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*foreword by* Elynn McCall

31 Days  
to  
**Lovely**

*A Journey of Forgiveness*

# 31 Days to **Lovely**: A Journey of Forgiveness

**Sarah Hawkes Valente**

*Kingdom*  
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Whatever is  
*Lovely*

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For Kevin

In loving memory

For Brian

because God brings forth beauty from ashes

For Ashley, Danielle, Ellyn, Cammie, Renee, Tiffani and Emily –without  
whom this book would be a draft in a drawer

For Beth, my loving cousin and merciless editor

For Deanna and Mom, who watched my kids so that I could drink coffee  
and write

For Dad, who has always wanted me to write a book

## Table of Contents

Foreword

Introduction

DAY ONE: Where Time Hasn't Healed, Search Me

DAY TWO: As Many Times as They Ask

DAY THREE: What Satan Means for Harm

DAY FOUR: Whatever is Pure, Nothing That's Not

DAY FIVE: What I Really Deserve

DAY SIX: Friendships That Heal

DAY SEVEN: Pray, Not Slay

DAY EIGHT: Do Justly. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly.

DAY NINE: Exercising Your Mind

DAY TEN: Looking Ahead

DAY ELEVEN: Skinless

DAY TWELVE: Not Tossed

DAY THIRTEEN: Does Your Life Preach the Gospel?

DAY FIFTEEN: Do Good to, Pray for, Bless

DAY SIXTEEN: The Devil Almost Made Me Do It

DAY SEVENTEEN: Put Down Your Stones

DAY EIGHTEEN: Take Your Place in the Kingdom

DAY NINETEEN: Thou Shalt Not Gossip

DAY TWENTY: Hypocrisy

DAY TWENTY-ONE: Through His Eyes

DAY TWENTY-TWO: Stop. Drop. Apologize.

DAY TWENTY-THREE: Wretched, but Forgiven

DAY TWENTY-FOUR: Forgiving Yourself

DAY TWENTY-FIVE: Sorry, You Do Not Have That Right

DAY TWENTY-SIX: Forgive and Be Forgiven

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN: Father, Forgive Them

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT: The Power of Life and Death

**[DAY TWENTY-NINE: His Desires](#)**

**[DAY THIRTY: The Ministry of Reconciliation](#)**

**[DAY THIRTY-ONE: Letting It Go](#)**

**[About the Author](#)**

**[Do You Know Jesus?](#)**

## Foreword

Sarah Valente is one of my closest friends. Our friendship has been built over email and phone lines, through hours of shared laughter and tears, and because we have *entirely* too much in common. The advent of the Internet age has brought with it many things both positive and negative, but one of the best, to me, is the capacity to feel less alone. The Internet opens up our society so that we are never the only one going through any given situation. There is someone else out there who has been there, right there, wherever it is that we are.

In the first email Sarah ever sent me, she wrote three sentences that would stick with me through a lot of trials. “I have been there. You can survive this. I have hope for you.” She was someone safe, who understood, who I could go to when it felt like no one else could see where I was coming from, who I could trust to be both empathetic and call me out when I needed it. By the time we spoke on the phone for the first time, it was like talking to an old friend. And now, three years later, we have a friendship that I believe will last the rest of our lives. On Day Six, when Sarah talks about “Friendships That Heal,” I have no doubt she’s talking about us!

When Sarah and I met, it was the direct result of a difficult time in my life. One she’d been through before. There were times I sincerely wondered how I would put the pieces back together, and I was angry that I had to do it at all. I had been wronged, and it wasn’t my fault. I was raw and alone, and it was the perfect recipe for a lot of the self-righteous anger that Sarah discusses on Day Fourteen. It is so easy to lose control of the righteous anger we feel about the wrongs we experience...to go from feeling a quiet conviction that God’s will has been violated to suddenly experiencing seething rage because *our* will has been violated. But regardless of the exact situation, people are wronged every day. No one should be treated disrespectfully; and in a perfect world, no one would be.

The problem is: we don’t live in a perfect world. We live in a fallen one. God has given us the gift of free will, and that means we can make choices for ourselves, good and bad alike. There are always extenuating

circumstances, and every person who wrongs another feels that they have some reason or excuse to do so at the time. *Father, forgive us, we don't know what we're doing!*

There were many times that I thought by holding on to a record of transgressions against me, by keeping score - if you will - I was somehow holding other people accountable. Instead, by holding those grudges so tightly, I was keeping myself from moving past the anger and bitterness I was feeling. And despite my best effort, being angry wasn't hurting the person who had wronged me! Instead, it was hurting me. Feeling so angry all the time made it hard for me to feel happy, to be engaged and loving to my children, and to even begin to move past everything that had happened.

There is more than one school of thought when it comes to forgiveness, although this book attempts to prove one of them wrong. Some people believe that forgiveness is a gift given to the transgressor...that when someone shows remorse or has somehow made up for their mistake, that they can *then* be forgiven as a reward. There are certain conditions to be met before someone deserves forgiveness. If we believe that, then it follows that some people do *not* deserve forgiveness. When talking with people who believe this, I often hear some variation of "Why would you forgive that person? They don't deserve it, after what they did!"

There is another school of thought, however; that the act of forgiveness isn't really about the transgressor, but about the person who was wronged. Making the choice to forgive even when there is no remorse or even acknowledgement of wrongdoing tends to be more challenging and harder to understand. Forgiving unconditionally can be tough to swallow; especially when pride rears its ugly head.

I, like Sarah, had a good reason to remain angry. So do most people, at some point in time. But one day, I woke up and I realized that my anger was affecting me more than the person I was holding a grudge against! So I made the choice to forgive, regardless of whether or not it was deserved. Of course, I would have to make that same choice to forgive many more times before all was said and done. It's a commitment to a process, to a journey, instead of a one-time decision, to give up our perceived control of punishing that other person and leave them to God alone. But every time I made the *choice* to forgive, it got easier.



It wasn't until I chose to forgive *unconditionally* that I realized how much better I felt and what a weight had been lifted off my shoulders! Choosing forgiveness has changed and enriched my life in ways that I never would have imagined. It wasn't about getting the outcome I wanted; instead it was a heart change that helped me in every area of my life. I hope that this devotional will help you along the way to your own heart change.

Sarah and I have many things in common. Our love of the Lord, of our husbands, and of our children are the things that formed our initial bond. But beyond that, both Sarah and I have a strong commitment to coming alongside women who are struggling and who may be feeling alone. We know the bitterness, anger, and feelings of isolation that so often accompany life's trials. We are standing, still, to say this to anyone who needs to hear it:

I have been there. You can survive this. I have hope for you.

**-Ellyn McCall**

Parenting and Family Life Blogger at  
[ProfoundlySeth.com](http://ProfoundlySeth.com)

## Introduction

*We are not the bitter ones; we are not the world-worn gossips. We know who we are, and we know that no weapon formed against us will prosper unless we let it. We are daughters of the King of Kings. We are loving, we are loved, we are lovely.*

When I began blogging my story, about four years ago, I knew that forgiveness was at the root of everything I was writing. I didn't know how little I understood about the process or how much my willingness to forgive would be tested over the next several years. Nor, did I fully appreciate the gravity of the biblical commands to forgive. I simply knew that forgiveness trumped bitterness and brought about a peace that I desperately needed. And I knew that God was allowing me to walk out an eternally significant path. As I sit here now, a single mother for the third time, I feel I have walked the journey of a lifetime in a fast-forwarded amount of time. It is an honor to share that journey (or the portion I have walked so far) with you, now.

Many people have *much* more to forgive than I do. Some may feel that they have less. But because all wrongs committed against us pale in comparison to our sin against a righteous and radiant God, quantifying our pain does not need to interfere with our process of forgiveness.

It is for this reason I've included a few of your stories (names and identifying details changed) in this offering of mine. The issues are different in each of our lives, but the pain—the groaning of humanity—is the same throughout.

And so is the way *out* of that pain.

Our tears fall for many reasons. Whether your tears have fallen over molestation, adultery, the loss of a child, bad business dealings, a broken home, gossip, etc., He has seen it all. He's caught every tear you've cried, and He is eager to take your pain and heal your unforgiveness.

Whether you choose to read these pages in a few sittings or over the course of the next thirty-one days, please know that I am praying for you. I'm honored to take you with me on this journey through the powerful Word of God—to seek and to find God's heart. I believe with all *my* heart that this is a journey to perspective, to strength, and to loveliness.



## **DAY ONE: Where Time Hasn't Healed, Search Me**

Like many old adages that we accept as truth—almost as gospel—simply because they've rung steadily in our ears since our childhood, we believe that time will heal our pain and therefore our bitterness. I'd like to turn this worldly wisdom on its ear. May I boldly suggest to you that time heals nothing?

Healing doesn't have to take a long time. We may boldly ask the Physician for *instant* healing. Then, as He carefully molds us, we can patiently trust Him with the length of the process.

It is up to us; it is up to Him!

Healing does not have to take time nor does time itself promise healing. Furthermore, time not submitted and surrendered to God creates bitter, drawn-mouthed pessimists who are made old long before their time.

When I was a child, we had one of these women on our block. Looking back, I realize she was relatively young, her house wasn't haunted, and if approaching her door to sell cookies you would *probably* come back alive.

Her lawn was overgrown and her house looked abandoned, even though everyone knew she was in there. She was intimidating, unapproachable, *unloved*. To this day, I wonder what happened to her. Who had disappointed her? Who didn't love her back? To a child, the fear that had overtaken her was fear-inducing.

One summer afternoon, my brother and I sat sifting through our large pile of Gospel tracts and talking about the neighborhood. In our minds, we were great evangelizers. Proving the unquestionable worth of babes' mouths, my brother adamantly concluded, "She just needs Jesus."

When you're a child, the answers are simpler...and often truer. We had yet to find a cure more successful than the Gospel. We searched frantically through our stack for tracts dealing with loss, grief, and fear. Once we'd found a few that we deemed appropriate, we biked the little ways to her

house and then crept stealthily onto her lawn. Uncut trees shaded the entirety of her yard ensuring darkness on the brightest summer day. Her mailbox was all the way up by her darkened front door; my heart pounded in my chest as I lifted the creaky lid while my brother slipped the tracts down inside.

*Then we ran like mad and peddled away!*

Sometimes, like the bitter woman six houses down, we shut ourselves away from the world and *wait* for the pain to subside.

*Tick. Tock.*

Sometimes, we end up as the neighborhood outcast in the process.

Bitterness grows like thorns, and soon no human being can get through. Perhaps no one wants to try. Time heals pain? No, it only allows the sores to fester! Time withers. Time wrinkles. Time decays. Who is there to heal our wounds if they are only left to *time*?

Are you aware of the thorns of unforgiveness that have grown thick between you and your Healer? Do some remain that are so well-watered, full-grown, and possibly “justified” that you walk around them daily without ever acknowledging their presence? These are the things God so desperately desires to reveal. He longs to prune them back and rescue us from the clutches of bitterness, unforgiveness, and pride.

Please don't trust time to take care of your pain; allow the Healer to lead you through it. Please don't hold back that one person you are “allowed” bitterness toward; He heals to the very depths of our souls!

To begin a life-long walk in and continually toward healing, follow the example of a man who sought God's heart.

The Psalmist David asked God to search him:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:  
And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way  
everlasting.*

*- Psalm 139:23-24*

Was there bitterness in him? Unrighteous anger? David wanted to know about every thorn. Following David's example, take a time out today, sometime before tomorrow morning. Get alone with God in a hot bath or on a walk through a private place. Simply ask Him to search your heart for those hidden things; and as they come to mind, write them down.

More and more thorns may be revealed to you over the following weeks. As more are revealed, keep adding to your list. Keep this list in a safe, private place; we'll deal with it at the end of our journey.

*Jesus, please search my heart for the bitterness and unforgiveness that lies there. I want to be yours, wholly and without hidden sins or thorns of unforgiveness. I do not want to run from you because of the wickedness in my own heart. Please light a candle to it all, and lead me in the way everlasting.*





## **DAY TWO: As Many Times as They Ask**

Within the Body of Christ, there should be apologies. We swim in an ocean of grace, diving in and rising up drenched—both in the accepting *and* in the offering of forgiveness. No Christian should choke on the words, “I’m sorry.” Acknowledging the fallibility of our flesh should be as natural as relishing the perfection of our Savior. Sadly, many Christians are waiting for repentance that will never come and apologies that will never reach their ears because they have refused to rebuke the sin.

Rebuke. Repentance. Repetitive forgiveness.

*Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother sin, **rebuke** him; and if he **repent**, **forgive** him.*

- Luke 17:3 (ASV)

Over and over again.

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

- Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV)

We’ve all been wounded, and we’ve all done the wounding. Without any warning to those around us, we can walk as ticking bombs, activated by our own pain and releasing untargeted blasts of destruction. This is the flesh’s reaction, not the Spirit’s. When we have been legitimately wounded by the sin of a brother, we must not skulk away and allow the offense to fester.

The merciful act of confronting sin in a fellow believer is not so that we might hear an, “Oh, I’m so sorry I’ve wronged you!” If your brother or sister is sinning against you, they are more accurately sinning against God.

Rebuke is for their repentance, not for your comfort! Few excel at or embrace the idea of confrontation, but it is something we've been commanded to do.

Rebuke. Repentance. Repetitive forgiveness.

~\*~

It was with this command in mind that I sat in the back of a crowded church service with a near stranger whom I'd just asked the question, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" I shook from head to toe. I can't confront someone over the phone without it being embarrassingly obvious that I am shaking—the phone rattles loudly against the rings on my fingers, my teeth chatter, I'm suddenly cold—but face-to-face is a thousand times worse!

I knew what I had to do and the hard words I had to say. Her flirtatious ways and the mixing of fellowship with sex were ruining her life and others' and were threatening mine. God had not only told me to confront her, He'd asked me to lead her into fellowship with Him. Initially, I had been far less than thrilled at the prospect.

For the first few weeks, I'd chosen the path of the prophet Jonah. Instead of compassion, instead of mercy, I'd decide to hate her and hitch-hike to Tarshish [Jonah 1:3]. But there I sat, humbled, covered in fish bile [Jonah 1:17 – 2:10], and ready to speak what was in God's enormous heart for a woman who was as much God's daughter, and God's favorite, as I was.

My words are not always welcomed even when I am certain God led me to speak them. At thirty-three, I still sound a little like Minnie Mouse. When I open my mouth, I simultaneously brace for nods and smiles or some other friendly dismissal. Maybe it's because of the many times I have been rejected that I still feel the urge to fight when God asks me to speak.

Thankfully, I've also had the privilege of being received—of planting fruit-bearing seeds where someone else has plowed and watered. In my late teens, I trained as a midwife. I've experienced that sweeping joy of watching and assisting squirming, gasping newborns from womb to breast. Still, no privilege on this earth can compare to that of planting His words and seeing those seeds immediately send down roots and begin to sprout. That is what happened in the back of the church as this stranger became my sister.

Twenty minutes into our conversation, you would have thought we'd been friends since childhood. We wept and shook and laughed in each other's arms. She asked for forgiveness for the sins that had impacted my life, and I repented before her for not speaking when God had first asked. I'd come eager to forgive her that day, and she told me through honest tears—admitting she'd needed me and wishing I'd spoken sooner—that she forgave me for my sins, too.

Rebuke. Repentance. Repetitive forgiveness.

A repentant heart is an essential attribute of a Christian. When we stand in expectation of repentance, though, without first offering rebuke, we are acting out of turn. How many offenses remain on your “mad list” without the offending party either knowing or understanding the biblical implications of their actions?

*Jesus, please give me the courage to rebuke sin, in love, when my brothers and sisters sin against me. Please help me to desire their repentance (for their sake). Help me to stand ready and eager to forgive them.*

## **DAY THREE: What Satan Means for Harm**

The longer I walk with God, the less sure I am that I can claim a favorite passage of Scripture. So many different legacies and truths have jumped out and grabbed me when I needed them lest I fall. The story of Joseph, though, has stayed with me throughout. Much of my life's doctrine comes from his life and the beautiful character of God that his story reveals.

In Genesis chapter fifty, something amazing happens.

Joseph...

...the bratty little brother who knew God made him extra special.

...the brother who all but one wanted to kill.

...the brother who was sold into slavery as his older brothers sat and ate lunch.

...the brother who spent two years in jail after being falsely accused.

...the brother who barely got to say goodbye to the father who had adored him and given him such a big head in the first place.

Joseph. That Joseph? He was now second in command in Egypt. He held the lives of his brothers in his very hands, and no one would have questioned him if he'd killed them or made them his slaves.

*But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

*- Genesis 50:19-20 (NIV)*

Joseph came to understand something that many believers today do not. He understood, even before it was written down, that his God works everything for the good of those who love Him [Romans 8:28]. And Joseph loved God. He understood that God had allowed his brothers to turn against