

Father's Day Hope for Those with Broken Relationships

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Is Father's Day a day of joy and celebration for you? For many, it's a painful reminder of what they've lost or what they never had. The history we have with our parents and our children is often filled with regrets. What hope is there for broken relationships between a father and his son or daughter?

The Bible is filled with stories of imperfect people just like you and me who did their best to navigate the complicated relationships called family. Thankfully, God gives us good examples to emulate, as well as the colorful stories of those who struggled, so that we can learn what to do and not to do. In addition, as New Testament Christ-followers, we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, instructing, and empowering us to live the way God intended – in right relationship with each other.



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A Father's Foolish Decision

In [Judges 11:29-40](#), we read a story about a father who made a foolish vow that affected the life of his daughter. Jephthah was a leader, a judge of Israel. One day he set out to do battle with the sons of Ammon. Instead of simply asking God to show him favor, he makes a vow that he will “offer up to the Lord” the first thing that comes out of his house to greet him if God brings him victory. The text seems to imply he was thinking of a sacrificial animal. God hears Jephthah’s prayer, and gives his enemies into his hand. Imagine his dismay when he returns home and is greeted by his one and only daughter. He realizes his vow will cost her dearly and affect him as well.

Some translations (and biblical scholars) indicate that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering, but we know this cannot be true. God would never accept or approve of child sacrifice; He declares it to be an [abomination](#). The context tells us what happened. Jephthah’s daughter asked for two months to go to the mountains with her friends and “weep because of her virginity.” In other words, because of her father’s vow, she would never marry, but be set apart in devotion and service to the Lord as an unmarried, single woman. She would never know the joy of having her own family, and as Jephthah’s only child, his family line would end. [Judges 11:39](#) is clear: “At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man.”

The course of Jephthah’s daughter’s life was irrevocably changed because of the actions of her father. We don’t know what happened after this event, but there are only two possibilities. The daughter accepted her fate and decided to embrace this new course of her life, maintaining a forgiving and loving relationship with her father, or she became bitter and broken, angry that her father had done something which to her mind was foolish and unfair.



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Mending Broken Relationships

How relevant this story is to our twenty-first century relationships! Children often suffer at the hands of their fathers. Fathers often make foolish decisions they later come to regret. Without the powerful [presence of God's](#) Spirit enabling us to forgive those who have wronged us and ourselves for wronging those we [love](#), a broken relationship can never be healed.

Jesus told another story in [Luke 15:11-32](#) about a father and his two sons. The younger son convinces his father to give him his inheritance, a presumptuous ask to say the least. The young man goes away to a distant country and squanders his inheritance with "loose living." When he finally runs out of money, in hunger and desperation, he hires himself out to a pig farmer, something that would have been highly offensive to his Jewish heritage. But "when he came to his senses," he realizes that even his father's hired men are well-fed. It occurs to him to return home and humble himself, asking his father to accept him not as a son, but as a servant.

We love the father in this story. He runs to meet his son (indicating he's been watching every day in hopes of his return). He embraces him, showing compassion and love, and treats him like royalty, celebrating that the son he thought was dead was alive again. This family drama doesn't end there, though. The older son is jealous and resentful, having stayed faithful to his father. He is angry and refuses to celebrate. When his father comes to see what is wrong, he wastes no time in telling him exactly how he feels. The father realizes that his older son will have to decide for himself how he will respond. He tells him simply that everything he has left belongs to the older son, but he will not let his jealousy diminish the joy of his restored relationship with the younger brother.



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Only Forgiveness Can Fix What Was Broken

Father-son (and father-daughter) relationships have *always* been filled with drama, conflict, and brokenness. One lesson we learn in the parable of the [prodigal son](#) is that the answer is found in forgiveness. Resentment, anger, jealousy, revenge, and desire for

justice will never fix a broken relationship. But forgiveness – real, sincere forgiveness – allows us to heal from our hurts and lay a foundation for restoration.

Forgiveness is the hope for broken relationships, whether it is between you and your father, or you and your child.

These two stories from [Scripture](#) illustrate two sides of the father-child relationship. Sometimes brokenness comes from the father's action. Sometimes it's the child that tears a family apart. Regardless, there is always hope if we are willing to extend forgiveness.

What is forgiveness, and how can we come to the point where we are willing and able to forgive, even when it seems there is no hope for reconciliation?

One New Testament Greek word translated “forgive” is *aphiēmi* and has the literal meaning of “to send away, to leave, to let go, to give up, to keep no longer.” Forgiveness doesn't mean that we will never again remember the wrong someone did to us, nor does it mean we affirm their behavior. It doesn't mean we agree with what happened. Instead, it means we let go of its hold over us. We no longer allow it to control us. We leave it. We give it up. We make a willful choice to treat the offender as if they had not offended.



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The Mark of a True Believer

Another word translated “forgive” is *charizomai*, meaning “to bestow a favor unconditionally, to show oneself gracious, kind or benevolent, to pardon.” We don't wait until we feel the other person deserves to be forgiven; we offer forgiveness freely without conditions. If this seems unreasonable, consider the times we ourselves need to be forgiven. Would we want forgiveness withheld until we deserved it?

Jesus taught the disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” ([Matthew 6:12](#)). He went on to say that if do not forgive others, our Father will not forgive our transgressions. Paul taught us that we are to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” ([Ephesians 4:32](#)). Forgiveness is a mark of a true believer. Those who have been forgiven are able, by the power of the [Holy Spirit](#) living in them, able to forgive others.

If you don't feel able to forgive, pray and ask God for the [strength](#) and ability. Ask God to give you a tender heart and a compassion for those who have hurt you. A helpful practice is to look at your father or your child, not in the familial relationship you have here on earth, but as a brother or sister in Christ. Family relationships are not eternal. Only our relationship with Christ will last forever. When we step back and see our family as fellow believers (or as people who need to know Jesus), it changes our viewpoint to an eternal perspective. Has your father hurt you? Has your son or daughter broken your heart? View them through the lens of a person who needs not only your forgiveness, but the forgiveness of a Savior.



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Hope for Broken Relationships

I once knew a man whose father had abandoned him, his mother, and his four siblings when he was just a small child. Life in poverty with an alcoholic father had not been easy, but it became exponentially harder without a father at all. For over thirty years, they never heard a word from him. One day, the father walked back into his mother's life, asking her forgiveness, and confessing that he had lived with another woman for all those years. The man's mother had never remarried; it took some time, but eventually and to the surprise of her adult children, she did forgive him, took him back as her husband, and renewed her wedding vows.

Despite his mother's decision, the man struggled with anger, resentment, and at times, hate for the father who had abandoned him. He was cordial to his father's face, but held onto the bitterness, unwilling to forgive. One morning, however, God confronted the man about his own hard heart. He tells the story that as he was praying in church, he

heard a voice as if someone was standing next to him. It was so sudden and startling that he opened his eyes and looked to either side. The voice asked, *“So, do you want me to forgive you?”* In his mind, he answered, *“Yes.”* The voice, which by now he recognized as God’s Spirit speaking to him through his conscience, said, *“Why should I forgive you when you won’t forgive your father?”*

As you can imagine, God made His point clear. The man decided then and there to forgive his father; he described it as “a load lifted.” Incidentally, this occurred after the man’s father had passed away. While he had missed the opportunity to tell him face to face (on this side of eternity), the act of forgiveness still worked in his own heart. He has hope to meet his father in [heaven](#), where they can be reconciled personally.

Our salvation depends on trusting that God has forgiven us. Who are we to withhold forgiveness for those who have hurt us? Our life is temporary; our struggles and pain will one day end. We will enjoy eternity in heaven because Jesus made it possible for our sins to be forgiven by the Father. Our Heavenly Father has set the example.

Do you want hope for broken relationships? Look at what your true Father did for you. Forgiveness is the path to [reconciliation](#) and redemption. We of all people have hope because we are forgiven. This is not only the message and means of the gospel, but also the evidence that the gospel has taken root in us.

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