

UNLOCKED
HEARTS,
UNLEASHED

JOY



*Forgiveness
is the Key*



MELANIE SHULL

*Praise for Unlocked Hearts, Unleashed Joy:
Forgiveness Is the Key*

“Melanie Shull is committed to the Word of God and the life-changing truth it brings to the hearts of men and women alike. Having led and written Bible studies for years while serving in ministry and having learned for herself the power of forgiveness from her own story, Melanie can be trusted to deliver the message God has given to her.”

—Denise Hildreth Jones, founder of Reclaiming Hearts Ministries
Author of the *Savannah from Savannah* series,
The First Gardener, Secrets over Sweet Tea, and Hurricanes in Paradise

“Melanie Shull has to be one of the most radiantly contagious people I know. Her joy comes from her own deep-rooted pain set free by the forgiveness given and received in Christ Jesus. This hard-to-put-down read will unlock your heart because God wants you to be liberated too.”

—Dr. Don Wilton, senior pastor of First Baptist Spartanburg, SC
Author and president of The Encouraging Word television ministry

“This is the Bible study you’ve been looking for. The theme of forgiveness is intricately woven into each chapter through Melanie Shull’s own story and through needy, desperate, or imperfect Bible characters who came face to face with truth. You’ll find an emphasis on getting answers from God’s Word, and you’ll discover how to make choices based on biblical wisdom. You can read this book on your own, but I encourage you to invite a group of friends to join you in a Bible study that will produce spiritual growth and deepened friendships. I highly recommend it.”

—Carol Kent, director of the Speak Up Conference
Author of *He Holds My Hand: Experiencing God’s Presence and Protection*

“Do you carry hidden scars and secret questions concerning your own life circumstances? Have you longed for freedom from destructive emotions that prevent you from moving forward into all God has for you? As Melanie Shull’s faith journey unfolds, so do a myriad of biblical stories illustrating the power of forgiveness and God’s sovereignty. *Unlocked Hearts, Unleashed Joy—Forgiveness Is the Key* is that rare combination of memoir and Bible study that allows the reader immediately to apply biblical teaching to their current struggles. If you are eager to live a more authentic, grace-filled life, Shull offers the tools to bravely take hold of all God’s promises.”

—Lucinda Secret McDowell, author of *Ordinary Graces*

“According to Paul’s words in Colossians 3:13, we are most like God when we forgive others of their sins against us. Regardless of the offense, unconditional forgiveness cancels the curse of hatred Satan uses to destroy us and opens our hearts as channels of God’s love so God can find ways to use us. Such is the compelling testimony of Melanie Shull, now expressed in her Bible study *Unlocked Hearts, Unleashed Joy*. Those who choose to follow her Scripture-based steps to reconciliation will find real joy.”

—Dr. Wayne J. Edwards, pastor, Heritage Baptist Church, Perry, GA
Director of Mature Ministries—Nicaragua Missions
Author of *Raising the Standard—One Pastor’s Plea for a Return of Righteousness to the Church and Silent No More—the Ten Issues Christians Must No Longer Be Silent About*

“*Unlocked Hearts, Unleashed Joy—Forgiveness Is the Key* is a perfect picture of what God does when we allow Him to heal our wounds. If you struggle with wounds from the past, I encourage you to pick up this book and prepare to have a miraculous encounter with the God of grace. Melanie’s story will encourage you and help you know you aren’t alone. But even more, you’ll see that not only can God heal you, but He can bring you to a place of joy you never imagined.”

—Dr. Eddie Coakley, senior pastor, Trinity Baptist Church, Cayce, SC

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Table of Contents

About the Author	9
Preface.....	11
Introduction.....	15
Lesson 1: The Nightmare	19
Lesson 2: Secluded but Never Alone.....	33
Lesson 3: An Unexpected Gift.....	45
Lesson 4: Adoption, the Loving Option	55
Lesson 5: Drenched in Grace.....	69
Lesson 6: The Man of My Prayers, Not My Dreams	79
Lesson 7: Forgiving Is Holy Art.....	95
Lesson 8: Full-Circle: Joy Unleashed	107
Afterword.....	127
Backstory	129
Leader Guide—Suggestions to Enhance the Small-Group Experience.....	131

About the Author

Melanie Shall believes in the power of story, especially the transforming power of God’s story through grace and an ever-growing faith in Jesus Christ. Since 2009, as founder and editor in chief of *Living Real Magazine*, Melanie has provided a unique platform for ordinary Christ-followers to “show and tell” how real faith influences everyday life. She is also the founder of the Living Real Co-Ed Conference—bringing the magazine to life. A musician, writer, speaker, worship leader, and Bible study teacher, Melanie loves ushering people into the presence of Jesus Christ. From her heart flow worship, encouragement, hospitality, and a deep love for God and His Word.

Melanie’s previously published works include a Bible study, *Renew, Refresh, Refine - Your Heart, Soul, and Mind* and *The Red Carpet Journal*, a resource for writing God’s Word on your heart. Besides having a serious coffee-mug fetish, Melanie is a loud and proud football fan. She loves doing life with her husband, Rick, in a not-quite-yet empty nest in the middle of their university alma mater town of Columbia, South Carolina—Gamecock country. To contact Melanie or to find out more about *Living Real Magazine*, go to

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Preface

Hello, friend! You just made my heart smile. Not only did you pick up this study book, but you are also reading this letter—a letter I’ve poured my heart and soul into. You and I probably have some things in common. In fact, I wrote this book because I believe when we’re transparent with our stories, we connect more easily with others who walk similar paths. You see, like so many, I know what it’s like to live with deep wounds. But I’ve also learned to forgive in spite of those wounds. Forgiveness is the key that releases us from a past of pain and unleashes God’s indescribable joy to flow freely within our souls.

That’s what I want you to discover too.

Maybe you struggle with a stubborn heart that doesn’t want to let go of the past. Maybe you need encouragement and answers for yourself or someone else. Or maybe you long to meet someone who understands what you’re going through. Whatever the case, I know what it’s like to strive in silence, to hide in guilt and shame, and to feel alone.

I believe every person experiences a locked-up heart. An unbeliever’s imprisoned heart is the result of unbelief and unconfessed sin. The same is true for a believer.

So what's the difference?

The door to the unbeliever's heart has not yet been unlocked. This keeps them imprisoned, along with their cellmates: sin, guilt, shame, regret, and the like. The keeper of the keys, Jesus Christ, stands outside the cellblock, constantly calling to unbelievers to let Him set their hearts free. If by faith they will confess Him as Lord, trust Him with their lives, and follow Him wholeheartedly, then His cross-shaped key will unlock their hearts and set them free.

However, Jesus has already unlocked the door to the believer's heart, using the key of forgiveness by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). He set us free from the bondage of sin and gave us power through the Holy Spirit to live victoriously over sin.

Sometimes, though, we choose to live as if we're still imprisoned. Whether or not we intend to ignore our unconfessed sins, those sins can slam shut the door of our hearts, locking in cellmates like fear, bitterness, anger—even hate. When left to grow unchecked and unchallenged, these sins strain our relationship with our heavenly Father, hinder our effectiveness for Christ, and affect our relationships with others. It's a miserable existence.

Some believers sentence themselves to years, even life, with a locked-up heart. They carry around regret, shame, and guilt like a prison ball and chain. I know. I walked around in shackles for many years, but I couldn't figure out what held me back. The good news is that God never stops pursuing us, longing to unlock the areas of our hearts we've allowed to slam shut.

As believers, we cannot let down our guards but must tend to our relationship with our heavenly Father daily. We need to guard our hearts above all else (Proverbs 4:23) because from our hearts flows the essence of who we are. Guarding our hearts against the debris of sin will allow joy to flow freely and help us maintain our influence for Christ.

Throughout this Bible study, we'll look into several scriptural accounts of those who've encountered God's pursuit of their hearts. Through the counsel of the Word and being honest with the Lord, you may discover Him pursuing you as well. Invite the Holy Spirit to examine your heart. Allow Him to teach you and to identify any culprits that prevent God's joy from flowing uninhibited through you. We have access to the key to freedom and joy, but we must use that key if we are to experience abundant life through Christ Jesus.

Are you ready? Let's do this.

By His Grace Alone,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melanie". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "By His Grace Alone,".

*"No one enters into the real joy of the Lord
in spite of the hard times, but squarely
through the hard times."*

~ Ann Voskamp

Introduction

Revenge, the ABC nighttime television series that debuted in 2011, intrigued me and immediately sucked me in. I didn't want to miss a single episode in real time. The main character, a woman in her twenties, believed a certain family was responsible for her father's murder during her childhood. From the devastating moment of discovering what she believed to be the truth about her father's death she became obsessed with planning her revenge and retaliation.

I couldn't help rooting for her to succeed. She didn't just want to get even—she was out for blood. She desired destruction of a family who'd built their success on dirty business dealings, corrupt politics, and other scandalous deeds. I wanted her to get her revenge.

However, as the series went on, my feelings changed. Even though the story was fictitious, my infatuation with the show bothered me. Taking revenge on the people who'd pierced the character's heart did nothing to heal it. Instead, her thirst for revenge caused more devastation. All her scheming simply brought more pain, which kept her from moving on. With each takedown, she craved more destruction. This woman's obsession with revenge not only became her life, but it also formed a

noose, slowly tightening around her neck and ultimately suffocating her. Her life became a pitiful existence.

Through this fictional television series, God reminded me why He said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Romans 12:19 ESV).

The same revenge-filled attitude sweeps across our nation today in real life, like the California wildfires that consumed whatever lay in their path. Revenge! The popular mantra “You will pay, no matter what it costs” speaks volumes about the spiritual condition of many wounded hearts.

Instead of fighting hard for healing, many people put on boxing gloves and look for the perfect moment to deliver a knockout punch. The scenarios play out in the media every day—the takedown of teachers, pastors, celebrities, politicians, journalists, judges, and more. The mindset of revenge is not only prevalent in the secular culture but has also crept into the hearts of Christians.

The purpose of this study is not to condone criminal acts or to vindicate the individuals who’ve harmed us. Rather, I wrote this book to help us surrender ourselves and our wounds to the Savior, who wants to transform our suffering into something beautiful for His glory and our good.

Left to their own devices, fear and anger grow into bitterness and hate. They root in the soil of our hearts, where joy should flourish. The prayer Jesus taught His disciples, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12 ESV), remains relevant today. You and I must practice the holy art of forgiveness.

Developing a forgiving spirit is not a sign of weakness or a willingness to give up. Forgiveness is about love, courage, and strength. It’s about breaking the stronghold of evil on our hearts. A forgiving spirit refuses to allow the one who harmed us to keep their control over our thoughts and minds. If we don’t cultivate a forgiving spirit, a bitter spirit will choke the

life out of us. As Christ has forgiven us, we must also forgive. We cannot love if we harbor hate against another human being. We cannot move forward until we develop peace with what lies behind.

The encounter I'm about to share with you begins with a secret—one I kept locked inside for years. This secret could have destroyed me, and revenge didn't set my heart free. The key of forgiveness did. When my secret pain surfaced, that pain drew me tighter into my Father's arms. Through His tender compassion and the Comforter's wise counsel, I stepped into a lifelong journey of unlocking and unleashing the joy of Jesus in my life.

Throughout these eight lessons, you'll discover that the enemy didn't turn out to be who I thought it was. In fact, I had locked the door to my heart from the inside.

I'm praying for you to commit before the Lord to fight the right enemy, in the right way, with the right key. I promise—it's more than worth it!

"The enemy may think he can wear you down without much of a fight, but wait until he encounters the fight of God's Spirit in you. Because... This. Means. War."

~ Priscilla Shirer

LESSON 1

The Nightmare

*My heart pounds until it might burst from my chest.
Fear locks in hard and fast. It's him! He's at the front door!*

*Home alone, holding my sweet baby boy, I try to shake off the cold hand
of terror gripping my throat. Trembling, I somehow make it into the foyer.
With sweaty palms, I slowly turn the knob, cracking open the door.*

*Standing on the stoop just inches away, he glares at me.
"If you ever tell, I will come back and take your baby."*

The nightmare ends as I jolt awake. I sit straight up in bed, shaken and frozen in fear. With tears streaming, I can barely breathe. I gather my emotions enough to ease out from under the covers, trying not to wake my husband. I tiptoe into the bathroom to wipe away the tears—again.

Why do I have this recurring nightmare? Why can't I share it with my husband? Why is it coming back now?

I was twenty-six, happily married, and thrilled to be a mom. At the time, I didn't realize I'd locked my heart sometime between the ages of thirteen and fourteen.

A leader in my home church, a dear family friend, began paying attention to me. Young and naïve, I thought this was normal. I should have been able to trust him. However, his inappropriate behavior soon popped that bubble.

One evening at a church event, this attention turned into an invasion of my innocence. Later, I knew what had occurred was wrong. This violation of personal space, this sexual misconduct, caused confusion in my young heart and impressionable mind. I struggled to process it all. That night, I chose to confide in one close friend, but I wouldn't mention this moment again for years.

My secret.

My wound.

For fourteen years, I believed the old adage "Out of sight, out of mind." I didn't speak about the incident, so I thought it had gone away. Since my perpetrator had also left South Carolina, no one would ever know.

Then one day, someone mentioned he was back in town. This news triggered my nightmare. I hadn't realized the severity of my wound until the pain came rushing back. My heart had locked up, and I discovered I was chained to some not-so-friendly cellmates.

We all have or will experience a wounded heart. To understand a wounded heart, Google the word "wound." Write what you find.

Wound means:

According to Strong's Hebrew Lexicon search (<http://www.eliyah.com/lexicon.html>) the Hebrew word for "wound" is makkah or makkeh, meaning a blow, wound, slaughter. Hebrew is much richer than our English language. A blow to the heart, or a slaughtering of the heart, gives a more graphic picture than the word "wound."

Read Isaiah 53.

How was Jesus wounded for us? Write down the descriptive words or phrases you find.

Wounds come in all shapes and sizes, thrust upon us in all sorts of ways. Some leave scars for life. Others fade away with time. Scars are physical reminders of past pain, and each one tells a story.

For years, I had a three- to four-inch scar on the inside of my left thigh. The scar has since faded, but my memory of the story behind it hasn't. I was in ninth or tenth grade—old enough to be home alone. My parents had asked me to pick up some tree limbs and debris in our backyard, so I headed outside to do the work.

When I picked up a short log, I didn't know it had a stick attached. That stick gashed the inside of my thigh.

I don't deal well with blood. I've never passed out, but I've come close. This was one of those times. With no one around to help, I headed into the house to lie down. But first, I had to clean the wound.

Ugghh!

By the time my mom returned home, I was lying on the couch, wound cleaned and bandaged, a cold washcloth draped across my forehead. I didn't attempt any more yard work that day.

Depending on the severity of a wound, it may need professional attention or even stitches. Thank goodness mine was not that serious. However, we must clean and bandage our wounds to reduce the risk of infection.

A wounded heart is no different. If we don't treat it immediately, infection can set in without our knowledge. My nightmares proved I had not tended to the wounds my sexual predator had caused. The wound had become infected.

What's the story behind your wounded heart? Did you suffer rejection, verbal abuse, or bullying? Maybe your wounded heart came through physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Family, friends, co-workers, bosses, enemies, even church members can wound us deeply. Everyone

we meet has the potential to hurt us. Depending on our response to those wounds, one of two things will happen. Either God will lovingly use them to make us better, or the enemy will exploit them to make us bitter. Without realizing it, I had allowed the enemy to take advantage of my pain.

Read Genesis 27:41–31:55.

Jacob loved Rachel from the moment he saw her. Rachel's father, Laban, promised to give her to Jacob as his bride, but only if he worked for him for seven years. Because Jacob loved Rachel with all his heart, he agreed. However, Laban wanted to remain faithful to the custom of his people, so he needed his older daughter, Leah, to marry first. So he tricked Jacob.

Leah followed Jacob into the dark marriage tent. Thinking Leah was Rachel, he consummated the marriage. What gut-wrenching pain he must have felt when he realized Laban had deceived him. Then Laban required seven more years of work in exchange for Rachel.

Talk about a nightmare. I can't imagine waking up next to a stranger instead of the man I thought I'd married the night before. But I'm sure it would make me more than angry and bitter. I'm not sure I would have been as gracious as Jacob. I probably would have packed my bags, loaded up my camel, and gone home.

However, Jacob remembered God's promise.

Re-read Genesis 28:13–15.

God had made a promise Jacob could cling to. Jacob believed God would take care of him and multiply his children.

Read on through verse 22.

What did Jacob do in response?

As Jacob remained in Haran, he clung to that promise and to the joy of knowing he lived in the presence of God. Not only did God take care of Jacob and his broken heart, but He also blessed everything he touched, making him a wealthy man. By the time Jacob had completed his second seven years in Haran, God had supplied him with everything he needed to move forward and finish His redemption story. Now Jacob could pack up all God had blessed him with, load up his camel train, and head back to Canaan, his homeland.

The Lord had devised a plan for Jacob, Leah, and Rachel even before the creation of the world. Through miraculous events and despite a dysfunctional family tree, God honored His promise. From Jacob's seed, the twelve tribes of Israel were born.

Let's examine Jacob's story a little further. Take your time and look for nuggets of truth you may not have seen before.

Describe how you felt about Jacob's response to Laban's trickery.

Once Jacob married Rachel, why didn't peace and harmony fill their home?

How many years did Jacob end up serving Laban before he went back to Canaan?

Describe how God's faithfulness to Jacob brings you comfort in your current situation. If it doesn't, describe why not.

If you have lived through nightmarish circumstances, describe how you responded to the situation.

Life isn't all unicorns and confetti. Everyone has times of celebration, times of weeping, and times of healing. King Solomon reminds us there is a season for everything.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8.

What seasons of life are listed in this passage?

Between 2014 and 2017, my family dealt with much grief. We lost seven close friends and family members to cancer, rapidly progressing Alzheimer's, and other ailments. The most tragic was McKinsey, our

daughter's best friend since third grade, who died instantly in a single-car crash at the age of twenty.

This season of sorrow exhausted us. We could barely overcome the initial shock and pain of losing one person before receiving another call about someone else. Through it all, I witnessed God's grace as His strength carried us.

When McKinsey died, my daughter and her friends rallied around each other in search of answers and comfort. The love they showed one another was priceless. Through the grace of God, they even helped McKinsey's mom through the grieving process. They stepped in to be "sisters" to McKinsey's only brother, "Little David," and haven't stopped caring for McKinsey's family to this day. God used McKinsey's death to draw her mom to Himself in ways that still amaze us.

This grieving mother formed the McKinsey Foundation because of her daughter's love for the orphans she had fallen in love with on a mission trip to Uganda. Many of these children had no hope of an education. Today, because of the McKinsey Foundation, over one hundred students now attend school, fully supported, and hear about Jesus.

We told McKinsey's story in our 2015 Spring issue of *Living Real Magazine*. Even though she had surrendered her life to Christ only two years prior to her death, McKinsey left a powerful legacy that continues to shine for Jesus.

I also saw God's power, strength, and grace fill my husband as he tenderly cared for his mother, an Alzheimer's victim, during the last forty days of her life. God's strength sustained him, and His grace was sufficient to see my husband and our family through those strenuous days of uncertainty.

God's grace and mercy kept us again in the weeks prior to the passing of our cousin Robby, who died of cancer. His grandmother had passed away a few months before. Sick and in poor health for several years, she had

asked the Lord not to allow her to outlive her grandson. She had already buried her husband and stepson after a plane crash many years earlier, and she couldn't bear to lay Robby to rest too. Her faith was strong, but her emotional state waned. God honored her request. She died first and, along with loved ones who had gone before, she surely greeted her grandson at his arrival at his eternal destination, in the glorious presence of Jesus Christ.

I could share many more similar stories, all with the same conclusion. Our time on earth is brief, and Christ wants us to live well, fully engaged in the joy of His presence.

Maybe you're in a season of deep wounds, hurt, rejection, or abuse, and your life feels like a nightmare. Maybe you're in a season of deep grief, feeling lost and shuffling through the day with no direction or purpose. Or maybe you're in a season of discovery, learning to identify the hand of God in your life. Whatever season you're in, I promise it will change.

The good news is that God never changes. His essence dictates that He remain the same yesterday, today, and forevermore (Hebrews 13:8). He is our immovable Rock in whom our strength lies. He is our faithful Redeemer, always working to restore everything that's broken. God makes all things beautiful in His time. He tirelessly crafts your brokenness and mine into something eternally stunning. He promises to complete the amazing work He has begun in all who believe (Philippians 1:6).

Remember this: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also your God. Run to Him with arms outstretched. Lay your requests at His feet. He's listening to your cry for help. He will cuddle up with you as He catches every tear. He's reaching for you and will carry you through.



He will cover you with his feathers; you will take refuge under his wings. His faithfulness will be a protective shield. (Psalm 91:4)

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength
of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?"*

Psalm 27:1 NKJV