

# A story of how choosing forgiveness is not like choosing ice cream.

Katie walked along the wooden planks of a boardwalk across the cliffs of Cambria as sun beamed down on them and waves exploded over the rocks below. Bushes, shrubs, and playful scrub jays lay on the side opposite the cliffs. She loved her hometown: small, safe, and with a view of the rugged cliffs of California. Her friend Laura walked beside her.

"You and Matt doing good?" Laura asked.

Katie's heart raced at the thought of him. "Better than good."

"What about college?"

A gust of wind blew Katie's blonde hair behind her. "Well, San Luis Obispo and Santa Cruz aren't that far. We'll survive."

Two forms sat on a bench further down the boardwalk. Well, a guy sat on the bench. The girl sat on top of him; they were connected at the lips.

"Ugh, a little heavy on the PDA, don't you think?" Laura said.

Katie shrugged. "I've done worse."

As they got closer, she thought it funny how the guy looked a little like Matt.

She stopped just a few footsteps from the bench.

"Matt?" she said uneasily.

The guy pulled out for air and stared back at Katie. Lipstick covered his face.

"Uh... hey, Katie," he said.

The girl on his lap turned. It was Suzie, Suzie the freshman! They stared at each other for a moment in stunned silence.

Something inside Katie exploded like an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. She felt like her stomach was about to burst out of her skin.

"What are you doing?" Katie shouted.

"Uh, this isn't quite, uh..." Matt stuttered.

She felt the black smoke of burning oil rolling out of her ears.

"You traitor!" she shouted.

She knocked the stunned freshman off his lap and went for after Matt's face with her fingernails.

Matt threw up an arm to save his eyeballs. He fell backwards off the side of the bench and into the dirt.

"What happened to 'I love you'?" Katie screeched.

Arms held her from behind, someone's arms... Laura, it had to be Laura, keeping her from second degree murder.

Matt stood up and brushed off some of the dirt. He stared at Katie and shouted. "You're boring, that's what happened."

He grabbed Suzie by the hand. "Come on, let's find another bench," he said. They stomped down the boardwalk.

Suzie turned back with an arrogant smile, stared at Lizzie, and blew a kiss.

She was going to strangle them while bashing their heads against the planks. Then down, down onto the sharp rocks, below.

"Let me go, let me go," Katie screamed to her friend. She struggled to get free. But Laura did gymnastics; freedom wasn't about to happen.

"Chill," Laura said. "Killing him won't help things."

"Yes it will," Katie yelled. "It'll wipe that smile off that girl's face."

She took a few deep breaths, and her tempter calmed. She stopped struggling, and Laura let her go. Katie wanted to collapse onto the bench, but she couldn't sit there. The thing just felt too... dirty.

"I hate them both," Katie said. "I'll kill him."

"Girl, come on, what would Jesus do?"

"Send them to the burning pit of hell," Katie said. She started running after them, again.

Laura, way more athletic, tackled her from behind. The two wound up face-down on the splintery wood planks.

"Ok, wrong question," Laura said. "But seriously, we're supposed to forgive as he forgave us."

"I'll never forgive him. I... I'm going to have to be in the same math class on Monday."

"Jesus. Bring justice on Matt. Amen."

Katie sat out on her dad's porch, overlooking the ocean and crashing waves. For some reason, she didn't feel the kind of peace she normally felt during her quiet time. She'd felt really angry and anxious all morning, and even sitting here, watching the bursts of spray on the rocks.

She opened her Bible to her daily chapter, Matthew 18.

Become like little children... yawn...

She sipped her Uganda fair trade coffee. Dang, two sugar cubes hadn't been enough. She should have put in more.

Yeah, God was happier about the one sheep that was lost than the 99. Good, she was the one sheep. He was glad she was saved. Great.

Go talk you your brother who sins against you. Oh, take it to the church, treat him like you would a pagan or a tax collector. Now, we're talking. Too bad Matt didn't go to the same church as her. Well, when he went to church.

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Okay, time to set this thing down for a moment. Breathe. Watch the otters play in the surf.

But she'd only read halfway through the chapter. Julie always said to read one chapter of the Bible a day if you wanted to grow in your faith. She hadn't finished her chapter!

Jesus replied to his dull disciple: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

She skimmed through the parable. Yeah, a king wanted to settle accounts with servants. A servant who owed him 1000 talents (apparently, a lot of money) got forgiven then went out and demanded payment for a tiny debt from his buddy. The unmerciful dude got thrown in jail. She'd heard this one before.

But the last verse caught her eye. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

The Bible fell out of her hands, splayed out on the floor.

Oh, crap. She was going to hell! She hadn't forgiven Matt, and she was going to hell!

It was youth group that night. Okay, okay, breathe. If she could avoid getting hit by a bus and make it to youth group, she might be alright. Julie would know what to do.

Katie clenched her Bible as she walked up the sidewalk towards Julie's house. A banner across the doorway read "XFG, Xtreme for God." Most of the students just called it "Youth Group."

She thought yesterday on the cliffs was the angiest she could ever possibly get. Like, if she got any angier, she'd have a stroke or something.

She was wrong.

Matt and Suzie were a thing, now. They'd sat together at lunch. And with them, sitting together meant *sitting together*.

She wanted to strangle the both of them. No, no, she had to forgive him 77 times. This was only twice.

The problem was, the footnote in her Bible said it might mean seventy times seven. That was 4,900. Or was it 490? She planned to major in fashion design for a reason: no more math. Anyways, at this rate, it would take a while for Matt to burn through all those. And she didn't think that was Jesus' point, anyways.

Katie opened the door and walked in. About fifteen students sat around the room on couches and folding chairs. Julie and Marco sat on folding chairs in front of the TV, holding hands. They'd been married just a few years. Marco did flooring for a living, and Julie taught.

"Katie, just in time!" Julie yelled.

She got up and gave Katie a hug. Katie's eyes got bleary.

"Whoa, you alright?" she asked.

"Matt..." her voice cracked. "Matt cheated on me."

The tears came free and furious. All the anger and grief came out. The students were staring at her, weren't they? She didn't care. She buried her face in Julie's sleeve.

"It's alright; it's okay," Julie whispered.

Hands reached and touched her on the back. The students gathered around her.

"Alright everybody, we're gonna pray for for Katie," Marco said.

She just cried. Afterwards, she couldn't remember the words, just the touch of the hands. She didn't know whether God heard those prayers or not. She just knew that her church friends loved her. At the moment, that's all she could take in.

The Bible study went by in a blur, and she found herself on the back porch, sitting under enormous pine trees in the silence of the hills, alone with Julie. This was their x-group. Most of the students called it a discipleship group. One of the girls in her group had to leave early, and two hadn't showed. Which meant she had Julie all to herself.

"You doing alright?" Julie asked.

"Better, now. Still hurting. But I think I'm going to hell, because I haven't forgiven Matt."

Julie looked stunned. "Why in the world do you think that?"

"Well, this morning, I read Matthew 18..." Katie explained her worries.

Julie said, "We know from other parts of the Bible that we're not saved by what we do or don't do but because of Jesus' mercy for us and receiving His righteousness. Period. But God puts passages like that in the Bible to give us an example of what it looks like to walk with Him. And if you're really saved, you'll walk with Him.

"So, if someone never forgives and always keeps bitterness, it means they don't really know God. Because if they did, His Spirit would work in them to convict and help them to forgive. The fact you have conviction to forgive means you're His daughter.

"Anyways, I don't think that passage necessarily means that you'll go to Hell if you don't forgive. In parables, Jesus usually describes Hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, He just says the servant was turned over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back a debt.

"I don't think that refers to the final judgment. I think it refers to us being tormented here, in this life. As long as we hold the guilt of others against them, we're in agony. And it opens us up to demonic oppression, too."

"So I've got a demon?" Katie asked. That was better than hell, but not much.

"Not like that... No... Uh... You don't 'have a demon,' at least not like you're possessed, but if you don't forgive, you open the door for Satan to be able to bug you. It's like... like opening your window and letting a wasp in your house."

"But I have screens on my windows," Katie said.

"No, no, well, then..." It was funny, Julie was usually so patient and smart, but sometimes she seemed at a loss for words. "It's like taking the screen off your window and letting a wasp in. You understand?"

"Yeah, I get it. So, what am I supposed to do? I don't feel like forgiving him."

Julie shook her head. "Forgiveness isn't a feeling. Forgiveness is a decision. You decide to give up any right to get even with the person and release them to God."

"Like, 'vengeance is mine,' thus sayeth the Lord?"

"Not quite. If your main goal is for Him to punish them, have you really forgiven them?"

"No, probably not. But does that mean he just gets away with it?"

"No. Vengeance really is the Lord's. That's why you don't have to go calling it down on anybody or gloating over the fact that something bad might happen to Matt. Maybe Matt will actually repent from what he did. Who knows? That's not your business. You're supposed to love your enemies, anyways."

Julie took a deep breath. "The point is that when you *choose* to forgive someone, your heart becomes free. As long as you hold anger and unforgiveness, you suffer."

"Have you ever had someone hurt you really bad?"

"Yeah," Julie said. "A few months ago, Marco yelled at me."

Katie's jaw dropped open. The *youth pastor*, yelling at his wife? No way. No. Freaking. Way.

"And?"

"And I chose to forgive him. I didn't let the sun go down on my anger."

Still, youth pastors or not, that didn't seem so bad. Especially if they reconciled later that night. Was that really the worst anyone had ever hurt Julie? Sounds like she'd had an easy life.

"So, like, how do I do that?"

"Just decide."

"But how do I decide?"

"You just do."

Could it really be that easy? Katie didn't think so, but Julie was the x-group leader. Julie knew basically everything about God. Apparently, it really was that easy.

But how did you just *decide* to forgive someone?

"Here, it's like this," Julie said. "Repeat after me."

"Okay."

"I forgive Matt for cheating on me with another girl."

"I forgive Matt for cheating on me with another girl." She saw the image of the two of them on the bench.

"I give up any right to get even with him."

"I give up any right to get even with him." She pictured herself clawing out his eyes.

"I release him to you, Jesus."

"I release him to you, Jesus." She pictured his car tumbling off a cliff and into the ocean.

"Amen."

"Amen."

"It's that easy. Whenever you start feeling mad, just keep saying, 'I forgive him. I forgive him. I forgive him.'"

"Alright..."

Nana was coming into town. Katie loved her grandma more than anything. If there was anyone in the world even more spiritual than Julie, it was her grandma. In holiness, it went something like... Jesus, the apostles, then her nana.

"Girl, you look terrible," were the first words that came out of Nana's mouth.

"It's been a rough few weeks," Katie replied.

Nana engulfed her in an embrace. "Want to talk about it?"

"Yeah." She could talk about anything with Grandma.

They went out onto the back porch, sat in the deck chairs, listened to the waves, and watched the pelicans dive into the water.

"What's going on?" Nana asked.

"My guy cheated on me."

An arm reached around her.

"Aww, my baby..."

"But it's okay. I've forgiven him!"

Yes, she'd forgiven him. Every time she saw him walking by with Suzie, she whispered, "Jesus I forgive him," over the roar of her own fury.

Every time she glimpsed them kissing (more often than she thought possible), she prayed, "I bless him, Jesus. Please help him to come to repentance and stop getting so physically active with Suzie. Oh, and I forgive her, too. Please help her to see that he's just in it for her body and doesn't really love her."

In fact, she forgave him so completely that every morning during her quiet time, when she thought about how bad Matt had hurt her, she released him to God at least a dozen times.

Yes, she had completely forgiven her ex. And all it took was one day! It's lucky that she'd had youth group that night and gotten to talk to Julie. Otherwise, she might have spent weeks forgiving Matt.

"Forgiven him, huh? You look like something the cat dragged in."

"Yeah, I've had trouble sleeping." *I forgive him; I forgive him.* "Must just need a new boyfriend."

"Have you lost weight?"

"Yeah, my stomach's been bothering me." Because she was thinking of him. *Forgive. Forgive.*

*Forgive.*

The faint sound of a yelling seal drifted from somewhere in the distance.

"I ever tell you when that happened to me?"

Images of soda pop, ice cream, neon lights, and the words "going steady" popped into Katie's mind.

"Someone cheated on you?"

"Yeah, your..." Nana paused, and her eyes got bleary. "Your grandpa."

"WHAAAAT!? Like, back when you were dating?"

"No, six years after we got married."

"WHAAAAT!?"

Grandpa was like right behind Jesus, the apostles, and Grandma in holiness. Well, now he was in heaven anyways. But there's no way, no feaking way, he ever could have done something like that.

"So when you say cheated," Katie said. "Like, you mean..."

"Sex. With an old girlfriend who lived in town. He hit the seven year itch a little early, and he shagged her."

Shagged, lol. "Who was she? How..."

Nana shook her head. "It's dead and buried. An innocent girl like you doesn't need to know the details."

"Wait, but you guys were married for like a gajillion years."

"Gajillion, huh?" she asked.

"Well, you know, fifty?"

"Fifty-six."

"So you got back together."

"We never got apart. Well, I lived with Aunt Edna for a week, but that was it. Anyways, I know what you're going through. And I say baloney if you think you've forgiven him."

Katie's heart lurched. Baloney. Nana just called her forgiveness baloney! She was a good girl. She loved Jesus. She wasn't harboring unforgiveness.

"No, I've made the choice to forgive him, just like my youth group pastor said. I just keep saying, 'I forgive him.'"

Nana chuckled. Then caught herself and tried to look serious. "How's that working out for you?"

Katie looked down at the deck. "Awful."

"You know, shoving down your anger isn't the same as forgiveness. Jesus called people like that a brood of vipers! It's not that simple."

"It's not? So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, that girl has one thing right. Forgiveness is decision. The thing she doesn't get is what kind of a decision it is."

"What kind of a decision?"

“Yeah, it’s a heart decision. That’s different from a simple choice.”

“Huh?”

“Okay, think of it like this. Ordering ice cream is a simple choice. What’s your favorite flavor?”

“Double chocolately chocolate with extra choclolate chips. And fudge on top if I can get it.”

Nana stared at her. “So, you go to the ice cream shop and say, ‘give me one big chocolate monster,’ and the guy gives you a cup. Does forgiveness work like that? You just say ‘Matt’s forgiven’ and it’s done?”

Katie leaned back in the deck chair and stared into the deep blue on the horizon. “It doesn’t, does it? I’ve been trying that for weeks. But I haven’t forgiven him, have I?”

“Doesn’t sound like it. Because forgiveness doesn’t work like ice cream. When you treat it like that, you end up with lies, hypocrisy, and suppressed anger. Everybody says everybody’s forgiven everybody, but you all still hate each other’s guts.”

Now Katie was pretty confused. “So, does forgiveness just happen, then? Like I’ll eventually get over it?”

“Nope, it’s a choice.”

“But you just said it wasn’t a choice.”

“No, I said it wasn’t a simple choice. I know people divorced for thirty years who still get anxiety when they think about their ex-spouses. They still haven’t forgiven.”

“How long did it take you to forgive Grandpa?”

“I don’t know. We went to marriage counselling with some quack for six months, and somehow we survived the experience. Two years after, things were pretty good. Ten years later, it’s like it never happened. But even at the beginning, during my week with Edna, I decided I wanted your Grandpa back. I decided that Jesus wanted me to reconcile, if Grandpa would reconcile. My forgiveness wasn’t complete. But I decided to step on the road of forgiveness.”

“So, the decision was more the decision to start forgiving?”

“Maybe. Here’s how I see it. Deciding to forgive is like deciding to walk to Milwaukee. You get on the right highway and put one foot in front of the other and don’t turn back. Just deciding to go doesn’t mean you’re there.

“Every day, you have to choose to keep going. You have to eat right and drink lots of water on the road—the Bible and prayer that is—otherwise you pass out.

“Every day, you choose to forgive a little more, as best you can. Saying ‘I forgive him’ is okay and all, long as you don’t think it means you’re done forgiving. You’re on the road of forgiveness.

“Remember manna in the desert? Jehovah gave the children of Israel just enough for each day. Forgiveness is like that. Today, I’m going to get power from the Holy Ghost to forgive for today. I’m going to have to forgive tomorrow, too. But I’ll forgive tomorrow, tomorrow. Today, I deal with today’s heart.

“And if you keep doing that, at some point, you get to Milwaukee. And you’re stronger for it. Then you just have to make sure to never go digging in the graveyard. Leave the thing dead and buried.”

“That sounds like really hard work,” Katie said.

“Get a job; that’s hard work,” Nana said.

“Hey! I’m just seventeen.”

“So what? Anyways, it’s not just hard, it’s impossible! What you need is a transformed heart, one that’s done being offended. That’s a choice so hard nobody can make it, at least not without the power of the Holy Ghost. Still, we work at it. It’s not our efforts that finally transform our hearts, but for some reason I’ve never figured out, He still tells to take those efforts. Then He rewards those who do.”

“You know, somebody published a book a few years back called Unbroken. It was about a famous World War II airman who got captured by the Japanese. He dreamed about returning to Japan and hunting down a soldier who tortured him. He fell into alcohol, depression, and poverty.

“Well, his wife roped him into a Billy Graham crusade, and he accepted the Lord. Instantly, without any human effort, his bitterness vanished, and he completely forgave his enemy.

“That’d be nice if we all got that moment soon as we decided to start forgiving, but most of us don’t. But however it works, we just get forgiveness as a gift from God. Until we get that gift, we just keep saying ‘I forgive,’ trying to think the best of the person, and rejecting any notion of getting even.

“It’s almost like we start walking to Milwaukee thinking we’ll never get there, then He just zaps us there, like old Phillip. So, every day, you confess your sins and take a step in the right direction. And He’ll make sure you get there. Forgiveness is a choice, but it’s also a miracle.”

Katie smiled at Nana. She got up, stood on the balcony, and felt the peace of the gentle, ocean breeze.

## **Thanks!**

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