



## **BELONGING:** As We Forgive Our Debtors

When someone you love hurts you deeply, it's disorienting, as if the compass between you suddenly went haywire and the road under you dissolved into nothing. While the battered mind settles and wraps itself around what happened, the shattered heart wants guarantees that what happened won't happen again. It's from this place—where belonging has unraveled and what was once soft and giving has become a hard and locked door—that we discover the hidden path of Forgiveness.

To forgive someone is not to excuse them. To excuse them is to absolve them of responsibility. Forgiveness means giving up your claim of vengeance in the name of love. It doesn't change the past. It doesn't excuse the past. It doesn't forget the past. It is simply the gracious and courageous act of leaving the past in the past. It is moving forward without the rage or bitterness that suffocates and shrinks us from the inside.

Good relationships are tested and people come through them, not unscathed, but bolder and stronger on the journey.

**Read:** Genesis 45

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How do we know from this passage that Joseph paid a steep emotional cost being separated from his family?
2. What do we give up or burden ourselves with when we choose revenge over forgiveness?
3. What did Jesus give up when He chose to be the instrument of God's forgiveness?

## **For Love in a Time of Conflict**

**By John O'Donohue**

When the gentleness between you hardens  
And you fall out of your belonging with each other,  
May the depths you have reached hold you still.

When no true word can be said, or heard,  
And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,  
When even the silence has become raw and torn,  
May you hear again an echo of your first music...

Before this weather of grief invites  
The black seed of bitterness to find root,  
May your souls come to kiss.

Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,  
To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,  
Reach out with sure hands  
To take the chalice of your love,  
And carry it carefully through this echoless waste  
Until this winter pilgrimage leads you  
Toward the gateway to spring.

**Prayer:** Abba, expose my heart to me. Are there past hurts that have made me hard or suspicious? Is there someone I am afraid to forgive, or someone I believe doesn't deserve forgiveness? You have pardoned me for all that I've done or will ever do. Give me your heart. Teach me to love others as you love me. Amen.



## **BELONGING:** Openhanded

What we have available to us is never limited to what we can see, in our cupboards or in our bank account. We live in and by the open hand of a loving God. We belong to Him and He is responsible for us. That doesn't mean we are always comfortable or that we know how we will make it into tomorrow's provisions. (Faith and guarantees seldom arrive at a party together!) It does mean that our needs will always be met not a moment sooner or later than is best for us.

Patience—desire with trust—is equal parts waiting and walking. When we don't have the answers to our problems, we live in the questions, doing what we know to do, letting go of what's out of our hands, and not allowing our fear to have the last word in any discussion or prayer.

God provides. That's more than a framed needlepoint on your grandma's wall. It's a promise, one that offers us a spot on the horizon to focus our gaze, and the bread of hope for our journey.

**Read:** 1 Kings 17:7-24

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How do we know that both the widow and Elijah trust God?
2. What makes a person with little or nothing to spare share what they have with others?
3. The Bible says God owns everything, but in what way is He generous?

"At destruction and famine, he shall laugh that has God for his friend to guard and maintain him. The brook Cherith is dried up, but God's care of his people, and kindness to them, never slacken, never fail, but are still the same, are still continued and drawn out to those that know Him. When the brook was dried up, the [river] Jordan was not; why did not God send him there? Surely because He would show that

He has a variety of ways to provide for His people, and is not tied to any one... Those that deal with God must deal upon trust; seek first His kingdom, and other things shall be added... Happy are those who can thus, against hope, believe and obey in hope."

—Matthew Henry

**Prayer:** Father, I admit that I'm not always as obedient as this widow, or as brave and sure as Elijah. Increase my faith in You. Help me not to trust what I see over what You have told me—what You've promised me. I want to believe You always, and move according to Your voice confident in Your protection and provision. Amen.



## **BELONGING:** Seeing Ruth

"Out of sight, out of mind," the saying goes. But what about the people we see every day and intentionally cast from our notice? The homeless man at the freeway onramp, the disabled child struggling to talk to no one, an old woman at a bus stop, a black man, arm raised, watching a sixth taxi refuse his fare, the prisoner, the immigrant, or the addict. These are the kinds of people we often give ourselves permission to call "other."

In Ruth's day, women were defined in the culture by their attachment to men. First their fathers, then their husbands, and, if widowed, their sons. To be without a man's protection meant you had no standing in the community. Widows had no identity and no voice. They were the poorest, least seen, most marginalized and vulnerable members of society.

And just as Boaz reached out to Ruth, so are we called to reach out to de-other those the world would throw away. To offer them ourselves, and our substance is to give them the gift of belonging. We become theirs even as they become ours; a treasure of mutuality, and the very "heaven on earth" of our prayers.

**Read:** Ruth 2: 8-23

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. In what ways does Boaz bring Ruth into his community?
2. Recall a time when God touched your life through "the other"?
3. In what ways did/does God go above and beyond to reach out to us the way Boaz did to Ruth?

The concept of "finding favor" in someone's eyes is a common phrase in the Old Testament, and it always referred to someone from a higher station showing kindness to someone in a lower station; a landowner to a slave, a prophet to a widow.

"Finding favor" in God's eyes means being on the receiving end of God's lavish and unmerited grace.

Boaz is a "type" of Christ, meaning we can look at his behavior and see parallels to Jesus and the Gospel. In the story of Ruth and Boaz, we can see that because of Jesus, we can enter into God's presence, not as "other," but as a member of His family, already knowing that we have His favor. When God looks at us, he sees us through the lens of Christ's perfect life on earth, and His sacrifice on the cross, and we receive His grace and favor, like Ruth received Boaz's.

**Prayer:** Abba, open my eyes and show me the "other" in my midst. Give me a heart of compassion, and hospitality. Show me how to bring others into community and give me the courage to enter spaces where I may feel like the "other." Expand my social circle to include more people who are not like me. Amen.



## **BELONGING:** One of a Kind

Esther became the Jewish queen of a Persian king. She hid her “otherness” from him and everyone else until it became clear that revealing her identity and entreating the favor of the king was the only way she could save her people.

Life is a lot like high school. “Fitting in” is usually the safest place in any community. The unspoken message is often “Don’t look or act too weird. When you call too much attention to your differences, you make the “in crowd” and the influencers nervous.” Fear of rejection is reason enough to hide ourselves in the safety of sameness.

But none of us is called to be “like the other.” We are born to be like no other. Esther was an orphan and an alien, separated from her family and her people. As a woman, she had no power. Still, she had purpose, and despite every circumstance stacked against her, she was persuaded, with the help of her cousin Mordecai, that God had plans for her to prosper, right where she was, as herself, not some counterfeit.

“To be yourself,” said Emerson, “in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

**Read:** Esther 9:17-32

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. Why is it important to celebrate God’s victories as Esther and her people did?
2. In what ways has God made your upbringing or circumstances useful to others?
3. Esther is the only book of the bible where God is not specifically mentioned. That said, where do you “see” Him?

“Finally, after all the anguish, fear and battle that had gone on in the land, we see that God’s people could finally celebrate. The enemy had been defeated and there was freedom at last. The spirit of heaviness had been replaced by the garments of praise!

To this day... this celebration and feast is still kept every year by the Jews. It is called the feast of Purim and is celebrated in the month of March. So what can we, as God’s people today, take from this for our lives? Well, this celebration is a reminder of the hope, joy and thanksgiving that should be ours due to the ultimate victory that was achieved for us on the cross. We can look back on that day when God ‘turned the tables’ on the enemy and purchased life out of death. And that is something worth celebrating!”

-Pastor Lain Gordon

**Prayer:** Oh Papa, I thank you that you have made me like no other. Let me find my identity in you so that I may live into the person you imagined when you first dreamed of me. Amen.



## **BELONGING:** Exiled Example

Every day, on average, each of us sends six newspapers worth of information out into the world, compared with just 2.5 pages 25 years ago. Despite all of that technology-saturated “presence,” though, we have become a civilization of hermits, lonelier than we’ve ever been, and ever more disconnected in our connectedness. It’s no surprise then that many people feel out of step in whatever place they call “home.”

Christ followers are challenged, in today’s culture, to live prophetically—to speak forth the good news of The Gospel—while a million other voices compete for the same hearing. Moreover, how do we do it with any degree of effectiveness when Christianity itself has, to many, become synonymous with division and dishonesty?

Well, we’re not without examples. Daniel gives us the striking example of what it looks like to live “exiled”—that is within a culture and without it at the same time. As the people of God, we, like him, have the power to love the world and bless it, even as we resist the temptation to conform to it.

**Read:** Daniel 6: 1-28

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. How did Daniel both bless and resist the people he lived among?
2. In what ways are you asked to conform at home, with friends, at work?  
How do you resist?
3. Daniel blessed King Darius and yet broke his law. Can you think of current day examples where this might be necessary?

“This was God’s power at work. When Daniel was in the den, God’s angel was there with him and the lions. Can God still send His angel to deliver us? Of course He can! He can deliver us with the angel of His presence (Isaiah 63:9). It is a great thing to experience the delivering power of God. He delivers from sin, from fear, from doubt,

from anxiety . . . and He delivers completely! If you are in a horrible den, threatened by any kind of lion, the same power that delivered Daniel will deliver you.

“Look at verses 25-27, and compare Philippians 1:12-14. How thrilled and humbled Daniel must have been when, in answer to his own prayer, and because of his own faithfulness and trust in God, Darius was led to give this great testimony!”

—Francis Dixon

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, it is not always easy to tell the difference between blessing the culture and conforming to it. Give me wisdom to discern it. Make me useful to those around me, even as You love them through me. Make me salt and light, in Your name. Amen.