

FORGIVENESS AND EMOTIONAL LIBERATION: A THEOLOGICAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY AMONG VICTIMS OF BETRAYAL IN THE CHURCH

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Abstract

Forgiveness stands at the intersection of faith, woundedness, and emotional recovery, yet it remains one of the most difficult practices for Christians who have been betrayed within the very community meant to nurture their spiritual growth. This study investigates the relationship between biblical forgiveness and emotional well-being among church members who have endured interpersonal hurt, leadership misconduct, fractured fellowship, and marital betrayal within Christian settings. Drawing on Scripture, psychological theory, pastoral encounters in Ghanaian congregations, and inner-healing insights from belief-focused pastoral models (Smith, 1996, 1999), the research examines forgiveness not as passive endurance or forced reconciliation, but as a deliberate release grounded in grace and truth (Worthington, 1998; McCullough et al., 1997).

The study brings theology and psychology into conversation. Biblical texts such as Matthew 18, Ephesians 4, and selected lament psalms present forgiveness as part of a larger spiritual movement—naming pain honestly, resisting vengeance, and allowing God to reorder the heart (Brueggemann, 1984). Psychological perspectives add another layer, highlighting how anger retention, rumination, and unresolved grief strain mental health (Baumeister et al., 1994). In my counseling ministry, I have watched clients who carried deep resentment speak with heavy pauses, tightened faces, and restless emotional energy. Yet when forgiveness began to take root—whether through pastoral counsel or inner-healing prayer approaches that address lie-based beliefs (Smith, 1997, 2000)—their emotional tone shifted toward calmer breathing, more hopeful imagination, and renewed readiness to reclaim the future. From such moments, one can see how forgiveness does not erase memory; it loosens the grip of emotional captivity (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991).

Several narratives illustrate this process. A youth leader wounded by public humiliation found that forgiveness helped her detach her identity from the offender's actions. A worship minister navigating betrayal among colleagues discovered that releasing resentment restored his sense of calling. These accounts reveal that forgiveness unfolds gradually. It requires courage, spiritual maturity, and a safe space to process anger and grief (Oduyoye, 1995; Herman, 1992). Patterns seen in inner-healing ministry movements affirm that emotional release often follows when distorted beliefs formed in painful moments are brought into the light of truth (Smith, 1996, 1999).

The study demonstrates that when forgiveness is approached with theological depth and psychological awareness, it becomes a potent resource for emotional liberation. It restores inner stability, reduces emotional exhaustion, and cultivates healthier relational patterns. Biblical

forgiveness, practiced authentically and supported pastorally, emerges not merely as a moral duty but as a transformative pathway toward emotional well-being and spiritual freedom.

Keywords: forgiveness; emotional healing; betrayal trauma; pastoral counselling; psychological well-being; church conflict; theological anthropology; spiritual restoration

1. Introduction

Forgiveness occupies a central and often contested place in Christian spirituality. It is preached from pulpits, recited in prayers, and embedded in communal expectations. Yet for many believers who have suffered betrayal within the church—whether through gossip, leadership abuse, marital unfaithfulness, or fractured relationships—forgiveness is not merely a doctrine to affirm. It is an emotional struggle that touches the deepest layers of the self. Betrayal weakens trust. It disrupts identity. It unsettles one's sense of belonging in the body of Christ. Many who enter counseling come with a Bible in one hand and unspoken grief in the other.

The present study investigates the movement from hurt to emotional release by examining how biblical forgiveness correlates with emotional well-being among victims of betrayal. The inquiry emerges from pastoral conversations where forgiveness appeared as both a spiritual command and a psychological burden. People know they “ought” to forgive, yet they carry wounds that resist easy resolution. Such tension echoes what researchers describe as the emotional ambivalence often surrounding forgiveness (Fincham, 2000). Forgiveness is not a simple choice; it is a layered journey involving faith, emotion, culture, and personal memory.

Theological reflection provides part of the foundation. Scripture frames forgiveness as an act grounded in God's character—gracious, restorative, and anchored in truth. Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18 or Luke 6 present forgiveness as an expression of discipleship, but these passages never minimize the reality of pain. Old Testament laments likewise give voice to wounded believers who confront their emotions before turning toward release (Brueggemann, 1984). Such texts encourage honesty rather than suppression.

Psychological insights add clarity. Betrayal triggers complex emotional reactions—anger, fear, shame, and sometimes numbness. If these remain unaddressed, they harden into bitterness or detachment. Studies on rumination and affect regulation indicate that unforgiveness is associated with increased stress and emotional agitation (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). In Ghanaian settings, where spiritual language often merges with communal expectations, people may feel pressured to forgive prematurely. This pressure can silence emotional truth rather than create healing. From pastoral encounters, one sees how unprocessed pain resurfaces in strained relationships and quiet resentment during worship or fellowship.

This study therefore situates forgiveness at the point where theology, psychology, and cultural expectation meet. It examines how forgiveness—approached with biblical integrity, emotional sensitivity, and awareness of belief-based distortions addressed by inner-healing prayer models (Smith, 1997, 2000)—promotes emotional liberation. The narratives explored here reflect Ghanaian church life, where community, honour, and spirituality shape responses to betrayal (Bediako, 1995). Forgiveness, as proposed here, is neither denial of pain nor dismissal of justice.

It is a deliberate turning toward inner freedom supported by Scripture, pastoral wisdom, and psychological insight.

2. Literature Review

Forgiveness has been examined from multiple scholarly angles—biblical theology, pastoral studies, clinical psychology, trauma research, and African cultural thought. Each discipline highlights a different aspect of the struggle and the healing that accompany forgiveness. Inner-healing perspectives that explore how emotionally wounding beliefs formed in painful experiences influence present behaviour also contribute to this field (Smith, 1996, 1999).

2.1 Theological Foundations of Forgiveness

Christian theology places forgiveness at the centre of God’s redemptive activity. In Scripture, forgiveness springs from divine character, not human merit (Exodus 34:6–7). The teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18 and Luke 6 portray forgiveness as a mark of discipleship, a call that reflects God’s mercy. Theological scholars emphasize that forgiveness is inseparable from truth and justice. Brueggemann (1984) shows how the Psalms teach honest lament as a beginning point for healing. Volf (1996) insists that forgiveness requires moral clarity, not denial of wrongdoing. African theologians such as Oduyoye (1995) and Bediako (1995) highlight the tension between biblical forgiveness and communal expectations in African societies, urging pastoral approaches that respect the dignity of the wounded. Inner-healing writers likewise stress the importance of naming emotional truth before release can occur (Smith, 1997).

2.2 Psychological Perspectives on Forgiveness

Psychologists view forgiveness as a complex emotional and cognitive process. Worthington’s (1998) model outlines stages including uncovering anger, understanding the offender, and emotional release. Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) argue that forgiveness involves a shift in attitude that reduces bitterness. Trauma scholars such as Herman (1992) highlight that betrayal often produces symptoms resembling traumatic stress—hypervigilance, intrusive memories, and emotional withdrawal. Premature forgiveness, therefore, risks suppressing pain rather than transforming it. Clinical studies show that rumination and unresolved anger intensify anxiety and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), while authentic forgiveness promotes emotional stability (McCullough et al., 1997). Inner-healing perspectives also note that emotional distress often persists when painful beliefs formed in earlier experiences are not addressed (Smith, 1996, 2000).

2.3 African Cultural and Communal Contexts

Forgiveness in African communities is deeply communal. Honour, relational cohesion, and reconciliation rituals shape expectations for conflict resolution. These cultural patterns bring both strengths and challenges. While communal reconciliation echoes biblical visions of unity, cultural pressure to “let things go” can silence emotional processing (Oduyoye, 1995). In Ghanaian churches, spiritual language often merges with cultural assumptions, sometimes creating an expectation of immediate forgiveness for the sake of harmony. This study reflects concerns raised

by African theologians who advocate for more pastoral sensitivity to the emotional journeys of wounded believers (Bediako, 1995). Inner-healing ministries also caution that emotional pain cannot be resolved simply by communal expectation; it must be processed truthfully (Smith, 1997, 1999).

2.4 Forgiveness in Church Settings

Betrayal within the church creates unique spiritual wounds. Pastoral studies note that spiritual betrayal destabilizes identity and belonging. The response of the faith community significantly influences emotional recovery. Supportive pastoral care fosters healthy forgiveness, whereas dismissive or rushed counsel deepens the wound (Volf, 1996). Case experiences from Ghana echo this research pattern. Healing-prayer literature similarly stresses that emotional restoration requires empathetic presence, not coercive spiritual rhetoric (Smith, 2000).

2.5 Integrating Theology, Psychology, and Culture

Across these fields, forgiveness emerges as a layered process—biblical, emotional, cultural, and relational. When these layers complement each other, forgiveness becomes a pathway to emotional liberation. When they collide, healing becomes complicated and slow. Belief-focused inner-healing models further support the idea that forgiveness grows most fruitfully when emotional truthfulness, spiritual reflection, and supportive community converge (Smith, 1996, 1999).

3. Conceptual Framework

The study rests on the meeting point between three bodies of knowledge: biblical theology, psychological theory, and the communal realities that shape relationships within Ghanaian Christian settings. Each field offers insights that illuminate different layers of forgiveness and emotional liberation.

3.1 Theological Framework: Forgiveness as Divine Imitation and Moral Transformation

Biblical forgiveness arises from God's own character and the believer's call to reflect that character. Texts such as Matthew 18 and Ephesians 4 describe forgiveness as an act rooted in grace rather than sentiment. The theological framework used here highlights three movements: naming the wrong truthfully, releasing the offender internally, and opening space for renewed relationship where possible. Scholars such as Smedes (1984) and Marshall (1999) argue that forgiveness grows out of moral clarity rather than emotional denial. This perspective shapes the study's understanding that forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it excusing harm. It is a deliberate turning of the heart toward freedom, grounded in God's restorative nature (Brueggemann, 1984; Volf, 1996). Inner-healing literature similarly emphasizes that transformation begins when truth is acknowledged and emotional lies lose their power (Smith, 1997, 2000).

3.2 Psychological Framework: Emotional Processing and Release

Psychological theories provide another dimension. Research on affect regulation, trauma recovery, and cognitive reframing suggests that forgiveness contributes to emotional steadiness and reduces

psychological strain. Work by Worthington (1998), Enright (1991), and Janoff-Bulman (1992) shows that unresolved resentment often fuels anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and emotional fatigue. In many counseling conversations, clients weighed down by betrayal often spoke with guarded posture and tightened tone. As forgiveness began to take shape, subtle emotional softening followed—less defensive energy, more reflective speech, and a lifting of inner heaviness. These observations echo the psychological view that forgiveness serves partly as emotional release (McCullough et al., 1997; Baumeister et al., 1994). Pastoral inner-healing approaches also note that emotional distress often reflects deeply held lie-based beliefs that must be brought into the light for relief to occur (Smith, 1996, 1999).

3.3 African Communal Lens: Honour, Belonging, and Relational Repair

African societies place great weight on community, shared obligation, and relational peace. Ghanaian cultural norms encourage harmony and discourage prolonged conflict. This framework helps explain why victims of betrayal sometimes feel compelled to forgive prematurely, especially when church leaders or elders emphasize unity. African scholars such as Bediako (1995) and Oduyoye (1995) note that the communal instinct toward harmony can lead to silence or internalized pain if individuals feel pressured to “move on” before healing. At the same time, this communal orientation provides resources—dialogue, mediation, and group support—that help individuals rebuild trust. The African conceptual lens reminds the researcher that forgiveness is not a solitary act; it is woven into family expectations, church culture, and communal bonds. Inner-healing perspectives also affirm that emotional wounds must be individually acknowledged even within communal systems (Smith, 1997).

3.4 Integrating the Three Strands

These three perspectives form the backbone of the study. Theology offers the moral and spiritual meaning of forgiveness. Psychology reveals the emotional processes beneath the surface. African communal life explains the social conditions in which forgiveness unfolds. When placed side by side, they provide a fuller understanding of how emotional liberation occurs for believers who have been betrayed in the church. The integration echoes calls for interdisciplinary approaches to human healing expressed in both pastoral theology (Lartey, 1997) and clinical psychology (Witvliet, 1997). Belief-based healing models similarly encourage integration of emotional honesty, theological reflection, and relational support (Smith, 1996, 2000).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design: Qualitative Pastoral Inquiry

The study adopts a qualitative design grounded in pastoral inquiry. Its aim is to understand lived experiences rather than to predict or measure them. Over the years, many Christians have sought counsel after being wounded by fellow believers. These conversations form a body of experiential knowledge that allows for careful reflection on how people navigate hurt, bitterness, and eventual release. Qualitative reflection has long been recognized as a suitable method for studying religious and emotional life (Patton, 1990). Inner-healing practitioners likewise acknowledge that emotional and spiritual transformation often emerges from exploring lived experience rather than abstract theory (Smith, 1996, 1999).

The qualitative design allows room for emotional nuance. It acknowledges that betrayal in the church carries layers of spiritual, psychological, and social meaning. These layers cannot be reduced to numerical categories; they must be heard, interpreted, and understood in context.

4.2 Data Sources: Pastoral Conversations and Case Narratives

The primary material comes from anonymized pastoral counseling sessions and ministry encounters between 1990 and 2022. Each narrative was selected because it reveals a significant moment in the struggle toward forgiveness, consistent with narrative approaches in pastoral care (Capps, 1990). Inner-healing accounts also emphasize that meaningful emotional shifts often emerge through narrative exploration of painful memories and associated beliefs (Smith, 1997, 2000). Examples include:

- A young deacon wounded by leadership conflict who wrestled with anger for months before finding release through guided lament.
- A choir member betrayed by close friends who discovered that forgiveness did not erase memory but loosened emotional burden.
- A Christian couple navigating marital infidelity who learned that forgiveness required slow rebuilding rather than quick declarations.

These narratives serve as windows into the emotional and spiritual journey of forgiveness. They are not statistical evidence but textured illustrations used to reveal how people make sense of betrayal within Christian life.

4.3 Analytic Approach: Theological-Psychological Interpretation

Each narrative was examined through three interpretive lenses:

1. **Theological meaning** – How the individual understood forgiveness based on Scripture, prayer, and spiritual teaching.
2. **Psychological processes** – Emotional reactions, rumination patterns, unresolved grief, and signs of emotional release, following insights from Worthington (1998) and Enright (1991).
3. **Cultural context** – Communal expectations, leadership influence, and Ghanaian norms surrounding conflict and reconciliation (Oduyoye, 1995; Bediako, 1995).

Inner-healing frameworks also guided interpretation by considering how painful memories shape present emotional reactions (Smith, 1996, 1999). This layered approach allowed the analysis to capture the complexity of forgiveness. The goal was not to force narratives into a predetermined structure but to understand how theological, psychological, cultural, and belief-based strands interacted uniquely in each case.

4.4 Researcher Positioning

My role as a pastoral counselor forms part of the interpretive lens. This insider position provides access to emotional and spiritual struggles that might not surface in purely academic interviews, a position consistent with reflective pastoral methodologies (Lartey, 1997). Inner-healing practitioners similarly stress the importance of compassionate presence and careful listening when exploring emotionally charged experiences (Smith, 2000). At the same time, reflective distance was maintained to avoid projecting personal assumptions onto participants' experiences.

4.5 Limitations

Because the study relies on pastoral narratives rather than a broad empirical sample, it does not claim representation of all church contexts. Betrayal experiences differ across congregations, denominations, and cultures. Yet the richness of qualitative reflection captures dimensions that structured surveys often miss—silence, hesitation, symbolic imagery, and emotional shifts (Patton, 1990). Inner-healing writers likewise affirm that emotional transformation is often best understood by attending to nuance rather than large-scale data (Smith, 1997). The value of this method lies in its ability to record the lived texture of forgiveness rather than its statistical patterns.

5. Findings

The narratives gathered through pastoral reflection reveal that forgiveness is not a single decision but a layered experience that touches emotion, belief, identity, and community life. Scholars note that forgiveness unfolds gradually, often moving through emotional, cognitive, and relational stages (Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; Worthington, 1998). Inner-healing practitioners similarly argue that emotional release often occurs as deeper belief-level pain is identified and addressed (Smith, 1996, 1999). Several themes surfaced consistently as individuals grappled with betrayal within the church.

5.1 Emotional Wounds Surface Before Forgiveness Takes Shape

Many counselees entered the counseling space carrying heavy emotional layers—anger mixed with confusion, grief mingled with shame. This mirrors clinical observations that emotional acknowledgment precedes emotional release (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Inner-healing insights similarly affirm that painful memories and their associated beliefs must come to the surface before transformation can occur (Smith, 1997). Some appeared calm outwardly yet carried inner turbulence evident in their pauses and strained tone. The first notable finding was that hurt needed to be named before forgiveness could unfold, echoing the pattern of lament in Scripture and trauma recovery literature (Brueggemann, 1984; Herman, 1992).

5.2 Scriptural Understanding Guides but Does Not Automatically Heal

Most participants were familiar with biblical teachings on forgiveness. Yet Scripture alone did not immediately soothe psychological wounds. This aligns with Smedes' (1984) argument that forgiveness requires both moral clarity and emotional processing. Inner-healing literature reinforces that spiritual truths often gain emotional traction only when underlying wounds and

beliefs have been addressed (Smith, 1999). When participants were allowed to reflect deeply, Scripture became a companion rather than a demand.

5.3 Forgiveness Emerges Gradually Through Emotional Release

As conversations unfolded, a gentle shift occurred. Resentment did not disappear instantly, but its grip loosened. Such gradual emotional softening supports psychological findings that forgiveness functions as a release of emotional tension (McCullough et al., 1997). Inner-healing practitioners attribute this softening to the gradual dislodging of painful beliefs associated with past experiences (Smith, 1996, 2000). Individuals described feeling “lighter” or “less burdened,” signalling the early rise of forgiveness as an internal process rather than an outward declaration.

5.4 Community Response Influences the Pace of Healing

The support or insensitivity of the church community shaped the healing journey. Where pastors or elders listened carefully, victims felt secure enough to speak honestly. Where pressure was applied to “move on,” emotional healing stalled—a pattern consistent with African communal studies that highlight the tension between harmony and honesty (Oduyoye, 1995; Bediako, 1995). Inner-healing models also caution that coerced spiritual performance can hinder authentic emotional transformation (Smith, 1997).

5.5 Spiritual Identity Is Often Shaken but Eventually Reclaimed

Betrayal in the church often unsettled spiritual identity. Some questioned their calling, others doubted God’s fairness. Yet as forgiveness deepened, a renewed sense of identity emerged. This finding resonates with theological reflections suggesting that forgiveness reshapes the self and deepens spirituality (Volf, 1996). Inner-healing writers likewise note that emotional freedom allows individuals to reconnect with their spiritual identity without the distortions created by unresolved wounds (Smith, 1999).

6. Discussion

The findings show that forgiveness cannot be understood apart from the emotional, theological, and cultural environment in which it unfolds. Forgiveness grows where honesty is permitted and withers where pressure replaces pastoral care.

6.1 The Heart Must Speak Before the Spirit Can Heal

The narratives reinforce the idea that emotional expression is part of spiritual formation. Trauma research affirms that naming pain is a prerequisite for emotional recovery (Herman, 1992). Inner-healing literature aligns with this view, teaching that emotional pain needs honest engagement before spiritual truth can be fully embraced (Smith, 1996). Participants who were given space to lament found clearer paths toward forgiveness, echoing the biblical pattern of lament before restoration (Brueggemann, 1984).

6.2 The Ghanaian Christian Ethos Can Both Support and Distort the Forgiveness Journey

Communal culture encourages harmony; this can facilitate reconciliation. Yet this same emphasis can distort the forgiveness process by rushing individuals into premature peace. African theologians warn that unity must not silence truth (Oduyoye, 1995; Bediako, 1995). Inner-healing perspectives echo this caution, noting that pressuring believers to “forgive quickly” may suppress rather than heal emotional pain (Smith, 1997).

6.3 Forgiveness Strengthens Emotional Stability but Requires Slow, Intentional Movement

The emotional shifts observed in counselees align with psychological insights that forgiveness reduces emotional strain and improves well-being (McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 1998). Inner-healing models highlight that emotional steadiness emerges when painful belief structures lose their influence (Smith, 1999, 2000). Calmer breathing, steadier tone, and renewed openness reflect the emotional benefits of gradual forgiveness.

6.4 Theological Depth Protects Against Superficial Forgiveness

The depth of theological reflection influenced the quality of forgiveness. Participants who engaged Scripture reflectively—rather than merely obeying external pressure—developed healthier forms of forgiveness. This echoes Smedes’ (1984) argument that forgiveness grows in moral clarity, not spiritual performance. Inner-healing traditions likewise teach that forgiveness deepens when spiritual insight addresses the emotional roots beneath the behaviour (Smith, 1996).

7. Recommendations

7.1 Pastoral Practice

Pastors should create spaces where believers can name their wounds without fear. Pastoral theologians note that genuine healing requires safe, nonjudgmental presence (Lartey, 1997). Inner-healing practitioners likewise emphasize that emotional honesty is essential for transformation; unresolved memories often continue to fuel distress when left unspoken (Smith, 1996, 1999).

7.2 Congregational Education

Churches should teach forgiveness in ways that integrate truth, emotional honesty, and relational responsibility. Biblical and pastoral scholars caution against using forgiveness as a means of silencing conflict (Volf, 1996). Theophostic principles also warn that pressuring individuals to “forgive quickly” can suppress pain rather than resolve it (Smith, 1997).

7.3 Psychological Referral

Pastors should refer individuals with signs of trauma, depression, or prolonged distress to trained mental health professionals. Psychological research indicates that unresolved resentment can fuel anxiety and depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Inner-healing

observations similarly note that severe emotional wounds may require clinical support alongside spiritual care (Smith, 1999).

7.4 Theological Clarity

Churches must teach that forgiveness does not negate justice or minimize wrong. Theological reflections emphasize that forgiveness and accountability can coexist (Marshall, 1999). Theophostic insights also stress that forgiveness should come from emotional release and renewed perspective, not from denial of the injury (Smith, 1996).

7.5 Balanced Interpretive Guidelines

Christian communities should develop interpretive frameworks that honour biblical truth, emotional reality, and cultural sensitivity. African theologians have long advocated for pastoral approaches that respect culture while remaining faithful to the gospel (Oduyoye, 1995; Bediako, 1995). Inner-healing ministry echoes this balance by urging caregivers to address emotional wounds while nurturing spiritual grounding (Smith, 1997).

8. Conclusion

Forgiveness remains one of the most demanding and transformative practices within Christian life. This study shows that forgiveness is not a single moment of moral resolve but a layered journey shaped by Scripture, emotion, and communal context. Emotional wounds must be acknowledged before spiritual healing can take root—a rhythm supported by both biblical lament (Brueggemann, 1984) and trauma research (Herman, 1992). Inner-healing perspectives likewise affirm that healing flows when painful memories and beliefs are brought into the light rather than suppressed (Smith, 1996, 1999).

The psychological benefits of forgiveness—reduced tension, steadier emotions, clearer boundaries—affirm findings within clinical literature (McCullough et al., 1997; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991). Within Ghanaian Christian communities, forgiveness unfolds at the intersection of faith and culture. Communal values of harmony can support healing, but they can also pressure individuals into premature reconciliation. This study highlights the need for pastoral environments where truth and compassion coexist.

Forgiveness, when practiced with depth and supported by pastoral care, becomes a path toward emotional liberation. It restores dignity, strengthens identity, and creates room for renewed purpose. As Smedes (1984) notes, forgiveness is the act that allows the past to release its hold, making space for a future rooted in grace rather than grievance. Theophostic insights reinforce this by showing how emotional release opens the heart to renewed spiritual clarity (Smith, 2000).

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