

A photograph of two women from behind, wearing hijabs and long-sleeved shirts, holding hands in a field of tall grass. The woman on the left wears a pink hijab and a blue shirt, while the woman on the right wears a grey hijab and a teal shirt. The background is a dense field of green grass, slightly out of focus. A purple rectangular overlay is centered over the image, containing the title text. Two small yellow rectangular accents are positioned above and below the purple overlay.

*Suffering, Forgiveness,
and Restoration*

Um Omar had taped newspaper to the windows to shield the room from the relentless sun. I was sitting with her on a thin mattress on the floor, drinking sugary tea. Some months earlier Um Omar had joined a self-help group that I was facilitating for Syrian refugee women who were struggling with trauma and depression. During a follow up visit she had told me how her son's flight to Germany had left her bereaved and without hope. One day when she had been lying on the mattress too depressed to do her housework she had felt that Jesus came and sat beside her. His presence had given her peace. Since that visit we had met regularly, sharing our lives and studying the Bible together. This time, like so many other times, she talked about the day when she would be able to return to Syria with her husband and children. Everything would be well again. First, they would rebuild their house and would no longer be forced to pay outrageous rent for some tiny wretched flat in a foreign country. Second, Um Omar would plant her garden again and be able to feed her children with home grown vegetables. They wouldn't go to school hungry ever again. Um Omar was wondering how long it would take until there would be functioning schools, or electricity. She knew that the beginning would be hard, but they would be home at last! I said: "The infrastructure can be rebuilt. But what about the hearts of the people?" I knew her story of suffering betrayal, violence and loss through her own community. How could everything be well again without reconciliation? But to me, reconciliation seemed an almost impossible dream. "That is easy," said Um Omar. "We will simply forget all that has happened."²⁸

²⁸ Conversation with um Omar, written down from memory afterwards, Dohuk, June 2016

My friend Jihan, a moderately devout Sunni woman in Damascus, was trying to get pregnant. She and her husband already had one son. Since I got to know her at a women's gym in 2006, she had been relatively satisfied with her life, with a husband that she obviously respected and loved, and her son whom she spoiled. Her main complaints were about the difficulty of losing weight and once in a while the intrusion of her mother in law. This changed a few years later when she did not get pregnant. Her unfulfilled desire for a second child drained all the joy from her life. When we met she talked about the doctors she had visited and the different diagnoses she got for her infertility. She went through three cycles of IVF treatments, without success. After the third one she decided that she could not go through the cycle of hope and disappointment again. The treatments had eaten into their financial resources. During one visit Jihan told me: "Yesterday I had a huge fight with my husband. I was so angry. I screamed at him: Marry another woman, then you can have more children with her! But before you do that I want a divorce." Jihan was washing big bundles of parsley and mint for salad. We were standing in her kitchen and preparing the food for when her husband would come home. After a while she said: "God is punishing me. He doesn't give me another child because of what I did." When I asked why she thought that, she explained: "After my son was born I got pregnant again when he was just six months old. My mother in law said: He is still so little, why don't you wait until later to have another one? I was tired and I thought it would be best that way. So I had an abortion." I tried to share about God's forgiveness in Jesus, but Jihan shook her head. "God

is very forgiving. God willing he will forgive me on the day of judgement. But for now I am sure he is punishing me.”²⁹

“I know that God answers my prayers”, said Um Sami, another Syrian refugee I was reading the Bible with. It was the story of Sarah and Hagar that made her remember a particular answered prayer: “We used to live next door to my husband’s brother. But his wife was evil. She talked against me all the time, she told bad stories about me. I was very unhappy. I cried a lot because of her slander. And I prayed to God that he would punish her. Then she got pregnant. When she gave birth my mother said to me: ‘Come and see what you have done!’ Her son was disabled. I knew this was because of my prayers.” Um Sami wondered how God had vindicated her and answered her prayers. But she also shared that the experience made her feel confused and fearful of the consequences of her desire for revenge.³⁰

One of the subjects that has been on my mind for a while has been how we can disciple Muslim women, who are suffering, about giving and receiving forgiveness. In my experience forgiving others from the heart is a difficult issue for believers from all backgrounds. So I feel my inadequacy to share about this subject when the person sitting opposite to me has lived through events much more horrendous than anything that has ever happened to me—and yet I know that I sometimes struggle to forgive comparatively small offences. How can I talk to women like Um Omar about forgiveness? It may seem insensitive and uncaring, and so my natural tendency is to

²⁹ Conversation with Jihan, written down from memory afterwards, Damascus, 2011

³⁰ Conversation with Um Sami, written down from memory afterwards, Zahle, November 2014

shy away from this topic. Nevertheless I want to share some of my observations and thoughts because in my encounters with Muslim women I cannot ignore how interwoven these subjects are: I see the pain that many are living with, and pray that God will heal them and give them peace, knowing that the journey to healing has to be a journey of forgiving as well. In my observations of working mainly with Syrian refugee women, forgiving others is not a major topic of conversation among them. There is very little awareness among these women of the importance of forgiving as a step towards reconciliation and therefore the fulfillment of their dream of rebuilding their country in the future. Some like Um Omar apparently think that forgetting and denial of the hurt is the solution to peace of mind. Others, and in my experience by far the majority, tend to long—and pray—for revenge, like Um Sami, in hope of finding that peace.

On the other hand, as in Jihan's case, suffering can also bring up the question why God is willing the painful events, and the answer that he is punishing unforgiven sin. While some women start to seek forgiveness through acts of compassion or religious devotion, the feeling of being deliberately punished can lead to even deeper despair when the path to forgiveness is not certain. Receiving God's forgiveness in Jesus is of course at the center of all our evangelism and discipleship, but the aspect that I want to touch on in this article is the way that the question of God's forgiveness affects women during times of suffering.

Seeking God's forgiveness is a very prominent theme in the religious discourse among Syrian Muslim women. The hope that God will forgive is based on the Qur'an. It encourages Muslims many times to repent from their sins because God forgives (comp. e.g. S 25:70, 39:53 48:2). Three of the 99 most beautiful names of God describe his

character as “very forgiving” (*al-ghafur, al-gaffar* and *al-’afuw*). At the same time, there is no certainty but only hope that God will forgive a specific sin (S 66:8) because God “forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will” (S 3:129; comp. 5:18, 48:14).³¹ However, repentance and good acts may be rewarded with God’s forgiveness. Accordingly any of the religious activities among women are aiming at this.

A few months after our conversation Jihan started to redirect her efforts from fertility treatments to supererogatory prayers, adding extra repetitions to her formal prayers (salat) and informal supplication (du’a). She explained to me that she wanted to gain forgiveness for her abortion through patiently accepting God’s will. She wasn’t certain that he would forgive her, but the explanation that she had found for herself helped her to accept her infertility as a result of her own action. While it was not in her power to get pregnant again, focusing time and thoughts on devotion to God and the possibility of avoiding worse consequences gave her new hope and made her feel at peace with her situation.

In contrast, although from 2006 to 2011 I spent many hours in public and private religious lessons in Damascus, and interviewing female preachers and their followers, forgiving others was rarely touched on in the religious discourse, and if so, only in passing.³² This is surprising because the Qur’an mentions forgiving others many times (e.g. S 2:109, 3:134, 42:37, 45:14). Sometimes the religious Muslim women I met brought up the priority of justice through retribution in Islam. They argued that Islam

³¹ quotes from the Qur’an as translated by Abdel Haleem

³² That said, outside of my personal experience, forgiving others sometimes plays a greater role among Muslims and is discussed on many online forums, see e.g. <https://aveina.com/forgiveness-in-islam/>. A prominent recent example of Muslims forgiving others is the forgiveness shown to the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre, comp. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/24/i-dont-have-hate-i-dont-have-revenge-stricken-mother-of-christchurch-massacre-victim-forgives-killer>.

is superior to Christianity because there is no unrealistic command of forgiveness, but there is acknowledgement of the victim's need for revenge. However, this apparently overlooks the Qur'anic choice of just retribution or forgiveness. In sura 5:45, e.g., it says: "In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound: if anyone forgives this out of charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds." Just retribution is defined as a punishment of an exact equal to the crime. In Islamic jurisdiction this verse and its parallels have led to the categorization of *qisas* crimes³³. Different from *hudud* crimes³⁴, *qisas* crimes can be forgiven by the victim, which means that the wronged party does not demand that the offender would not be punished in equal matter, but would pay retribution money.

Parallel to the New Testament, the Qur'an draws a connection between God's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiving of others, and calls Muslims to forgive because they want to be forgiving. In sura 24:22 it says: "Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you?" Similarly, sura 64:14 affirms: "Forgive them, pardon them, then God is all forgiving, all merciful." Forgiving others is mentioned in the lists of virtues of the believers and is highly recommended. However, there is no command that makes forgiveness a requirement for Muslims. Just as there is no certainty of forgiveness, there is no certain causality between not forgiving

³³ *Qisas* crimes are defined as murder or intentional physical harm and punished through a sharia court by the same harm done to the perpetrator, unless the victim or their family pardons them. E.g. if someone knocks out someone else's teeth, the victim can demand that their teeth are knocked out, too.

³⁴ *Hudud* crimes are understood as crimes for which God has commanded specific punishments. They are adultery, false accusation of adultery, robbery, theft, and apostasy. According to *sharia* law, because *hudud* crimes are committed against God they cannot be pardoned but the punishments have to be executed once the facts has been established beyond doubt.

others and not being forgiven by God. Forgiving is not always the better choice; it isn't intrinsically better, because God himself may or may not forgive.

How does this affect how I disciple a suffering Muslim? Ruba's story of suffering and forgiveness highlights a couple of factors:³⁵

I am 32 years old Beduin from a Muslim background; of course I live with my parents. At home, like all Muslims, we pray, we fast, but we don't talk a lot about the details of our religion. During the winter my parents would sell greens like thyme from the mountains to make a living. During the summer my father worked as a day labourer if he could find work. We were doing okay but sometimes we were in need. Like we couldn't afford all the school books and things. I went to school until the second year of secondary school but didn't continue.

At that time I was in a car accident. That was the reason why I stopped going to school. I had a problem, actually many problems. With my legs and my whole body and my eyes. I didn't want anyone to see me because I'm not pretty. Nobody should meet me. That is why I didn't want to meet any strangers so that no one would ask me: What happened to you? I didn't want anyone to ask me about this issue. I didn't have anything to do. I wasn't at school, I didn't have work, nothing. My situation was difficult. I was only at home; my life was very, very hard.

There were some people from a charity, they knew my family. They were looking for girls to come to their centre. They would teach them things because they didn't have a chance at school, for example sowing, pedicure and manicure, even some of them teaching

³⁵ Excerpt from an interview through WhatsApp voice messages, my translation from Arabic. 11.1.2021.

Arabic. They helped them and they paid. And so they came to us: "Don't you have someone who could come to our centre and we will pay?" Okay, there was me. It was very hard for me to go. I didn't want to see anyone, I didn't like people to see me. But I went.

In the morning we had to start with prayer and a Bible lesson. It was very hard for me because I was a Muslim. I didn't like the thought that I would read the gospel. Because we say that God is one, no! Surely there are many things in the gospel different from our beliefs. I read but I didn't accept anything I was reading. There was nothing that touched my heart, but because I had to I continued reading and going to the centre to learn new things.

But after a while, little by little I started thinking: All these events, how did they happen? The stories, how different they were from what I experienced in life. How the Lord loves everyone, how I as well had to have people who loved me no matter who I was because the Lord loved me no matter who I was. How he loves us all the same. Many, many things in the gospel made me feel: really, life has to be different.

There were many girls with me when we started but those girls accepted Christ more than me, maybe they got baptized, that circle of girls was [spiritually] open I was the one who took the longest. I was always thinking about all the things that happened to me. But step by step I accepted Christ, in every verse I was reading, in every story he was pushing me more so that I accepted that this was happening. And step by step I loved to read more. There were many people around me and I was supported by them. One time they were praying for me, and while they were praying I felt something very strange was happening to me. I felt someone was talking to me. For me that was something very strange, that I should actually hear the voice of the Lord. If someone was telling me: "We heard from the Lord" that was hard for me to swallow, but I really heard this inside of me

and I felt that I am truly a daughter of the Lord who loves me and the Lord was calling me to be with him always.

What touched me again and again was the verse from Lk 6 that says, “love you enemies.” I wondered how the Lord could ask me to love those people because I was brought up that we don’t love those people: on the contrary, we hate those who hate us, and we don’t help them in any way. But the gospel says and the Lord says: “Do this.” It was something impossible.

The most difficult experience that happened in my life was the car accident. This was so difficult. A lot of things changed in my life because of that. Sometimes I was saying, “God, why did this happen? If you love me: why?” I had doubts, sometimes I really had doubts if God exists: if he saw me, why did he do this? I was isolating myself from others, from everyone, even from the family at home. It was very hard for me that anyone should see me. It is still a problem to meet new people who ask me: “What happened to you?” It is still hard. Always, always, always, always this is affecting me. This was a terrible ugly evil experience. The accident was for me the end of the world. I’m finished. Why do I live? What is the meaning of my life? There is no meaning. The girl or the woman, I don’t know, who hit me with the car, she didn’t stop to see what happened, she didn’t come to me, or ask about me, she left and we don’t know anything about her. This was hard for me and I never wished her anything good. I was always saying, “for sure, God will take from her what is my due. God will hold her accountable for sure.” I couldn’t forgive her. I was very, very upset about her. Always I was thinking: That is the person: she did this to me, she ruined my life, and never ever will I forgive her.

At the centre the people around me were praying for me. I felt there is someone who helps me. Not with money but morally. I was healing. I was feeling that the Lord loves

me. That he loves me as I am. Before, I felt: it's over, I am not loveable, no one loves me, I am different. But with the Lord I felt: Really he loves me and he wants me to be with him. Feeling this was very beautiful, and I started to love to pray. I was praying and he was answering.

At the centre they were from time to time teaching us about reconciliation and forgiveness. It wasn't just me alone with this topic, the girls who were in my group and started at the same time as I at the centre, a lot of them were in a similar place like me. At the beginning nobody was talking with each other, we weren't friends, we didn't love each other. But through everything we were reading together, through all the activities at the centre, I feel that the relationships grew very strong; I even feel we have become like family and more than family to each other.

There are many references in the gospel telling us that the Lord wants us to forgive. The thought that really made me think was: If I want God to forgive me, why do I not forgive? I ask from the Lord: Please forgive me everything. So do I not want to do the same? Why can I not do the same? This thought always takes my breath away: If we ask forgiveness from the Lord, why do we not forgive? We have to do this. If I want to be a disciple of the Lord, others need to see this in me. If I don't love others and I don't forgive or help them, or if I don't live reconciled with those around me, how can the people around me who see me, how will they know that I am a daughter of the Lord? How will they see that I have Jesus in my life?

Ruba's story is a story of restoration in process through discipleship. The voice messages convey the effect that the car accident still has on her emotionally and spiritually. These parts in the story were difficult for her to tell, her voice sighing and breaking up a number of times. Some of the brokenness she experienced will possibly

not be restored in this life: the brokenness of her body, maybe the prospect of marriage broken by the disfigurement that she alludes to, as a woman in her thirties who still lives with her parents. Yet restoration is happening in other aspects of the social, emotional, and spiritual brokenness that were the result of her accident.

Socially, her suffering had made Ruba isolate herself not only from strangers but even from her family. She stopped going to school. She also didn't want to go the centre. Again and again she recounts how she went against her will because she did not want to mix with others.

Emotionally, her judgement on herself as "ugly" made her feel unlovable, hopeless for the future, and void of meaning. Because a change of the physical results of the accidents didn't seem feasible, change of her life in general was unimaginable and therefore she didn't show any desire herself to do anything to facilitate change. Apparently she didn't even have the strength to stand up against having to go to the centre and read the gospel against her will. Spiritually the pain that she lived with made her question and doubt God's love and care for her and even his existence.

In the process of discipleship, social, emotional and spiritual restoration are happening hand in hand. The role of experiencing discipleship in a community stands out clearly in Ruba's story. Meeting a group of believers who came to look for her and who opened up new possibilities through including her in a group of girls learning different skills led her to be reintroduced into human fellowship. When she started to actually understand what she was reading about Jesus and his love for everyone, she simultaneously realized her need to be loved. Far beyond being only a group that met to learn and earn some money, this community filled Ruba's emotional needs to be cared for and loved. And it slowly transformed into a spiritual fellowship. It was during a time of prayer for her that she had a personal encounter with God, hearing his

invitation to no longer be separated from him but to live with him as his beloved daughter.

Her emotional and spiritual brokenness was also addressed through the teaching of forgiving others. Ruba describes her feelings of anger, her desire for revenge and her vows never to forgive the woman who was responsible for the car accident, like a prison that confined her thoughts and emotions “always.” Her first reaction when she realized that forgiveness is not optional, but commanded by Jesus, was shock. She rejected forgiving because it was impossible. But it seems that during the struggle to forgive, the community of girls at the centre was helping her to grow. She wasn’t alone in this process, she continued feeling loved and accepted, and to hear repeatedly over time about forgiveness.

At the time of the interview Ruba showed a strong desire to forgive, even if she still asked herself: “Why can I not?” The main reason that she uses to encourage herself is God’s all-encompassing forgiveness: because she expects God to forgive all of her sins she wants to forgive, too. However, she also gained a second reason that illustrates the power of forgiveness in restoring her: She wants to truly forgive so that others can see her as a disciple of Jesus being like him, a “daughter of the Lord,” someone who has Jesus in her life. It strikes me how she now repeatedly thinks of herself someone who should be “seen”—after all the fear of being seen, all the running away from people so that no one should see her after the accident. Now she no longer thinks of herself primarily as ugly but as a bearer of the beauty of Jesus, his love and forgiveness in her life. Ruba has again become someone who, in her own eyes, is good to be seen. Even if there is still pain in her narrative and the process is still a hard one, learning to forgive has brought spiritual and emotional healing to her and taken her deeper into discipleship, making her into someone who wants to draw others to Jesus.

Ruba's story illustrates once again how important it is in discipleship to engage Muslim women continuously and with patience in the word of God and the person of Jesus. This is particularly true for women who are struggling with suffering in their lives and need to experience him as the lover who accepts them and forgives completely: the one who has suffered horrendously but yet does not hold back forgiveness. Understanding the difference in the religious discourse about forgiveness helps me build bridges, and yet to focus on the difference that changes everything: for disciples of Jesus forgiveness is not optional because God does not keep this option open to himself. When this truth hits home, women who feel the need for retribution and revenge may start on the journey to bless those who harmed them instead. Discipling women to forgive is best done in a community where love and acceptance build the basis of dealing with painful issues. Ruba needed the fellowship of other young women like her while she was struggling to come to grips with forgiving the person who had caused so much brokenness in her life. Finally, I, as a co-learner in all matters forgiveness, should not avoid sharing about forgiving others, no matter how inadequate I feel. Instead I should listen well, pray with grace and love, and believe that God can free us all from the prison of unforgiveness.