’s there. You try to live each day a little better than the one before.” Does that work for you?

Making Ripples

1. What does Dostoevsky mean by calling love in action “a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams”? How do you see this playing out on the national and global scene? What about in your own life? Give some examples.
2. The author observes that “forgiving is a deeply personal matter.” But then he goes on to say that “forgiveness can be a powerful social force, transforming and empowering whole groups of people.” How can both be true? Can you provide your own examples of how personal transformation led to something larger?
3. Margaret Mead observes that even “a small group of committed people can change the world...Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Does Jean-Paul Samputu’s story validate this thought? If so, how?
4. According to Jean-Paul, “People need to hear stories of forgiveness, so that they can be touched. And they need a vision of how things could be, in order to give them hope.”

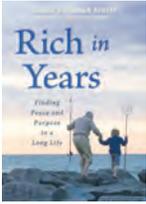
Now that you have almost finished the book, do you agree with Jean-Paul? Have the stories in the book helped you to gain a vision and given you hope? If so, how do you intend to apply the lessons you have learned and the inspiration you have taken from these stories?

5. The author makes the bold statement that “every human is capable of being both a victim and a victimizer.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
6. Arnold goes on to add that “there is no victory without struggle, no redemption without remorse, and no healing without pain. There is no such thing as spring without winter.” How has your own journey reflected these words? Does this sentence give you courage to weather the storms of life?
7. Dorothy Day speaks about the “ever-widening ripples that will reach around the world” – a thought that is reflected in the title of this chapter. Describe specific examples showing how you have seen this happening in your life or within your lifetime.

Epilogue

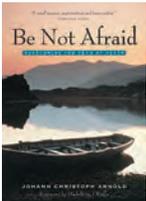
Though short, the epilogue is important. Read it a couple times. Then write down your concluding thoughts after finishing the book. How has it affected you? If you are in a group setting, pass the papers around and read them out loud so the whole group can benefit.

Other books by Johann Christoph Arnold



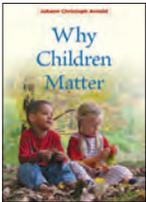
Rich in Years

What's the secret of people who love life regardless of their health or circumstances? In *Rich in Years*, Arnold tells stories of real people to show that we don't have to be young or physically fit to enjoy life and contribute to society.



Be Not Afraid

In this hope-filled book, stories of ordinary men and women offer hard-won insights on dealing with uncertainty, loss, grief, and the fear of death. Arnold knows that the biggest challenges in life are the ones that won't fit the script. All the same, he is convinced that there are plenty of common truths worth holding to the light.



Why Children Matter

In an age when common sense too often gives way to the opinions of "experts," Arnold offers an approach to childrearing that is grounded in faith. This short book offers concrete steps to encourage parents who want to pass on to their children the values their parents gave them.



Cries from the Heart

If you've ever felt that praying was like talking to a wall, the last thing you need is another book that holds out religion like a good-luck charm. Arnold tells stories about how people with very real problems have found strength to face life's challenges.



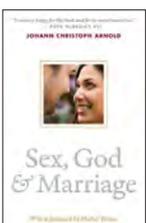
Seeking Peace

Where can we find peace of heart and mind – with ourselves, with others, and with God? Arnold says there is such a peace, but it will demand a relentless pursuit kept up only by hope and courage, vision and commitment.



Their Name Is Today

There's hope for childhood. Despite a perfect storm of hostile forces that are robbing children of a healthy childhood, courageous parents and teachers who know what's best for children are turning the tide.



Sex, God, and Marriage

A refreshing new look at sex, love, and marriage that sees past the usual issues and gets to the root: our relationship with God, and the defining power of that bond over all other relationships.

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