

“7 x 70”

By Chris August

Album: No Far Away

Hello! Welcome, everyone. I'm glad to see so many of you here and hope that what we discover about these songs and each other will be especially meaningful and that these songs will help us draw closer to God and each other and give us some useful tools to use in our faith journeys.

That's really the purpose of this study. I have heard these songs on the radio so often because they are at the top of the charts. I began to wonder...what if these songs – songs that really seem to touch people – could be used in a new way? What if we could really dig deeply into this great resource to see what makes them tick, so to speak. And by doing so, maybe we could find some insights that will help us in our day-to-day lives, our relationships with our families and friends, and our relationships with God.

So after a lot of prayer and thought, God began to help me see this as a Bible Study. One song...each week...starting at #10 on the Christian Billboard charts. Now, before we begin, let me make a few disclaimers! I am NOT a preacher. I have not gone to seminary and I have no formal education in teaching the Bible. But I feel that God has asked me to do this study, and I feel strongly that He'll give me something to say that will be useful. It has already been extremely helpful to me personally, as I've been planning this study. I'm hoping that you all will feel the same way, too!

Each week I'm going to be handing out a G.P.S. This is an idea that I "borrowed" from a minister named Adam Hamilton out in Kansas. This G.P.S. (which stands for Grow through Prayer and Study) is a study guide, of sorts...something you can use throughout the week to help you remember the scriptures that we've discussed and then it'll have some questions and prayers that you might be able to use individually during your daily devotional times. I know I promised that you don't have to read or study anything in order to do this Bible study...and you don't! But if I have learned anything from the past few months as I've been planning this study, I have learned this: the more effort you put into trying to understand what God is telling you, the more he helps you understand! It's that simple. So if you can find the time to reflect on what we'll be discussing here, I think God will really honor that effort.

So let's get to it. Song #10. Now you'll see on the top of your GPS that I've listed the name of the song and the artist. That, of course, will change from week to week. Many of these songwriters have numerous songs that really touch the hearts of their listeners. We are only going to be focusing on the top ten of the charts, but there may be others that you'd really like to hear as well. Today's song is called "7 x 70." This is kind of a strange title and I didn't really understand it until I heard the song. It was written by a man named Chris August. Chris is a relatively new Christian music artist. In fact, this song is from his debut album called No Far Away. But just because he's new to the scene, doesn't mean his music hasn't connected with people. On the contrary, several songs from his debut album made the top 10 charts, including "Starry Night", if you're familiar with that song. His songs are very personal and deal with things that we all struggle with, and I think that's why they click with people...because we can relate. I'd like to show you the 7 x 70 music video now, in case you haven't heard it before. Pay close attention to

the words, as you watch. Even if you don't care for contemporary music all that much, I think this song still has something to say to each of us.

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5-Q1zAhqA>

Okay. I'm wondering...how many of you have heard this song before? I'm thinking probably not a whole lot. It hasn't really been clogging up the airways for some reason, and I think I know why that is: it's the song's topic. It's probably pretty obvious after hearing the song, but who knows what the song is about?

Yes, it's about forgiveness. Here's the story behind the song:

In 2010, Chris August was preparing his debut album. He was actually just a couple of days from recording everything when his producer came to him and said, "Chris, I think we need another song to sort of round out the record. We need a really personal song." When Chris heard this he kind of rolled his eyes at the comment because to him, ALL of the songs on the album were really personal! But at any rate, his producer really wanted something MORE personal. So Chris was sent home that night with a bit of homework: unaware of Chris's personal history, the producer asked Chris to write about what hurt him when he was growing up. What did he struggle with when he was a kid? So that's what Chris did. He went home and started to write. By the next morning, he had the first verse written:

*I've been living in this house here
Since the day that I was born
These walls have seen me happy
But most of all they've seen me torn
They've heard the screaming matches*

*That made a family fall apart
They've had a front row seat
To the breaking of my heart*

Now, these are some pretty powerful words, aren't they? And I'd be willing to bet that there are probably a few people here who can relate directly to those words, right?

These are clearly the words of a man who grew up in a troubled home. Chris is the product of a broken home. His parents divorced when he was in fifth grade, and it's obvious that there were some pretty rough times in his childhood as a result of that failed marriage. That house that he grew up in (which, by the way, IS the house that you see in the video...that really was his childhood home) was witness to a lot of heartache. And so, when given the assignment to write about what hurt him as a child, THIS is what Chris wrote about.

The next morning, he played what he'd written for his producer. The man was moved to tears by the words – words that were a sort of 'open wound' that was laid out before him in song. And the producer said, "Chris, this song has GOT to be on your record, and it has to be a song about forgiveness."

Well, this was news to Chris! He said, "Whoa, wait a minute. You told me to write about what hurt me as a child. THAT'S what this song is about. NOT forgiveness!" But it didn't take long for him to come to the realization that it wasn't just his PRODUCER asking him to write a song about forgiveness. It was GOD that wanted him to do it. And more than just write a song about it...He wanted him to actually FORGIVE.

So he decided to try to do what God was asking him to do. After the song was written and the album had been released, an interviewer asked him about the story behind the song. He told them the story, but then he said this about writing the rest of the song...the FORGIVENESS part of the song:

“The following few days consisted of us being surrounded by the Holy Spirit like I’ve never felt before. This was, without a doubt, the most personal song I had ever taken on and it required a mind set on prayer. As the lyrics started to come to mind, so did all the memories of my past that I hadn’t thought about in years. Some lines brought smiles and some brought another set of pains that I needed to forgive.”

He began to realize that he had a backpack full of resentment and un-forgiveness that he had been carrying around for most of his life. And he needed God to teach him how to forgive.

Adam Hamilton talks about forgiveness in this way: he says the things that are done to us, that we have a hard time forgiving, are like rocks. Some are obviously bigger than others. For instance, each time some nut in the car behind you hammers down on their horn because you’re taking too long to cross the highway...you know – you see him in your rear view mirror, yelling at you because you’re holding him up...each time that happens, you collect a little rock. Not a big one...I mean, this is just a small thing and you’ll probably never see him again. But it’s enough to make you mad! So there’s a rock in your backpack.

Or maybe somebody says something about you behind your back at work, and you find out about it through the grapevine. It's just a little thing, and maybe you're not sure what the circumstances were regarding this juicy bit of gossip, but it hurts anyway and causes resentment. There's another rock.

Or what about this...this really drives me crazy. You're about to enter a store and just after you open the door, someone else is trying to exit the store. So you very politely step aside, holding the door for that person so they can leave first, EVEN though YOU were clearly there first. And does that person say "thank you"? No. They waltz right through, talking on their cell phone, ignoring you because you must be the doorman or something. I know this is very petty of me, but boy does that irk me. There's another rock for my backpack.

In just one morning I could gather up a backpack full of little rocks that I'll be carrying around for the rest of the day. One or two...that's no big deal...but if you carry around a sack full of them, after awhile, you begin to get a little weary. You start to lose your cool. And you start throwing around some rocks of your own, don't you?

I'm ashamed to admit it, but there have been times when I have found myself reacting to these "rocks" in a very ugly manner. I've found myself holding the door for someone as they waltz through without a thank-you, and I say very loudly to them as they exit, "You're WELCOME." Then, of course, they turn back, now aware of their 'unforgivable action', embarrassed. And as they walk away, they're probably loading up THEIR backpack with the rock that I just threw at them. I remember the last time I did this...Todd was with me. As I did it, I remember him looking at me as if to say, "Who ARE you? That's not the person I married."

I think, when we're dealing with these little rocks that get flung our way constantly throughout the day, we have to stop and think (before we react)...Who ARE we? Who AM I? and Who does GOD want me to be? Am I a stone-thrower, someone without blame who has the right to hold it over everybody else who wrongs me? Or am I a follower of Jesus, who IS the only perfect one...and who forgives ME time and time again for my wrongs?

Listen to this from the book of Micah, chapter 7, verses 18 and 19.

The Message (MSG)

*Where is the god who can compare with you—
wiping the slate clean of guilt,
Turning a blind eye, a deaf ear,
to the past sins of your purged and precious people?
You don't nurse your anger and don't stay angry long,
for mercy is your specialty. That's what you love most.
And compassion is on its way to us.
You'll stamp out our wrongdoing.
You'll sink our sins
to the bottom of the ocean.*

Now if God can “sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean” why can't we do the same?

I'm sure you know the passage of scripture from which this song draws its inspiration: Matthew 18:21-22. Let's take a look at that.

Matthew 18:21-22: ²¹ Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone^[a] who sins against me? Seven times?” ²² “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven”!

Seventy times seven...probably just a play on words that Jesus used to express the fact that we're supposed to keep on forgiving over and over and over again.

Forgiveness, some say, is defined as giving up the right for retribution. And so, no matter how good it might feel to throw a few stones of our own when somebody wrongs us, God wants us to give up that right. Over and over and over. Seven times seventy times.

But when the rocks get bigger, it becomes more and more difficult to truly forgive, doesn't it? These kinds of rocks are the ones that really end up doing some damage in our lives. When lies get told about you that ruin your reputation...when you are robbed... when your best friend betrays you... when your husband or wife, or in Chris' case your parents, let you down... these are things that really have an effect on you personally. If you had to carry around a backpack full of THESE rocks all day, every day, it would cripple you. I haven't had too many of those kind of rocks in my life, thank goodness. I can only imagine the strength and courage it would take to truly set one of those rocks aside, toss it down to the bottom of the ocean, and give up the right to make that person PAY for what they did to me. But I do know this: the better we are at laying down THESE rocks (little ones) the more equipped we'll be to do it when the bigger ones come our way.

But it's still not easy and it takes a lot of time. Chris August was interviewed a year after this song was released and he said he was STILL working through forgiving his father. Forgiveness is a choice. A daily choice.

The more I think about that, the more I keep coming back to the passage in Matthew. Remember what it said again: ²¹ *Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone^[a] who sins against me?" Seven times?"* ²² *"No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven"!*

I've read this passage a lot over the past few weeks and I remember one day, reading it and hearing differently. Maybe the way I heard it wasn't the way Matthew intended when he wrote this, or maybe it's just the way this translation worded it. But this is what I heard that day: when someone does something to hurt me, in small ways and, more especially, in big ways, I have to forgive and forgive and forgive until I'm ABLE to truly forgive. I think when we're dealing with the "big rocks" in life, we sometimes have to actually pray a prayer of forgiveness over that situation, even if at the time it's impossible to actually believe that we mean it, 490 times (7x70=490) or more before we're actually able to do it. So this scripture, to me, means sometimes people hurt us over and over and over in small ways, and we're called, as Christians, to forgive them each time they do it. And sometimes, we're almost crushed by the weight of the hurt that someone has caused in our lives, and that's when WE must make the choice to keep forgiving them for that thing they've done, over and over and over, until God brings healing to that situation.

Chris August put it like this:

*Seven times seventy times
I'll do what it takes to make it right
I thought the pain was here to stay
But forgiveness made a way
Seven times seventy times
There's healing in the air tonight
I'm reaching up to pull it down
Gonna wrap it all around*

I'd like to give you all a chance to share your personal experiences but we're kind of a large group, and large groups don't lend themselves very well to sharing or discussing anything. So what I'd like to do is break off into smaller groups. And I'd like you to discuss these two things in your groups: Chris's chorus says "I'll do what it takes to make it right." So the first question is: what does it take to forgive someone who has hurt you? (prayer, talking to the other person, an apology, etc.) The second question is: do you have trouble with re-visiting past wrongs?

BREAK OFF INTO GROUPS

So, what things did you come up with that YOU need to do in order to forgive?

I'm interested to see how many of you said you have problems with re-visiting past wrongs. You think you've forgiven somebody but then it all comes back again and you're starting from square one. Anybody have problems with that?

If I had to guess, I would say this is the hardest part of forgiveness. It's like going on a diet. The first step is making the decision... "Today I'm going to start eating right and exercising." And that first day really feels good. You feel like you can take on the world. But the really hard part is the day to day actually DOING it. Likewise, the decision to throw that rock of un-forgiveness into the bottom of the ocean, like God does with our sins, is the first step. So we throw it, watch it sink, and think... "You know, this feels really good." But then, a few days later, something reminds you of that rock...maybe that person says something or does something that reminds you of that rock, and what do you do? You reach back in and pick up it, right?

I'd like to share something that happened to me. This example is going to sound pretty minute in comparison to Chris' issue, or maybe to some issues you all are dealing with right now. But to me, when this happened, it was a big deal. It was a question of my character. Several years ago I was driving home from church...it was around lunchtime, I know, because Nick and I were heading home from the pre-school here that he attended while I worked. I'm really bad about letting the gas tank get dangerously low before I remember to buy gas and as it happened, this was one of those days. If you know Rt. 1 at all, you know that there's only one gas station between here and Milford...the Valero station about half-way to Milford. I stopped there, filled up my gas tank, and then proceeded to head home. I crossed the southbound lane of Rt. 1 and waited in the median until a good chance to merge into the northbound lane occurred. Traffic was pretty steady in the farthest lane, the slow lane, but finally a point came where I could pull into the "fast lane" safely because it was clear for a good long while. So that's what I did. As I pulled into the lane, and began to accelerate, I took note of a State Trooper parked in the next median up, maybe a few football field lengths away. As I passed the police car, I saw the lights turn on and I thought to myself... "Ooohh, somebody's gonna get in trouble." The next thing I know, the trooper pulls up behind ME with their lights flashing, motioning for me to pull over. At this point several things were running through my head: was I not supposed to merge into the fast lane? Did I leave my gas-cap hanging out? Is my purse on top of the car? I rolled the window down as the trooper walked up next to my car, and waited to hear what silly thing I'd done. Here's what came out of her mouth:

"Mam, do you know why I've pulled you over?" Wide-eyed, I replied that I didn't. "Well, I clocked you going 73 miles per hour and the speed limit on this road is only 55. I'm going to have to see your license and registration."

“YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME?!” That’s what I said. I couldn’t believe it. Seventy three miles per hour?! It’s laughable. My poor old van starts to quiver and shake at 65...but to get from 0 to 73 from a dead stop...either this lady was crazy or I was on candid camera! I tried to explain that I had just pulled out onto the highway... that I dislike driving too fast and rarely ever go over 60, which I certainly wasn’t doing that day. She didn’t want to hear it. All she kept repeating to me was, “Take out your license and registration.”

There was absolutely NOTHING I could do to convince this lady that I had not been speeding. And her unwillingness to admit that she might have made a mistake made me cry, right there and then. It felt to me as if she had arbitrarily chosen my red minivan to pull over just to see if she could get away with it - at my expense. (I realize that this is turning into a very long story but there’s a point...just wait!) I went to court three times trying to dispute that ticket. And I finally had to plead guilty to it, even though there was no way possible that I was guilty, just to finally make it go away. And every time...EVERY time I passed that gas station after getting that ticket that day, the hurt, anger and resentment boiled up inside of me until it was all I could think about for the rest of the trip. And, believe me, I make that trip up and down Rt. 1 a lot! Back then it was nine trips per week. That’s 18 times a week I passed that gas station. You wouldn’t believe the arguments I had with that Cop as I drove in my car. Man, did I tell her what I thought of her! (Too bad she wasn’t there to hear it! ☺) And every chance I got I told the story to other people. Some of you probably have heard this story before, right? I COULD NOT let it go. The righteous indignation I felt was almost sweet. SHE was SOOO wrong, and I was SOO right. Over the years, I would try to forgive her and put the incident in the past but sure enough, one day

would come and I'd see that gas station and it would all come flooding back. I'd lay the rock down, give up my right for retribution, but then I'd just pick it back up again!

It wasn't until I started working on this study, that a true picture of what I was doing came to me. I read that Micah scripture...about God sinking our sins to the bottom of the ocean, and an image came to my mind that I will never forget. I'm sort of a visual person. I can relate to things better when I have a picture or image in my mind that sort of symbolizes the situation. Here's the picture: what does the bottom of the ocean look like? Now I've never been to the bottom of the ocean but I have been to the bottom of a lake. And I have to say, it is really gross.

Everything's all squishy and slimy...there's rotten I-don't-know-what-all floating around down there. And when you pull your feet up out of the water, they're all covered in stuff that really reeks. You wipe your feet off with your towel but then that towel never quite smells the same way again, no matter how much you wash it. It's gross, right?

Well, I pictured myself reaching down into that water, rooting around for that rock-of-unforgiveness that I'd thrown in but then later decided I really needed to re-visit. I saw myself fishing through that slime and then pulling out that rock that was all covered in smelly, rotting, whatever. I picture myself covered in the goo from the bottom of the water. And I asked myself...who AM I? Look what I've reduced myself to!

It reminds me of a sermon illustration I once heard. It was about a minister who was counseling a married couple who were having problems. Actually, there were on the verge of divorce and were thinking that counseling would be their last ditch

effort to save the marriage. You see, they each had a laundry list of things that the other had done or said or not done or not said, that they just couldn't get past. The same things kept coming up over and over. So finally the minister had them write them all down. Just list them all. And then the minister said, okay, let's take the lists and go for a walk. So they followed him out of the office, down the hall, until the minister stopped at the door to the restroom. They all went in and it began to dawn on the couple where he was going with this. He had them sort of circle around the toilet and the minister said, okay, I want you to crunch up your paper, your lists of the wrongs each has done to the other, and I want you to throw them in. And of course, they react with a "Yeah, right. We're supposed to flush the lists away and then, magically they're going to disappear and everything will be fine. If only it were that simple!" The minister said, just trust me, do it. So they tossed them into the toilet. Then the minister said, okay, now you've both said that you want to be able to forgive each other, right? They agreed. He said, okay, I want you both to flush those lists. Both of you reach over and flush them right down. So they did. Then the minister said this: "by flushing those lists down the toilet, you've both made the decision to forgive each other. You've wiped the slate clean. Now, which one of you is going it after your list?" They looked at each other, confused. "What do you mean?" The minister said, that's what you're doing, you know. When you decide to bring those things up again, and un-forgive what you've already forgiven. You're reaching your hand down into that toilet, scraping and scratching, trying to bring it back. Do you really want to do that?

Ultimately, that's what un-forgiveness is. It's crawling around, covered in muck, hanging on to some rock. And that's not who God called us to be. That's not why Jesus died. He died for us so that we might be washed white as snow. And by doing so, we belittle the sacrifice He made for us so that WE could be forgiven.

I'm not so naïve as to think that there aren't some pretty crushing rocks out there, too. Some of you may be dealing with something so horrible, so devastating, that there's no way you can even think that you'll one day be able to forgive that person who has hurt you so deeply. I think, in those cases, there really IS no way WE can forgive on our own. We have to do what Chris says in his chorus.... "I'm reaching up to pull it down." I'm reaching up to you God, not down into the depths of the water or into the septic tank of unforgiveness...I'm reaching up for your help. And when we do that, God's hand is there waiting for us. And he teaches us how to slowly, day by day by day, 490 times or more, to chisel away at that huge, ugly, horrible thing that has been done to us, and sculpt it into something beautiful. That's what God's healing can do.

I close with this one last thought. I searched and searched to find some mention of how Chris' father dealt with this whole thing. I mean, Chris had made this very personal thing into a very public thing and I wondered what that had done to their relationship. I only found one mention of it in an interview, but the one statement was perfect. Chris said he was awed by his Father's reaction. His father said it was amazing that God could take something that was so painful and turn it into something so beautiful. This song has touched the hearts of so many listeners. Chris has received countless emails and letters from total strangers who just want to let him know that his song saved their marriages and relationships with their families. God had took the hurt and pain that Chris experienced and turned it into something truly beautiful. And that's what forgiveness is all about.