

[1 Queen] I searched and searched and couldn't find the story behind Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust". So we're left with only what the song tells us - there's a man named Steve who's going around killing people. As people fall, one after another, Freddie Mercury observes, "Another one bites the dust. Another one bites the dust. And another one gone. And another one gone. Another one bites the dust."

Who is Steve? Who are the targets of his killing spree? We don't know.

Toward the end of the song, we get a hint of a clue... Singing in Steve's voice, Freddie laments, "You took me for everything that I had and kicked me out on my own... There are plenty of ways that you can hurt a man and bring him to the ground. You can beat him, you can cheat him, you can treat him bad and leave him when he's down."

We may not know much about Steve, but we recognize this... it's a revenge story. Someone did something to Steve. Something bad. And now he's taking his revenge.

No wonder we like this song. In addition to the killer bass line (pun very much intended), we *love* a good revenge story. [2 Movie Posters] When Liam Neeson warns the men who took his daughter that he has "a very particular set of skills" in *Taken* or when Keanu Reeves goes after the men who killed his dog in *John Wick*, we cheer. Even older revenge stories like *The Count of Monte Cristo* have stood the test of time *because* we love them so much.

And it's easy to see why we like revenge stories, isn't it? Who in here hasn't been betrayed? Who hasn't had to dig a knife out of their own backs? Which of us hasn't imagined ourselves like Steve, standing on our own two feet, meting out justice, becoming the hero rather than the victim?

Even just talking about it is exciting!

On the other hand, if we're being totally honest (and we're in church, so let's do that), Steve's story is a little bit disturbing. Maybe it's because we live in a time of mass-shooting after mass-shooting, but Steve's revenge is at the end of a machine gun and it feels... off.

We might justify it to ourselves as a problem of scale - we don't know what happened to Steve, so maybe his reaction is an overreaction.

But what if our disquiet with Steve's slaughter *isn't* scale? What if deep in our selves we see a more fundamental problem with Steve's revenge?

No matter what's been done to Steve, in "Another One Bites the Dust", he's a villain. His quest for revenge has made him into the very monster he's convinced himself he's fighting.

Revenge doesn't heal us. Revenge destroys us.

[3 Someone slapped] That's hard for us to hear because retaliation feels good. When someone hits, I want to hit back. When someone hurts me or someone I love, I want to hurt them back.

And I'm not talking about brute revenge, the sort of mindless berserker rage we all know is wrong. I'm talking about those truly difficult scenarios -- they cheated on you. Cost you a promotion or even a job. Hurt your kids. Betrayed your trust.

They did something clearly unjust. And now the universe is out of balance. At its very best, our desire for retaliation is a desire to even those scales, to right a clear wrong. We've become victims, and we want to fix things.

But even in those scenarios, revenge will not bring us the peace we imagine it will. We will not become heroes. We will not create justice. We will not even any scales.

As difficult as it sounds, if we truly want to find peace, healing, hope, justice, if we want the wrongs done to us to give way to right, we must forsake the path of Steve and embrace the difficult path of forgiveness and kindness.

### **Forgiveness leads to freedom, and kindness creates justice.**

That's hard to believe, especially when you're Steve. When you've been victimized, when you're at the bottom, it seems like forgiveness and kindness are the easy way out. You just roll over, show your belly - what could be easier than that?

What's hard, we imagine, is taking revenge. Plotting, planning, and having the courage to get back up, to fight back. There's a reason we like revenge stories - because most of us aren't brave enough to get back up when we're down. We *wish* we had the courage to get up and fight back. It's what we aspire to. It's why we look at the main characters in revenge stories as *heroes*.

But we're wrong. On all counts. Forgiveness and kindness aren't easy because they're not the same as rolling over (we'll come back to this).

[4 Steve Cycle] Let's ask for a moment if retaliation is actually better. [5 + highlighted down arrow] Someone hurt Steve... they brought him to the ground, beat him, cheated him, treated him bad and left him while he's down. [6 + highlighted up arrow] Then Steve decided to get back up and take his revenge. So now he's retaliating. Boom. Steve's the hero.

[7 + Flipped] Except now that Steve's back on top, he's brought someone else to the ground. He's treated someone else bad and left them while they're down. Steve has become the victimizer. He's created new victims. He hasn't created justice - he's actually created more violence and added it to the world.

This is the cycle of violence. It's why retaliation, no matter how well-intentioned doesn't work. It's why revenge is toxic. And it's why the Scriptures repeatedly warn against retaliation.

**[Scripture Slide]** If you have a Bible, turn with me to Proverbs 24. If you grabbed one of the free Bibles in the back (or want to go grab one now), you can find Proverbs 24 on page XXX. And please keep that Bible if you don't own one.

Proverbs is one of Ancient Israel's Wisdom books. It's known for having a bunch of pithy aphorisms, but it's much more than that. Ancient peoples saw Wisdom as the DNA of creation, the stuff out of which God made the world. The Hebrew creation story is one of God speaking the world into existence, so they thought of Wisdom as the words that God spoke, the words that made life possible.

**[8 Genie lamp]** We miss that today when we read Proverbs. We treat them like promises or almost magic wishes. We read something like "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it," and treat it like a law, a cause and effect. If I raise my kid right, they'll be good their whole lives.

Of course we know that's not always true. Sometimes kids who have great parents turn out rotten. And sometimes kids who have lousy parents turn out great. But this proverb is pointing in the direction of life. It's saying, In a perfect world, parents care deeply about their children and teach them the way of God, the way to life. And those children follow that way for the rest of their lives.

It sounds a little silly to say it out loud, but basically that proverb is saying, Good parenting is better than bad or no parenting. Kids have a better shot when they have parents who love them and teach them right from wrong. So... do that, parents!

**[9 This Way]** Proverbs are like signposts that point us in the right direction. They say, Life looks like this, or These behaviors are best.

So when we read these proverbs about retaliation, let's remember: they're not guarantees. They're not laws. They're signs pointing the way toward life and flourishing. With that in mind, let's read 24:28-29 together:

**Do not testify against your neighbor without cause— would you use your lips to mislead? Do not say, "I'll do to them as they have done to me; I'll pay them back for what they did." -- Proverbs 24:28-29**

The first part is pretty straightforward - don't lie about someone else, or cheat them. But the second bit reveals that we have a Steve situation happening... the reason we might be tempted to lie about someone or to cheat them is because they've done it to us first.

[10 Street Signs] But the Proverb warns, "Don't do that!" Don't pay them back. Don't do to them what they've done to you. Retaliation runs counter to the way to life. If you want life, reject the path of revenge.

The reality is, when victims choose revenge, they don't become heroes. They become victimizers. Retaliation turns us into the very thing we hate.

Retaliation creates more violence, not more justice.

So what do we do? If retaliation isn't the answer, how do we respond? Flip over to Proverbs 25:21-22. Here, the teacher offers us a way to respond to violence, to injustice, that leads to life, rather than death.

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. -- Proverbs 25:21-22

If your enemy is in need, meet that need. This is the essence of kindness, a kindness predicated on forgiveness.

Which still to many of us sounds a lot like rolling over and taking it, doesn't it? Someone's brought you to the ground, beat you, cheat you and kicked you while you're down, and you're supposed to grill 'em a steak?

And yet the proverb assures us this is in fact the way to life. Not because God wants you to be taken advantage of. But because forgiveness and kindness are *not* the same as rolling over while you're on the ground and showing your belly.

[Bring cycle back] Both retaliation and rolling over perpetuate the cycle of violence. Rolling over allows the abuser to continue to abuse. And retaliation turns the victim into the victimizer. Neither breaks the cycle. Neither leads to justice.

[Two paths] According to the Proverbs, only forgiveness and kindness create justice. They are the way of getting back up off the ground and choosing not to respond in kind. They're choosing to treat your enemy the way you want to be treated, not the way they treated you.

That's really hard. Much harder, frankly, than taking revenge.

And yet Proverbs tells us that kindness is the way to life. That if we choose to respond with kindness, we're in fact heaping burning coals on our enemies' heads and God will reward us.

Which doesn't sound particularly kind. It actually sounds like a sort of revenge.

[11 **Forgiveness/Kindness**] Which is why forgiveness is an essential first step in our acts of kindness. Forgiveness and kindness are sort of like twins. Forgiveness is about how we feel inside - whether we're letting what they did control how we behave. Another preacher I really like named Rob Bell once said that unforgiveness is renting someone else free space in our heads.

Forgiveness is about choosing to let go of what they did to you, choosing not to let someone else dictate your behavior.

Forgiveness is about freedom. Freedom to choose a better way. Freedom to be who God is calling you to be.

Once we've forgiven, we're free to be kind. Kindness is about how we treat other people. It's a word that implies benevolence, a desire for the good of the other person. Kind actions are actions we do for the good of the other person.

God is for the flourishing of everyone. God created us all to have life, and God desires life for all of us. Of course we live in a world where not everyone desires that.

But we believe God is right now setting the world right, that God's plan to restore the world was enacted in Jesus' death and resurrection, and that we are now working with God toward that fulfillment.

Our ability to forgive is predicated on the fact that God has already forgiven us. God does not act towards us based on how we treat God. God acts towards us out of God's infinite love for us.

Our ability to act kindly towards even our enemies is predicated on the fact that God has already shown us immeasurable kindness. Our very lives are evidence that God acts kindly toward us, that God gives us good gifts that we might flourish.

So back to that Proverb. It says, **If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. -- Proverbs 25:21-22**

[12 **Cycle -> Kindness**] This proverb is pointing a way *out* of the cycle of violence. That way is kindness, built on forgiveness. When you are wronged, do not retaliate. Do not respond in kind. Instead, respond with *kindness*. Look for what your enemy needs, and offer your aid.

In a best case scenario, your refusal to meet your enemy's violence with violence may shame them to repentance. It's been known to happen.

But even if they refuse to turn from their evil, you have refused to follow them, to become like them. You refuse to add evil to the world, and instead offer hope, joy, peace.

When we choose to forgive, when we choose to stand back up and offer kindness, we are participating in the love that is the heartbeat of the Holy Trinity. We are choosing to follow the path of the very energy out of which the universe is woven together.

Sounds beautiful, doesn't it? (Some of us are thinking, Yes... beautiful, but not very realistic.)

One of the worst circles of violence in the world is the one that persists between Israel and Palestine. When the UN created the state of Israel in 1948, they displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs. To this day, neither state has found a way to coexist that satisfies everybody involved.

[13 **Cycle of violence**] Palestinians retaliate against what they perceive as theft of their land. Israelis retaliate against what they perceive as acts of terrorism. And so on and so on.

In 1998, two groups of families sat down together. One group was Israeli. One was Palestinian. What they all shared in common was that they'd all lost children to the conflict. Both sides shared grief, and a desire that no more families suffer the pain they've experienced. They formed The Parents Circle Families Forum, and to this day, they work to bring together families from both sides of the conflict, convinced that only by sitting with the Other will we learn the love we need to break the cycle of violence.

Recently, a documentary was made about this organization, and the trailer for the film captures the heart of what the organization is about. In lieu of showing the whole docu, here's what it looks like to break out of the cycle of violence, to choose to forgive and offer reconciliation.

[\[video\]](#)

[14 **Retaliate v forgive, wrath/hatred v freedom/resurrection**] Israelis and Palestinians are finding freedom from the cycle of violence that has consumed their countries. We can choose to retaliate or to forgive. We can respond in kind, or we can respond by being kind.

One puts us on the path of wrath, locks us into a downward spiral of violence and hatred.

The other frees us from behavior dictated by what someone else did to us. And invites us to walk the path of kindness, a path that will take us to a cross, but will continue to the resurrection.

When you are wronged, choose to forgive. Choose to be kind. It'll be like scooping burning coals on your enemy's head. If they're hungry, fire up the grill and prepare them a feast. If they're thirsty, offer them the water of life.

We don't know what happened to poor Steve. But we know what became of him. Steve turned into the very thing he hated, the very monster that kicked him to the ground.

Catalyst, let's be a people who refuses to stay on the ground. But let's also be a people who stands up not to fight back, but to repay evil with good. Let us choose to forgive. And let us give kindness for violence.

Can you imagine if this week, we chose not to retaliate? What would next Sunday look like if every time we respond to an enemy, we took more violence out of the world, added more peace, more kindness? What would our marriages look like? Our families? Our workplaces? Our friendships? Might we find reconciliation sprouting up in surprising places?

And don't you want that?

### **Charcoal Examen**

[15 Charcoal background with questions]

The questions will be on the screen, so please take your time to consider them carefully.

1. When in the last week did I choose the path of forgiveness and kindness?
2. When in the last week did I choose the path of retaliation?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to choose to retaliate?
4. How can I choose to forgive and offer kindness this week?