



making

sense

of

FORGIVENESS

Forgiving Others
Finding Forgiveness Ourselves
Receiving God's Forgiveness

Second Edition

JOHN PHILLIPS



making
sense
of

FORGIVENESS

JOHN PHILLIPS

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Preface

We all go through painful experiences in life. Some suffer personal tragedies from which they never fully recover: broken relationships, robbery, abuse, violence, disease, life-changing injuries, even the violent death of a family member or close friend.

But one of the most common causes of pain is that which we inflict upon ourselves when we hold on to anger and hatred towards people who have hurt us.

Hatred and revenge may be our natural response when we have been hurt. But this book aims to show that, however tough it might be, forgiving is always the better option. It is the better option for both victim and offender.

If you are struggling to forgive someone, or longing for someone to forgive you, or carrying such guilt and shame that you cannot forgive yourself, I hope that *Making Sense of Forgiveness* will help you to begin to find healing.

And if you have never considered that you owe a debt to God for hurting Him, I hope that you will discover the need for His forgiveness. We need to be at peace with God and that is only possible when we ask Him to forgive us.

This is the second edition of *Making Sense of Forgiveness*, incorporating some additional stories. The first edition was published in 2018. It superseded *Forgiveness: Making Sense of it* (first published in 2010) and *Can I Forgive Myself?* (first published in 2013).

Acknowledgements

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Publication would not have happened without the support of two people in particular. Monica Farthing never seemed to tire of reading and rereading my drafts and never failed to enhance my own best efforts. Tamaryn Pitout then skilfully transformed my manuscript into a book. Both laboured for many, many hours, so willingly and cheerfully. I owe a great debt to them and to Adam Shah, too, who has overseen the revisions to this second edition.

I am also very thankful to Nicola Goddard for all her proofreading and to Barbara Parsons, who offered her wisdom, mostly accepted, on my final draft.

I am especially grateful to all who have allowed me to use accounts of their personal journeys, including some who have inflicted pain on others. Their stories bring the book to life: they will inspire you. They illustrate what I know to be true – that forgiveness really does work.

John Phillips
December 2020



The
MEANING
of
Forgiveness

Chapter 1

The MEANING of Forgiveness

What forgiveness is ...

What do we mean when we talk about forgiveness? People have very different ideas.

It has two slightly different meanings. First, it can mean the granting of a free pardon or the cancellation of a debt. A head of state may pardon someone who has offended against the state. And states or private lenders may write off ('forgive') debts owed to them. The debt is then cleared.

Secondly, and most commonly, a person forgives if they choose not to hold on to bitterness and hatred, and not to seek personal revenge when they have been wronged: they set themselves free from being trapped in the past.

And that is often true for the offender too. When their victim forgives, it can also help them to find closure.

“ ... I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison

Nelson Mandela (on his release from prison)

And what forgiveness is not ...

Forgiveness does not mean that wrong actions do not matter, do not hurt or should not be justly punished.

And to forgive does not mean that we trivialise the incident in any way or make excuses for the person. Nor does it place any obligation upon us to continue any relationship with the person. Reconciliation may follow on from forgiveness but it will not always be possible.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting

'Forgive and forget' may appear to be sound wisdom: the idea is that you cannot forgive unless you also forget. But that is not true. Whilst we should not keep dwelling on past hurts, it may be unhealthy to try and block them from our memory – and impossible in the case of life-changing events.

“

***Forgiveness is not forgetting
– it requires a fearless remembering
of hurt.***

Desmond and Mpho Tutu

Paul Farren and Robert Miller agree with Desmond and Mpho Tutu that forgiveness is not about forgetting. They are church leaders who work to bridge the Catholic-Protestant divide in Northern Ireland and strive for peace and forgiveness in their community. They have co-authored *Forgiveness Remembers*, believing that it is important not to forget the past conflict their community has experienced and its causes and its pain.

They explain: 'Our world often calls us to forget the past so we can move forwards unencumbered by it. ... our plea is not to forget. "Forgive and forget" is not the way forwards. Rather we believe that the maxim should be "forgive and remember".'

... we believe that the maxim should be 'forgive and remember'.

'Whether it is at the level of society, family or individual, forgetting is often impossible. So a truth that echoes throughout our journey is a call to remember. We are not calling you to strive to achieve peace by developing amnesia: no! Our journey has caused us to look more closely at the source of our pain and to apply the salve of forgiveness. It may 'smart', but it has a healing quality. The pain is not forgotten, but transformed as part of a wider healing process.'

Forgiveness v Justice

Forgiveness does not rule out the need for justice. Forgiveness is personal: it is a matter between the victim and offender. Justice is public: it is a matter between society and the offender. It is for the courts to dispense justice regardless of the wishes of the victim.

Samantha Geimer was raped at the age of 13 by the film director, Roman Polanski. Forty years later, in 2017, she told a court that she had forgiven him and wanted the case against her abuser to be dropped to help her to move on with her life. The judge refused, saying that Polanski had to face justice: the case could not be rejected 'merely because it would be in the victim's best interest'.

Rachael Denhollander was the first woman (of more than 250) to publicly accuse the US gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar, of sexual abuse. In her impact statement in court in January 2018, she made a plea to the judge: 'I ask that you hand down a sentence that tells us that what was done to us matters, that we are known, we are worth everything, worth the greatest protection the law can offer, the greatest measure of justice available.'

Alongside her plea to the judge, Rachael also told Larry Nassar that she forgave him. You can read more from her statement on page 60.



The
WHY
of

Forgiveness

Chapter 2

The WHY of Forgiveness

There are three compelling reasons to forgive.

Forgiveness is good for the victim

Firstly, to forgive is always good for the person who has been hurt. We might think that withholding forgiveness is our one lawful option of making the offender pay. We might think that our anger towards them keeps us in control by not letting them 'off the hook'. We might hope that it will hurt them – and then expect to feel better ourselves if it does.

But can that really be expected? Our refusal to forgive is unlikely to affect the person if there is no remorse. If they are remorseful, then their own guilt and shame is more likely to be their real stumbling block to moving on with their life.

And, whatever we might think, choosing not to forgive rarely helps us feel better. It is more likely that our bitterness will lead to depression and stress-related illnesses.

**// ... I believe bitterness only harms you.
It doesn't touch the people who have
hurt you.**

Lyn Connolly

Sheree Osborne

Sheree grew up hating her parents and with good reason.

'Forgive them! Why should I? What right did they have to be let off the hook like that?

'I could feel the sickness turn to anger. I had hated them for so many years for what they had done. I was not about to forgive them now and say that it was all right for them to have done that – no way ... If I forgive them it will be like they have won!'

If I forgive them it will be like they have won!

That was Sheree Osborne's reaction when a friend suggested that she should forgive her mother, who had abandoned her as a child, and her father who had abused her.

Yet Sheree began to recognise her friend's advice was for Sheree's own benefit: she was the one who was really suffering from her anger towards her parents.

Finally, Sheree was able to take that step to forgive, for her own sake. 'I had a life to live and I wanted some quality within it. If this forgiveness was the price, then I would have to do it. So I chose to forgive.'

It has been said that ‘harbouring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die.’ And that is very true. Our anger may not affect the other person at all: they may not even be aware of it. So, not only do we fail to get the victim to drink the poison, we actually poison ourselves. And as long as our anger makes us constantly relive the event, the healing process cannot begin.

And our anger may harm other relationships as people will not wish to spend time with us. As Max Lucado has commented: ‘Revenge builds a lonely house. Space enough for one person. The lives of its tenants are reduced to one goal: make someone miserable. They do – themselves.’

Revenge builds a lonely house. Space enough for one person.

Forgiveness is good for the offender

Secondly, forgiveness is good for the offender. When a victim displays compassion rather than anger, it can help the offender enormously. It should help them to ‘come to terms’ with what they have done and to begin their journey of recovery.

Katy Hutchison

Katy Hutchison forgave the man who murdered her husband, Bob. He was beaten to death in 1997 in British Columbia, while checking on a party being thrown by their neighbour’s son.

It was ‘... the most incredible thing that anyone has ever given me. My life would still be full of anger and violence if it wasn’t for Katy. ... with Katy’s forgiveness, I hope that one day I’ll be able to forgive myself’

That was Ryan’s response when Katy forgave him. She recalls their meeting: ‘As he sobbed it was all I could do not to hold him. Second to the day I gave birth, it was probably the most human moment of my life. Forgiveness isn’t easy. Taking tranquilizers and having someone look after your kids would probably be easier ...

‘Whether victim or perpetrator, part of being human is rolling up our sleeves and taking an active part in repairing harm ... Forgiveness became an opportunity to create a new and hopeful beginning.’

... part of being human is rolling up our sleeves and taking an active part in repairing harm ...

Forgiveness pleases God

Thirdly, we please God when we forgive others. Forgiveness is at the very heart of the Christian faith, for we all need God's forgiveness.

Jesus placed great emphasis on forgiveness when He taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer. He explained: 'For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.' (Matthew 6:14-15).

*But if you do not forgive others their sins,
your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Matthew 6:15

We must forgive regardless of the pain we have suffered. Forgiveness brings peace and it is good to be at peace with others, even those who have hurt us. And, as we shall see in chapter 5, there are serious consequences for those who do not have God's forgiveness and so are not at peace with Him.

Barry and Margaret Mizen

In May 2008, on the day after his 16th birthday, Barry and Margaret's son, Jimmy, was fatally wounded in an unprovoked attack in a shop in South East London.

'... I believe God freed me from being consumed with anger and hatred and instead gave me a deep empathy! That has been Margaret's response to the killing.

Margaret and her husband, Barry, would not allow any anger to destroy the peace which they have always desired for their family. 'We could not cope with anger on top of the incredible pain which Jimmy's death has brought to our family.

'For Barry, forgiveness means that he has no desire to seek retribution. For him that is forgiveness. It is not excusing what Jake has done. It is saying, "I do not wish to do the same back to you". It doesn't go any further than this!'

In 2009 Barry and Margaret set up a charity, now renamed *For Jimmy*, through which they work tirelessly to ensure that Jimmy's legacy will not be one of vengeance or fear, but one of hope and peace.

Objections to forgiveness

The following are the more common reasons for choosing not to forgive.

Objection: 'They don't deserve it.'

This is perhaps the most common objection and it is almost always true: the person will not deserve to be forgiven. To forgive is an act of kindness and mercy. That is the very nature of forgiveness. And that is precisely what we want from God when we ask Him to forgive us: we want Him to show us mercy, not to treat us as we deserve.

Objection: 'But they have not said sorry.'

Ray and Vi Donovan decided to forgive the men who murdered their son, Christopher – and to tell them – before there was any real expression of remorse. They felt it was important to take the first step themselves.

Ray explains: 'They needed to know that we had forgiven them. You shouldn't have to wait until the person says sorry. It is not the person who needs to say sorry that matters; it is you, humbling yourself and saying "I forgive" that matters, whether they accept it or not.'

You shouldn't have to wait until the person says sorry.

You can read the Donovans' story on page 96.

Objection: 'It's a sign of weakness.'

This is another misunderstanding. When we forgive we do not overlook or ignore the wrong. We recognise the wrong and we recognise the need for justice and punishment. However, we do not look for personal vengeance or hold on to hatred against the person.

We are definitely not being weak when we choose to forgive: we are demonstrating that we are strong. To forgive a serious offence may be the toughest thing we ever do.



**The weak can never forgive.
Forgiveness is the attribute of the
strong.**

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi

Objection: 'It would be a betrayal.'

When a person is killed and the family decide to forgive, they may be accused of betraying the victim.

Mary Foley sensed that is what some of her friends thought when she chose to forgive the girl who murdered her 15-year-old daughter, Charlotte, in April 2005. She was stabbed to death at a party. Mary has since exchanged letters with Charlotte's killer.

As Mary explains, '... some people are disgusted by the very idea of forgiveness. It can seem like an act of betrayal. But, on the contrary, I think it's an act of freedom.'

It can seem like an act of betrayal. But, on the contrary, I think it's an act of freedom.

Mary was only able to forgive in relation to the hurt which she had suffered. She was not denying the need for justice.

Objection: 'But the relationship is over.'

To forgive someone you know does not mean that the relationship has to continue. If there is no longer mutual trust and if there is no willingness to try and restore the trust, there cannot be full reconciliation.

But that does not affect the need for forgiveness. Even where a relationship is terminated, forgiveness is still necessary. Without it, there will be continued anger and resentment, making it difficult for each party to move on from their painful experience.

There can never be reconciliation without forgiveness but there can be forgiveness without reconciliation.

There can never be reconciliation without forgiveness but there can be forgiveness without reconciliation.

Forgiving For Ourselves

Are you hurt and suffering? Is the injury new, or is it an old, unhealed wound? Know that what was done to you was wrong, unfair, and undeserved. You are right to be outraged. And it is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies.

You are right to be outraged. And it is perfectly normal to want to hurt back. But hurting back rarely satisfies.

We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness as to the fact you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our emotional pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.

Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person

who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor.

Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom ...

When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. Forgiveness, in other words, is the best form of self-interest. This is true both spiritually and scientifically. We don't forgive to help the other person. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves.

Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our jailor.

From *The Book Of Forgiving* by Desmond and Mpho Tutu



The
HOW
of

Forgiveness

when we have
been hurt

Chapter 3

The HOW of Forgiveness

– when we have been hurt

How should we respond when we suffer hurt or loss by someone's actions or when we are offended by something that is said. The person may be a complete stranger – perhaps even committing a crime against us – or the person may be someone very close to us, possibly a family member.

Undoubtedly we will be angry. Anger is not wrong in itself. It is one of the most basic human emotions. What is important is that we control the way we express it and that we do not hold on to it. Holding on to it will lead to bitterness and even to a longing for revenge. Letting go of it requires us to forgive.

Forgiveness needs time

The road to forgiveness can be a long one. Remarkably, there have been instances of people announcing their forgiveness, even of a murderer, within a matter of days – but that is exceptional. Most of us will need time to come to terms with the incident – and the consequences – before we can contemplate forgiveness. The process cannot be rushed.

A suicide bomber attacked the Manchester Arena on the 22nd May 2017, killing 22 people (as well as himself) and injuring 139. Several hundred others are carrying psychological scars.

A year later, on the anniversary of the attack, the Bishop of Manchester, David Walker, responding to a question about forgiving people who commit such atrocities, commented: 'Forgiveness is nothing shallow. It can often be a lifelong work ... we cannot jump to it across the pain and anger as though they were not there.'

Forgiveness needs a decision

The Bishop of Manchester is right: we cannot just forgive, pretending that we are not hurting and not angry. Yet, there has to come a point of decision: to hold on to our anger and bitterness or to let it go and to forgive. We cannot wait until the pain has passed for it may remain with us for our entire life. Nor can we wait until we *feel* like forgiving: we may never *feel* like forgiving.

***Nor can we wait until we feel like forgiving:
we may never feel like forgiving.***

When we do choose to forgive, we may have to remind ourselves regularly of that decision, in order to avoid slipping back into feelings of anger.

Forgiving is a tough journey

It (*forgiveness*) has fits and starts, good days and bad.

Anger intermingled with love. Irregular mercy. We make progress only to make a wrong turn. Step forward and fall back. But this is okay. When it comes to forgiveness all of us are beginners. No one owns the secret formula. As long as you are trying to forgive you are forgiving. It is when you no longer try that bitterness steps in.

As long as you are trying to forgive you are forgiving. It is when you no longer try that bitterness steps in.

Max Lucado

Forgiveness needs to be communicated

We may be tempted to hold back from telling the person we have forgiven them, if only to hold on to the option of changing our mind! That is not true forgiveness. We need to let the person know we have forgiven them. And it can be helpful to put it in writing, perhaps at the same time emphasising the pain we have experienced.

If the perpetrator is feeling shame and guilt, it will help them to know that we have forgiven them. That ought to be one of our motives in wanting to forgive.

There can be circumstances where it is not possible to have contact with the offender, either directly or indirectly, as may be the case with a serious crime. It can still be helpful to the victim to go through the process of writing down their feelings, alongside their decision to forgive.

Letting 'bygones be bygones'

Just letting 'bygones be bygones' – forgetting without actually forgiving – may seem an attractive option. Archbishop Desmond Tutu deals with this in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. He writes:

'It was pointed out that we, none of us, have the power to say, "Let bygones be bygones" and, hey presto, they then become bygones. Our common experience in fact is the opposite – that the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye, we will find that it returns to hold us hostage.'

Unless we look the beast in the eye, we will find that it returns to hold us hostage.

Sharing our pain

When no one else is aware that we have been hurt, we may feel the need of support from a family member or friend. That will often be appropriate and necessary.

But we must be clear about our motive for sharing our pain – that it is genuinely for our support and not simply to complain about the person who has hurt us. Telling others can easily be a subtle means of taking revenge.

Coping with everyday hurts

Every day we are all at risk of being hurt by someone, especially if we have a sensitive nature. Things can be said or done, even unwittingly, that hurt us emotionally and psychologically. And the wounds may not heal quickly.

Mostly we can brush these hurts aside. We do not dwell upon them and they are soon forgotten. We have taken a decision, perhaps subconsciously, to forgive the person.

But when we cannot do that, we must then address the issue with the person rather than hold on to the hurt and allow resentment to grow, even over something quite trivial.

Let us never forget that other people may be just as easily hurt by our actions and, especially, by what we say. We must take great care in choosing the words we use. The Bible tells us how dangerous the tongue is: ‘... but no

human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.’ (James 3:8).

Family feuds and forgiveness

Family quarrels and disputes are inevitable. Usually they can be, and are, readily resolved with an apology – often within minutes or hours. But it only requires one person to refuse to make an apology, or to accept an apology, for a rift to develop. It is tragic when families get torn apart – or drift apart – because someone holds on to their anger, possibly over something very minor.

I will never forget my conversation with a lady of 90 on the death of her son, as she explained that they had not spoken for thirty years. Both must have borne incredible pain and guilt over those years. Clearly, neither was willing to take the first step to being reconciled – and so they weren’t.

Sadly, that is not uncommon. Many people attend funerals carrying the added grief of unresolved conflict with the person whose death they are now mourning – and with the opportunity of reconciliation having finally passed.

Forgiving with help from others

Restorative Justice can be a very helpful way of moving towards forgiveness with the help of others. You can read about Restorative Justice in chapter 7.



The
HOW
of

Forgiveness

when we have
hurt others

Chapter 4

The HOW of Forgiveness

– when we have hurt others

Restoring those we have hurt

Admitting responsibility

When we hurt someone, we have a choice to make: to admit or to deny responsibility. If a criminal offence, we have the choice of pleading guilty or not guilty.

It can be very tempting to deny responsibility. It can be a matter of pride: we want to protect our reputation as well as avoiding the consequences of being found guilty. And if the evidence against us becomes overwhelming, we may then want to try to justify our action or to shift the blame to others – perhaps even to the person we have hurt.

The better (and honest) option, although it may seem to be the less attractive, is to accept responsibility from the outset. It is the better option for both parties.

Without that admission, forgiveness becomes more difficult. The person will find it more difficult to forgive us and we will struggle to ‘forgive ourselves’. The guilt – and the denial – will remain with us, perhaps even causing us to hate the other person and certainly preventing us from finding the healing we need.

Making an apology

Once we have accepted responsibility, and only then, can we begin to think about restoring the person we have hurt. We should show our remorse and express it through making an apology.

// An apology can be one word, but it’s a massive thing.

Laura (Read her story on page 94)

The words, ‘I am sorry’, are tremendously powerful if they genuinely express how we feel and are communicated promptly. They may enable a victim to open up the way to forgiving.

We should always follow the advice of Kimberly Johnson, ‘Never ruin an apology with an excuse.’ We can easily fall into that trap of trying to justify our actions or words. Our apology may then be rightfully dismissed as worthless.

// Never ruin an apology with an excuse.

Kimberly Johnson

Making amends

The apology is the crucial step, both for the person we have hurt and for ourselves too. But we should also consider whether there are practical steps by which we can make amends for the damage we have done. Apart from the practical benefit, it will reinforce our remorse.

Seeking forgiveness

Part of the apology must be to ask to be forgiven. Obviously, we have no control over the person's response but we can be satisfied that we have taken every possible step to demonstrate our remorse. Forgiveness may come later.

There will be situations where there can be no direct communication with the other person, which is often the case where a crime has been committed. It may then be possible for an apology to be passed on through another person, such as a probation officer.

Where that is not an option, it can still be helpful to write a statement of remorse and apology, in the hope that it can be passed on later. There may also be the possibility of a Restorative Justice conference at a future date. (See chapter 7.)

Restoring ourselves

When we hurt someone, there will almost certainly be painful consequences for us as well. Whether we tell lies about someone; steal; cheat on a partner; fail our children; injure (or kill) someone by careless driving; engage in drug dealing; abuse someone or commit any violent crime, we have to expect that we will also suffer. There may be:

... punishment

It may be the loss of a job, a fine, a driving ban, a community order or prison sentence.

... broken relationships

Hurting someone close to us will almost certainly affect our relationship with that person and, very likely, other friends too. Those relationships may take time to rebuild: some may be lost forever.

... rejection

Other people – local residents, workmates – may express their disapproval by distancing themselves from us.

... personal loss

There may be other consequences. Our reputation may be tarnished which may affect our job opportunities. A criminal conviction is likely to have severe repercussions.

... guilt and shame

Our greatest pain may come from our guilt and shame. We may try to avoid those feelings by making excuses for what we did or we may try to suppress them. But, sooner or later, they are likely to surface.

Our greatest pain may come from our guilt and shame.

Dan DeWitt has made helpful comments regarding guilt and shame: see page 79.

Forgiving ourselves

We can easily despair over what we have done. We often express that by suggesting that we will never be able to 'forgive ourselves'. But to speak of 'forgiving ourselves' – or 'not forgiving ourselves' – is to misunderstand what forgiveness really is. We forgive when we choose not to hold on to bitterness and hatred against the person who has hurt us. And so the right to forgive belongs to the victim, not to the offender. The offender can only *ask* for forgiveness.

The real need is for self-acceptance rather than self-forgiveness. What we really mean is that we cannot imagine ever coming to terms with, or accepting, what

we did. But we must consider the possible motives for thinking like that. Firstly, it may be a way of diverting attention away from the person we have hurt, to focus upon ourselves and our own pain. It can be an excuse for not making an apology to the victim and a cry for pity and sympathy for ourselves.

Secondly, it may mean that we are struggling to accept that we really are capable of hurting the person as we did.

Thirdly, it may be the result of a deep sense of guilt and shame. To satisfy our demand for justice against ourselves, we may want to punish ourselves further by clinging to the memory of what we did and wallowing in it. That will prevent us from finding healing and from exploring ways of making amends for the pain we have caused. And it will almost certainly have a negative impact upon our family and friends who may not know how to support us and may choose to distance themselves.

But that (punishing ourselves) will prevent us from finding healing and from exploring ways of making amends for the pain we have caused.

The path to restoring ourselves is the same path as seeking forgiveness from others: accepting responsibility; making an apology; making amends (where that is possible); and asking to be forgiven. But there is another step: to ask God to forgive us, for that is our real need – for every wrong we commit and every mistake we make.

God is our ultimate judge and only through His forgiveness can we find true healing and restoration. And His forgiveness is entirely sufficient. We must never think that we need to ‘forgive ourselves’ to complement God’s forgiveness. To think like that is to dishonour God and the promise He has made.

God is our ultimate judge and only through His forgiveness can we find true healing and restoration.

In his story (on page 84), Tim explains how he overcame his struggle to ‘forgive himself’.

In the next chapter we look at how we can receive God’s forgiveness.



The
GOD
of

Forgiveness

Chapter 5

The GOD of Forgiveness

Our biggest problem

The biggest problem we all have is the debt that we owe to God. We may see ourselves as victims or as perpetrators but we are all in exactly the same situation. Before God we are all guilty.

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...

Romans 3:23

And the problem is much bigger than any particular offence which may be worrying us, however serious.

God hates all 'sin' (which is the word the Bible uses for any wrongdoing). It includes all the wrong things in our lives which do *not* trouble our conscience. It includes our everyday attitudes and behaviours, such as our lies, our anger, our selfishness, our pride and our envy. It even includes our wrong thoughts which, though hidden from others, are not hidden from God.

God is just and demands justice ...

The reality is that we all have a sinful and rebellious nature. And because God is just, He cannot simply turn a blind

eye to our sin. He insists upon justice and justice demands that our rebellion is punished.

For the wages of sin is death, ...

Romans 6:23a

... but is also merciful and offers forgiveness ...

But, wonderfully, God is merciful and offers forgiveness to everyone who repents. That has only been made possible because God's demand for justice has already been met by Jesus, God the Son. Jesus did that when He took the punishment on our behalf. He became our substitute by coming down from heaven to sacrifice His life for all who would choose to believe in Him and follow Him.

... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13b-14

Jesus was willing to suffer an agonising and humiliating death by crucifixion and to take upon Himself all of God's anger at our sin. Jesus was then raised from the dead and He returned to heaven to be with His Father again.

... as a free gift

God's forgiveness is a free gift, totally undeserved and freely given to all who will receive it.

The Bible uses the word 'grace', meaning God's undeserved favour towards man. Jerry Bridges has defined it as 'God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him.'

This is contrary to the popular belief that we must earn God's forgiveness and favour by our 'good works'. But no one can ever come anywhere close to satisfying God's standard of absolute holiness and perfection.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 John 3:1a

Living with God's forgiveness

We can receive God's forgiveness – safe from His anger and wrath – by:

- accepting that we have not kept God's laws and deserve to be punished,
- believing that only Jesus can rescue us from God's punishment,
- confessing the wrong things in our life and repenting of them, that is, turning away from them,
- deciding to live to please God as a follower of Jesus.

If you are ready to receive God's forgiveness, you can do so now by using the following prayer.

Dear Father God,

I am very sorry for everything in my life, past and present, which is not right. I now repent of my sin.

Thank You for sending Jesus to die in my place, for my sins, in order to save me from the punishment which I deserve. I want to live to please Jesus and to make Him the centre of my life – to be my King.

Please forgive all my sins and accept me as Your child.

Amen

If you have prayed this prayer, it is a good idea to tell another Christian who can help you as you begin your new life as a child of God.

A parable of two attitudes

Jesus told a parable (a story) for the benefit of the proud, self-righteous and religious people of the day, notably the Pharisees. They were a religious sect, believing that God took great pleasure in their strict observance of the Old Testament laws, as they went far beyond what the laws intended.

Tax collectors were despised in their community because they worked for the Romans and because they cheated their fellow Jews by overcharging on their taxes. They didn't need anyone to tell them that God hated their evil practice.

'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

The Pharisee: 'God, I thank you I am not like other people ...'

'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The Tax Collector: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

God has the same view today of people like the Pharisees, who think that He is pleased with their religious practices, rules, rituals and 'good deeds'. No, He is pleased with 'tax collectors' who humble themselves and ask Him to show them mercy.

The parable can be read in Luke 18:10-14.

Living without God's forgiveness

We are either a child of God or His enemy: there is no neutral position.

And there are terrible consequences for those who are His enemies: they will have to face His wrath and punishment when Jesus returns from heaven to earth to judge everyone who has ever lived.

The Bible warns us to be ready for Jesus' return: He will come suddenly and unexpectedly. It will be a day of unimaginable pain for those who are enemies of God but a day of immense rejoicing for everyone who is His child.

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realising that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Romans 2:4-5

The Apostle Paul

'Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy ...'

Saul – only later did he become known as Paul – was born three or four years after Jesus. He was brought up in a strict Jewish home and studied Jewish history under one of the greatest scholars of that time.

He became a religious 'extremist' and was filled with hatred for the Christians. He was convinced that he was serving God by trying to destroy the church and by getting Christians thrown into jail. And yet, to quote from those verses from Romans above (which Paul himself wrote later), he was storing up God's wrath against himself.

But God showed mercy to Saul. While he was on his way to the city of Damascus to have Christians arrested, God showed him he had got it all wrong. Saul had the most dramatic encounter with God just outside the city. At that moment he realised who Jesus was – the Son of God. (Acts 9:1-6)

Paul's passion had been to destroy the Christian church. God gave him a new passion – to spread the good news of Jesus. He travelled extensively, starting new churches.

John Newton

The lost wretch, gloriously found and saved.

John Newton, like the Apostle Paul, had a sudden and dramatic encounter with God. He lived in the 18th century (1725-1807) and is best known for writing *Amazing Grace*, one of the best known hymns of all time.

John Newton's mother died when he was six and her strong Christian faith meant nothing to him. In his teens he became wild, angry and rebellious, a confirmed atheist and a very vocal blasphemer. He was press-ganged into the Royal Navy and publicly flogged after deserting.

Later, he got caught up in the slave trade in Africa. To use his own description from *Amazing Grace*, he was a 'wretch'. When he was 23, he was returning home from Africa when a very severe storm threatened to break up the small ship. Fearing he would die, he cried out, 'the Lord have mercy upon us!' He astonished himself by this cry and by using the Lord's name reverently rather than to blaspheme.

He continued to pray. On the one hand, he questioned why God would have time for someone who had ridiculed Him so much: on the other, he began to recall promises in the Bible which he had learned as a child. And God answered his prayer: the ship survived.

Under God's inspiration, he then wrote many letters to those churches to teach them about the Christian faith and to remind them of how they should live. His letters form a significant part of the Bible.

It is a wonderful demonstration of God's grace that He should choose Paul, so committed to crushing the Christian church, to become its most prominent leader at that time.

Paul never forgot the mercy and grace which God showed him. He wrote:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:12-14

Fearing he would die, he cried out, 'the Lord have mercy upon us!'

John Newton's experience changed his life dramatically and is expressed wonderfully in *Amazing Grace*, which he wrote twenty-five years later. By that time he was an ordained clergyman. For almost fifty years he preached of God's mercy and grace.

He is also remembered for his part in the campaign to abolish the slave trade, as he encouraged his close friend, William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Parliament.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

Words from *Amazing Grace*

Billy McCurrie

I deserved God's justice but received His mercy and forgiveness.

In 1970, when I was 12, my dad was shot dead by the IRA, plunging my family into heartache, grief and bitterness. He was just walking home and was in the wrong place at the wrong time. From that time I grew up with a deep sense of bitterness, hatred and rage and I had an insatiable longing for revenge. At the age of 16 I joined a loyalist terror group with the idea that I would kill as many people as possible. When I was 17 I was commissioned to carry out a killing and I took great delight in committing an execution. It was a cold, callous and brutal murder for which I felt no remorse or shame or any twinge of conscience.

... I had an insatiable longing for revenge.

I was arrested two weeks later and received a life sentence. I was sent to The Maze, a prison for political prisoners caught up in the troubles. I used my time there to gain greater political awareness. The murder of my dad left me convinced that there was no God.

But some years later, I made it known to a medical officer that I didn't believe that there was a God. I still remember very clearly his response: 'Regardless of whether you believe in God or not does not take away the fact that there is a God. Nor does it take away the fact that if you die in your present state you will go straight to hell and there you will no longer have any doubts about whether God exists. Every person in hell believes that God exists. And the tragedy is that there is no release date: everyone remains there forever.' I began to question my unbelief.

Regardless of whether you believe in God or not does not take away the fact that there is a God ...

Some time later, a Christian woman came to visit me and started reading the account of Jesus' crucifixion. As she read from the Bible I came under an unmistakable conviction of sin – every wrong that I had ever committed came before me. I was overwhelmed with guilt for the very first time. And I realised why Jesus Christ was dying on the cross. God was not turning a blind eye to everything I had done. It had to be punished and Jesus was taking my punishment. And He was willing to do that because He loved the likes of me.

... I came under an unmistakable conviction of sin ... I was overwhelmed with guilt ...

I acknowledged to God that I deserved His justice but I asked for His mercy and forgiveness. As I did so, all the rage, anger and bitterness just left me. And I felt clean, with a new freedom and peace despite being in prison.

... I asked for His mercy and forgiveness. As I did so, all the rage, anger and bitterness just left me. And I felt clean ...

That was in 1980. The Christian life is not easy but it is one of contentment. My life is shaped by what the Bible teaches. There is bad news for good people who think that they have no need to fear God: God has said that there is no one good, for all have fallen short of His glory. There is wonderful news for 'bad' people: God has said that He will forgive everyone who comes to Him, through Jesus Christ, repenting of their sin and asking for His forgiveness.

Following his release from prison, Billy attended Bible College and is now a Baptist Church pastor.

Rachael Denhollander

In January 2018 Larry Nassar, a USA Gymnastics doctor, was found guilty of sexually abusing girls and young women over two decades.

Rachael Denhollander, who was the first woman to publicly accuse him, presented a very powerful victim impact statement when he was in court to be sentenced. She stressed that what he had done was wicked and evil.

But she also told him that his evil and wicked acts were not beyond God's forgiveness. Here is an extract from her statement.

'In our earlier hearings you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you have spoken of praying for forgiveness. And so it is on that basis that I appeal to you. If you have read the Bible you carry, you know the definition of sacrificial love portrayed is of God Himself loving so sacrificially that He gave up everything to pay a penalty for the sin He did not commit. By His grace, I, too, choose to love this way.

'You spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about

what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse, without acting as if good deeds can erase what you have seen in this courtroom today ...

It (forgiveness) comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done ...

'The Bible you speak of carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.

And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found.

'I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me – though I extend that to you as well.'

The Debt

Unforgiveness says:

'You owe me;
'You are in my debt;
'A debt so deep
'It can never be paid –
'I will not let you pay it.'

That debt is an iron chain
Which binds the injured
to the injurer;
The victim to the
perpetrator;
The offended to the
offender;
Growing old,
Bitter,
Imprisoned together.

Forgiveness
Is the choice
to break that chain;
The courage to walk
away,
The strength to say,
Despite the injury,
And the wrong,
'You owe me nothing'.

Here is true forgiveness:

That God
Angered by my rebellion;
My disobedience,
My waywardness,
Seeing the debt I owed to
Him;
Seeing that I could not
pay;
Came in His mercy,
Nailed all that I owed
To the cross of His Son,
Paid my debt Himself,
And spoke forgiveness
over me.
I owe Him nothing.

And those cursed chains
That should have bound
me
To His anger,
Become arms of love
That hold me
To His heart.
I owe Him everything.

Barbara J Parsons, 2010



The
BIBLE
on
Forgiveness

Chapter 6

The BIBLE on Forgiveness

The Lord's Prayer on forgiveness

In the previous chapter we saw that we are cut off from God by our sin. But God longs to forgive us and that was made possible when His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, came to earth and willingly took the punishment which we all deserve. He did that by allowing Himself to be crucified.

By choosing to receive God's forgiveness, we become children of God and so enjoy a right relationship with Him.

In this chapter we consider what Jesus and the apostles taught about forgiveness. Their teaching was, and is, for the benefit of Christians. It is not intended for those who have rejected God.

We must start with the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught His disciples as a model for their own prayers. As we use this prayer we recognise our *continuing* need of God's forgiveness but, also, that God requires us to forgive those who have hurt us.

And forgive us our debts ...

When we are in Christ – as a child of God – we are counted to be righteous. It is as though we have taken on the

righteousness of Christ. But we do not become perfect. We will try to live to please God but the sinful nature has not left us and we will continue to sin.

And so there is an ongoing need to ask God to forgive us. We know that He will if we confess our sins, which we can do by using the Lord's Prayer. But our deliberate and wilful sins should be confessed specifically.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

... as we also have forgiven our debtors ...

But the Lord's Prayer itself makes it very clear that, unless we forgive others, God will not forgive us.

“This, then, is how you should pray:

“ ... And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ...”

Matthew 6:9,12

Jesus then reinforces the point to remove all possible doubt: God will only forgive us as we forgive those who need our forgiveness.

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14-15

The theologian, J I Packer, has written: 'This is not a matter of earning forgiveness by works but of qualifying for it by repentance. Repentance – change of mind – makes mercy and forbearance central to one's new lifestyle. Those who live by God's forgiveness must imitate it; one whose only hope is that God will not hold his faults against him forfeits his right to hold others' faults against them. "Do as you would be done by" is the rule here and the unforgiving Christian brands himself a hypocrite.'

And so, if we withhold forgiveness from others, God will withhold forgiveness from us. That does not mean that we cease to be His children, for our salvation is secure from the time we repent, put our trust in Jesus and accept God's free offer of forgiveness. But to refuse to forgive others is to disobey God and He will hold us to account for it.

It was the Lord's Prayer that persuaded Maureen Greaves that she had to forgive her husband's killers.

Maureen Greaves

On Christmas Eve 2012, Maureen's husband, Alan, was on his way to church to play the organ at midnight mass when he suffered an horrific attack by two strangers. He died two days later.

Maureen, a Church Army evangelist, was due to lead a service on Christmas Day which would have included the Lord's Prayer. Sitting at Alan's bedside in the hospital, words from the prayer came to her very forcefully: 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'

She concluded, 'I cannot not offer these strangers forgiveness.' Maureen explains: 'I had been forgiven myself. Jesus had paid the penalty for my sins and I had no doubt about His forgiveness. I knew His forgiveness was pure, clean and almighty – and that it meant I could go to heaven when I died.'

I cannot not offer these strangers forgiveness.

'I simply prayed, "Heavenly Father, will you please give me your grace to fully forgive whoever has done this to Alan – both now and in the future. I don't want them

weighing on my mind when I go to bed. I don't want to talk about them in any way that's ugly or derogatory. You will deal with them with your justice, mercy and love."

'The weight of my heartache and loss was too heavy for me to feel any other emotion. But after forgiving the attackers, I felt that the matter had been dealt with. I knew that I had done the right thing before God and I firmly believe it's what Alan would have wanted me to do.'

And despite being in a real state of shock over what had happened, forgiving the attackers meant that neither Maureen nor her children needed counselling. 'I don't say that with any pride – I really think it was God at work. When you forgive someone, you're setting yourself free from them.'

Maureen recalls the time she saw her husband's attackers in court. 'I felt so thankful that I had forgiven them. I didn't feel any hatred towards them by the grace of God and was able to tell their mothers that I was praying for their sons.' One was given a life sentence, with a minimum of twenty-five years, for murder and the second man was sentenced to nine years for manslaughter.

I felt so thankful that I had forgiven them.

Neville Lawrence

The murder of 18-year-old Stephen Lawrence in South East London in 1993 has been one of the highest profile racially motivated killings in UK history. It was 18 years later that two men were convicted of his murder.

In 2018, 25 years after Stephen was killed, his father, Neville, announced his decision to forgive those involved. 'As a Christian you have to forgive people. So in order to be a Christian, I decided I am going to forgive all those people who were involved in the murder of my son, Stephen. It is one of the hardest decisions I have ever made, and I think it will be the hardest decision I will ever make in my lifetime.'

Neville explains his motive for forgiving: 'It has been a very heavy load to carry and hatred is not a nice thing to have. I thought at one time that if you wanted to forgive someone they had to ask for forgiveness. That is not so. You can forgive somebody whether they want it or not.'

'If by any chance these people repent of what they have done and ask to see me, I would consider meeting them.'

It has been a very heavy load to carry and hatred is not a nice thing to have.

On God's forgiveness

King David

One of the most notable confessions of sin which the Bible records was that of King David. His adultery with Bathsheba resulted in her becoming pregnant and that led David to arrange for her husband, Uriah, one of his soldiers, to be killed in battle. (2 Samuel 11).

But David only confessed when God challenged him through one of His prophets.

David wrote two Psalms about this tragic episode in his life and they are worth reading in full.

In Psalm 51 he acknowledges his guilt and pleads for God's mercy.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 51:1-2

Then, later, in Psalm 32, David speaks of his joy at knowing that God had forgiven him but, also, of his pain before he confessed and was forgiven.

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Psalm 32:1,3-5

We also can experience joy and be released from pain when we confess our sins before God. There will be continuing regret and consequences that we cannot escape but our greatest need will be met – knowing that God has forgiven us.

When doubting God's forgiveness

It is possible to still *feel* guilty after we have repented and received God's forgiveness. But we must distinguish between truth (which we find in the Bible) and our feelings. We must not rely on our feelings, which can change according to our circumstances, but we must hold on to the truth that God's Word teaches.

C S Lewis, widely recognised as one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, wrote about our natural tendency to make excuses for our failings.

‘A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in it (*forgiveness of sins*), from thinking that God will not take us to Himself again unless He is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favour. But that is not forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.’

And that is exactly what God does when we truly repent. He sees everything we have done – perhaps repeatedly – but still forgives us and reconciles us to Himself.

He (God) sees everything we have done ... but still forgives us and reconciles us to Himself.

Satan’s strategy of lies

Christians are constantly under attack from Satan and one of his objectives is to make us feel guilty and ashamed. Jesus described him as ‘a liar and the father of lies’. (John 8:44). And Peter likened him to a roaring

lion who prowls around looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8). He wants to destroy our faith and one of his tactics is to plant lies and doubts in our minds. He excels at that.

Our best defence against Satan is the Bible. When we know the truth of God’s Word, we can recognise Satan’s lies. Here are some of them. Do you recognise them?

Satan’s lie: ‘You *must* feel guilty. It is part of your punishment.’

God’s truth: If we have truly repented, then God has done exactly what He has promised: He has forgiven us and our guilt has been dealt with. He declares us ‘not guilty’ but ‘righteous’.

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Romans 8:33–34

We must always hold on to that truth: Christ Jesus, who died so that we would no longer be condemned, is now at the right hand of God interceding – and pleading – for us.

And that truth is wonderfully expressed in this great hymn,
written to encourage us not to listen to Satan's lies.

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea,
A great High Priest, whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart;
I know that while in heav'n He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free,
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.*

*Behold Him there! the risen Lamb!
My perfect, spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
The King of glory and of grace!
One with Himself, I cannot die;
My soul is purchased by His blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Saviour and my God.*

Charitie Lees Bancroft (1841-1923)

Satan's lie: 'What you did was unforgivable.'

God's truth: Nowhere in the Bible are we told that God will forgive some sins but not others.

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just
and will forgive us our sins and purify us from
all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:9

*... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us
all our sins,*

Colossians 2:13b

Satan's lie: 'You haven't been punished enough.'

God's truth: To believe this lie is to believe that Jesus' death was not sufficient to cover our sin. And then we also believe that we have to take some of the punishment ourselves to add to what Jesus has done for us. No! This is the biggest lie of all! The truth is that Jesus has paid the price and He has paid it in full.

*... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or
repay us according to our iniquities.*

Psalms 103:10

Satan's lie: 'You don't deserve to be forgiven.'

God's truth: Actually, this is not a lie: it is true. But Satan wants us to think that God's forgiveness is only for those who deserve it. And that is *not* true. No one deserves, or can earn, God's forgiveness. We receive it by His love, kindness and mercy alone.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Guilt and Shame

As Christians, our guilt, in its deepest sense, is dealt with entirely when we are made right with God through trust in Jesus.

This is what the Bible calls justification. It is a quick and decisive event that happens at conversion. But the process of applying the truth of the gospel to our lives – what the Bible calls sanctification – is lifelong and can be quite messy.

Shame will haunt us long after we deal with our guilt. But we cannot give in to its game. We must confront both our guilt and shame with the gospel of grace.

That's why we must deal with our shame by reminding ourselves of how God has dealt with our guilt. Our guilt is objectively forgiven at the cross ... But shame will refuse to acknowledge our new identity. May we not let it have the last word.

We must counter the voice of shame with the gospel reminder that we're whole, we're new, we're loved, we're forgiven, and we're adopted. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

From *Life in the Wild* by Dan DeWitt

On forgiving others

As we have already seen, Jesus made it very clear in the Lord's Prayer that God expects us to forgive others.

One of His disciples, Peter, once questioned Jesus about how many times he ought to forgive someone who kept hurting him. Peter thought he was being very generous in suggesting seven times. Jesus said: 'Not seven times but seventy-seven times.' What Jesus really meant was that we should not place any limit on forgiving others.

Jesus proceeded to tell a parable about an ungrateful servant who refused to show mercy. You can read it in Matthew 18:21-35 but a summary is given here.

Jesus told the parable for the benefit of His followers who were expected to forgive other believers – their 'brothers' and 'sisters'. But Jesus was illustrating how seriously God views it when anyone refuses to forgive.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

A master summoned one of his servants asking for the repayment of an enormous debt – ten thousand bags of gold. Needless to say, the servant was unable to repay it and so the master ordered that the servant, his wife and children should all be sold to help repay the debt.

The servant pleaded with his master to be given time to repay. The master took pity on him and cancelled the debt entirely. But the servant then went and demanded repayment of a debt he was owed by another servant. It was for a fraction of the amount he had owed the master. The second servant also begged to be given time. But the first servant refused to show mercy and had the servant thrown into prison.

The master was furious when he heard this and had the first servant handed over to the jailers to be tortured. Jesus explained the purpose of the parable: 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

The above is a summary of the parable which you can read in Matthew 18:21-35.

The Apostle Paul on forgiving others

The Apostle Paul had reason to write about forgiveness and anger in some of his letters to the churches with whom he was in contact. Here are some of the instructions he gave about forgiving others.

'In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:26, 31-32

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.

Romans 12:17-19

In that passage in Romans, Paul makes reference to revenge – that we should leave it in God's hands. Max Lucado, the pastor and author, has written: 'Isn't some vengeance in order? Of course it is. In fact, God cares

about justice more than we do ... Unlike us, God never gives up on a person. Never. Long after we have moved on, God is still there, probing the conscience, stirring conviction, always orchestrating redemption. Fix your enemies? That's God's job.

'Forgive your enemies? Ah, that's where you and I come in. *We forgive.*'

Tim

It was a long and painful journey until, finally, I was able to forgive myself.

I had attended Sunday School for years and knew hymns from my school days. And over a period of several months in a rehab I attended church regularly. Words from the hymn, *To God be the Glory*, have always stuck in my mind: 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.'

My life fell apart when I had a row with my beautiful wife and hit her, causing awful injuries. After calling the police and an ambulance, I left the house with enough pills to kill ten people. Miraculously, I was discovered in a semi-conscious state two days later. It was not what I wanted at the time. As I relived the horror of what I had done, I wanted to die. It really did seem to be the best option: the overwhelming pain was crushing me.

As I relived the horror of what I had done, I wanted to die.

I begged God to forgive me and yet believing I could never forgive myself. I hated myself for hurting the woman I loved. As far as I was concerned, no one had done anything as bad as what I had done.

I knew the Bible taught that Jesus died upon the cross to take away our sins. But my ego wouldn't allow me to accept that He had died for *my* sins. I could not bring myself to ask God to forgive me.

And then I recalled the tale of the three frogs on the log which I had heard a few years earlier. After two of the frogs decided to jump off, how many were left? The obvious answer is one. But no. There were still three. The two didn't actually carry through with their decision. And we often behave like frogs: making decisions but not fulfilling them.

I decided I had to jump off the log. I took hold of God's promise to forgive me as I repented of my sin and as I put my trust in Jesus who had died for my sins.

I now know it is true: 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.' If God Himself has pardoned me, because of what Jesus has done, then I have no reason at all to hate myself. I have no need to 'forgive myself' for God has forgiven me. Of course, I will always regret what I did but I am free from that crushing pain of guilt.

I have no need to 'forgive myself' for God has forgiven me.



RESTORATIVE

JUSTICE

and

Forgiveness

Chapter 7

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE and Forgiveness

Restorative Justice (RJ) aims to help repair the harm caused by a crime or conflict by bringing together, through qualified facilitators, those who have been hurt and the persons responsible. Forgiveness is not its primary aim but can emerge as a result of the dialogue which takes place.

RJ provides an opportunity for the victim to explain how they have been affected by the incident and to ask questions. Many victims are desperate for answers to their questions, to help them recover from their trauma. They may then go on to forgive the offender, especially if they can see the person is genuinely remorseful.

Many victims are desperate for answers ...

Offenders also benefit. They can find it easier to move forward with their lives if they have met their victim and chosen to make an apology. And having been confronted by the damage they have caused, they will be less likely to offend again.

Will Riley and Peter Woolf

Will may have been 'just another victim' but he wanted Peter to understand the impact of his crimes.

Peter Woolf is one of the strongest advocates of RJ. It was his RJ conference with Will, whose house he had burgled, which caused him to turn from crime.

'I started taking drugs at the age of ten and before I knew it I was a heroin addict. That went hand in hand with a life of crime, as it always does. I was once described as a walking crime wave and I spent many years in and out of jail. Heroin was my best friend and my worst enemy. And when I was not in jail I was living in total squalor.

'I just thought of Will as yet another victim. Having got nicked that day it was a 'bad day at the office' for me. But several weeks later I was asked if I would meet Will for an RJ conference. I only agreed to it because it would get me out of my cell for a couple of hours.

Peter

I just thought of Will as yet another victim.

'I started to tell Will my 'poor me' story but he was not impressed.' Will explains: 'Peter came out with all the

usual lines for someone in his situation, expecting me to feel sorry for him. But I was determined that he would listen to me. I wanted him to know how I felt. I wanted him to know that, by breaking into my house, he destroyed my belief that I was able to protect my home and my family. I just poured out to him the effect it had had on me.'

Will

... I was determined that he would listen to me. I wanted him to know how I felt.

Peter began to realise for the very first time the impact of his crimes. 'Until Will shared how he felt, I had never realised the damage done and the harm caused and the number of people affected by my crimes.'

Peter

I had never realised the damage done and the harm caused and the number of people affected ...

Will realised that Peter was really moved by what he told him: 'He started talking from his heart. It was obvious that he was genuinely affected by what I had said.'

Peter agrees. 'When you hear a victim speak as Will did, you have got to be a very, very bitter and twisted human being for it not to affect you. And for some reason Will chose to forgive me. Hearing the distress I had caused Will was the start of the process of change for me.'

Peter

... you have got to be a very, very bitter and twisted human being for it (RJ) not to affect you.

The conference also had a profound impact upon Will who observed that 'in a court of law the victims are the most affected but the least involved, which makes RJ so invaluable for victims.'

... in a court of law the victims are the most affected but the least involved, which makes RJ so invaluable for victims.

A few years later, in 2008, Will Riley founded *Why Me?*, a charity campaigning and advocating for greater access to RJ for victims.

And Peter? 'I made promises to Will about making amends to the anonymous victims of the thousands of crimes I had committed. But saying sorry to nameless, faceless

people was going to be hard, if not impossible. And so I decided that I would learn to help other people – people like me.’ Peter has been doing that for the last 12 years by supporting victims and facilitating RJ conferences.

He has his own view of RJ. ‘Basically, it brings together the harmed and the harmer, the victim and the criminal, the good guy and the bad guy. Simple.

‘But the preparation that is done in order for the harmed and the harmer to come together, meet, and go through a well prepared, respectful face to face meeting, is anything but simple.

... it brings together the harmed and the harmer ... the good guy and the bad guy.

‘In my view it is “the coming together of minds” ... metaphorically, the harmed says to the harmer “pleased you are here, I am going to spend time sharing with you the pain you gave me.” Powerful.’

... the harmed says to the harmer “.. I am going to spend time sharing with you the pain you gave me.”

Paul

A family’s terrifying ordeal and, finally, a handshake.

In 2014 Paul suffered a quite brutal attack by four men who broke into his home. He was left with a fractured eye socket, a fractured jaw bone, a broken nose and severe bruising. His wife, Samantha, felt threatened and one of his daughters, Eloise, barricaded herself in an upstairs room to call the police.

A few months later, Paul spoke publicly of his wish to speak with his attackers. *Why Me?* offered to explore the possibility of an RJ conference with one or more of the men. A conference finally took place in November 2015, when Paul, his wife and daughter were able to meet one of the men in prison.

Paul stressed to him how terrifying the ordeal had been for them. ‘What he said about the attack did not minimise his role. He was self-effacing.

‘We pushed him hard on how he is going to change. He said he was studying English and maths and was a qualified chef. He talked about his past and his life. The point I made is that lots of people have a bad life but do not end up doing this. He realised that was not an excuse.”

'At the end of the meeting I took the decision to shake his hand, so did Sam and Eloise. It was not pre-planned, it just felt like the right thing to do. The act of forgiving someone is incredibly powerful. But you can't do that unless you believe the apology. It gives you a sense of enormous empowerment. I felt sure that he was remorseful from the outset.'

The act of forgiving someone is incredibly powerful. But you can't do that unless you believe the apology. It gives you a sense of enormous empowerment.

Laura

Her abuser's statement of responsibility (without any excuses) helped with her problem with anger.

As a child, Laura was groomed and abused over several years by her former stepfather. As a result, Laura suffered mental health problems, including eating disorders and severe depression.

In 2015, at the age of 30, Laura met with her abuser through an RJ process. She was able to ask the many questions she had.

'I asked him why he abused me. He said he picked me because I was the youngest sibling and therefore the easiest to manipulate.

'I also asked him if he understood that my anorexia was caused by what he'd done to me. He told me he'd deliberately blanked it out so he didn't have to admit to himself that it was his fault.

'I wanted an apology, and I got one. An apology can be one word, but it's a massive thing. He was not expecting me to offer forgiveness so I don't think he was ready to accept it and he got very emotional and had to leave the room.

'I'm not as angry any more – that's lifted. And hearing him say that it was all his fault was massive. I didn't believe that until I heard it from him, and no one else would have been able to convince me.

'I now see myself as a survivor of abuse rather than a victim.'

I wanted an apology ... it's a massive thing ... And hearing him say that it was all his fault was massive.

Ray and Vi Donovan

Since losing their son to a violent crime, Ray and Vi Donovan have committed their lives to promoting RJ and forgiveness.

In 2001, their lives were devastated by the murder of their son, Christopher, who was attacked by a group of youths late at night.

In 2005, they agreed to visit a local women's prison to speak of their experience as part of a victim awareness and RJ programme.

Their visit had a remarkable impact upon the women, especially their decision to forgive the three young men convicted of Christopher's murder. The idea of forgiving did not come easily: it was a battle for Vi especially. But within months they had made that decision to forgive.

Ray and Vi have since told their story in prisons and young offender establishments throughout the UK (and also in schools), promoting the concept of forgiveness and encouraging men, women and young people to turn from crime.

Following that first prison visit, they also decided that they wanted Christopher's killers to be assured personally that they had been forgiven. In 2011, they were able to meet with one of them, Stephen.

Stephen's perspective

'At first I found it too difficult to accept what I had done and I fought against the sentence I received. When I was first approached about meeting Ray and Vi, I was too scared.

'As time went by, I began to realise that I had to face up to the death of Christopher and take responsibility for the person I was. Only then would I be able to move on with my life and have a positive future. So, I started to approach courses with a greater motivation. I wanted to make changes. The more I took responsibility the better I felt inside.'

The more I took responsibility the better I felt inside.

Stephen began to feel that it was the least he could do to agree to meet with the Donovans.

'During the preparation meetings we exchanged messages. I knew some of the questions they had and I told them that they should feel free to ask anything. They also explained that they felt no anger towards me which really helped.'

Finally, the meeting happened. 'It was amazing. Of course, it was so emotional. It exceeded my expectations in so

many ways. Some of the questions were very difficult but I knew they would be and I understood, and respected, why answers were needed.

'It was far more powerful than any victim awareness course. It gave me the opportunity to apologise personally, to explain the background to my own experiences and what I had done since.

'Hearing that they had forgiven me meant everything. Hearing them give me permission to have the best life that I can made me feel like a human again, a good person with a clear focus and a positive future. I owe that to Christopher. I was lost with no direction or purpose. That is no longer the case.'

Hearing that they had forgiven me meant everything.

John

Usually it is the victim who requests a RJ conference but John's probation officer suggested it would be good for him and he agreed to it.

'By the time I was 14 I had various juvenile convictions. But it was joining a Hell's Angel motorcycle gang that led me into more serious crime. For once I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging. It seemed to me that this way – the violence, theft and robbery – was the path to follow.'

John escaped from prison twice while serving an eight-year sentence for armed robbery. 'I became even more violent. I disrespected everyone around me, especially the prison authorities, and reached the lowest point in my life. But eventually I found myself at the therapeutic prison, Grendon Underwood.'

He responded very positively to that regime and eventually was given the opportunity of having his sentence reduced. About that time, on the suggestion of his probation officer, John agreed to explore the possibility of an RJ conference. RJ was almost completely unheard of back then in 1988.

One of his most seriously injured victims was an 18-year-old girl who was scarred for life during a pub brawl which he had started. That was six years earlier. She was traced and agreed to meet John, with her parents.

'When I walked into the room I noticed she had a six inch scar on the side of her face. I could see she was full of rage. It was highly traumatic. Her father was clenching his fists, her mother looked distraught. I was the first to speak. It was the first time I felt in person the reality of the hurt that I'd caused, not only to her but to her family too.'

It was the first time I felt ... the reality of the hurt that I'd caused ...

John then listened to his victim's account of that evening and how it had affected her ever since. 'Towards the end of the meeting we all broke down and cried. Finally I told her how remorseful I felt and then, after a brief pause, she said "I forgive you". I hadn't asked for this and certainly didn't expect it but those words had a profound effect on me. They gave me the resolve not to steal and certainly not to commit violence against another person ever again.'

... those words ('I forgive you') ... gave me the resolve ... not to commit violence against another person ever again.

'As for my victim, the meeting allowed her to put a face to her fear and hopefully reassured her that it would never happen again. As for me, I have never returned to a life of crime. I feel the whole RJ process and meeting my victim changed me forever.'

Jo Nodding

In 2010, at the suggestion of her Victim Liaison Officer, Jo met with Darren, a boy she knew who had raped her more than five years earlier.

'I wanted to meet Darren because this was about me taking control of the situation, re-balancing what he had taken away from me that day. The judge had said to him in Court "you have destroyed this woman's life" – but that wasn't what I wanted, and that wasn't how I saw it.

'When I walked into the room our eyes met straight away. I started by thanking him for agreeing to meet me as I knew it must have been a difficult thing to do. I asked why he had agreed to meet me and he said "I did something really bad and now I can do something good."

'Then I went straight into telling him what it had been like for me on the day of the rape, how scared I had been and that I thought he was going to kill me. I went through

every detail of the attack from start to finish. As I told him the impact it had and the terror and confusion I felt, he actually cried. And I could see it was genuine.

'I could see for myself he found it really hard, but he listened to everything I had to say, and didn't try to make any excuses. He heard it from me that day, not from someone else saying how I might feel. I think if they hear it from the victim themselves they get a much better understanding.

'I hadn't expected him to apologise, but towards the end he said "I'm sorry, and that's a proper sorry" – and I could see for myself he really meant it.

'At the end I gave him what I've later come to think of as 'a gift'. I said to him "What I am about to say to you a lot of people would find hard to understand, but I forgive you for what you did to me and I want you to go on and have a successful life. If you haven't already forgiven yourself, then I hope in the future you will." This had a massive impact on Darren – I could see he was shaken by the parting 'gift' I had given him.

... I gave him ... 'a gift'. I said to him ... "If you haven't already forgiven yourself, then I hope in the future you will."

'I didn't excuse what he did, or minimise it, but I wanted to be free of that burden of grievance, and as importantly for me, I hoped Darren could learn, move on, and forgive himself.

'Meeting him gave me closure, because I had said everything I had wanted to say and I had taken back some kind of control over my life. I'm not a victim any more, I'm a survivor.'

I didn't excuse what he did, or minimise it, but I wanted to be free of that burden of grievance ... Meeting him gave me closure ...

Tracey and Simon

The RJ conference which triggered a change in a burglar's life.

Tracey and Simon took part in an RJ conference, after Simon had burgled Tracey's house while she was out.

Tracey explains the impact of the burglary upon her and her daughter and how the RJ conference helped them. 'Knowing that someone had been in my house made it feel dirty. He'd been through my belongings. The impact on my daughter was bad; afterwards, she woke up in the night, worried about him coming back.

'At the meeting Simon came in and apologised and I asked my questions. He offered to pay back the cost of the things he took.

'He wrote my daughter a letter saying he was not coming back. That helped her. She used to wake up and after she got the letter, she got over it.

'As regards RJ, I would say definitely go for it. You can ask the offender what you want until you get answers. You can tell if they are genuinely sorry or just saying it. It changed my opinion of him.'

You can ask ... what you want until you get answers. ... It changed my opinion of him.

Simon explains what he gained from the conference. 'I needed something to trigger a change in my life and it was the RJ conference for me. At the meeting I couldn't look at Tracey but got asked to look at her when I told her what happened. That was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I tried to explain everything to her. I asked if I could pay back for the damage.'

'Tracey asked me to write a letter to her daughter – from the 'bad man'. That had a big impact on me to be called 'bad man'. It took me two or three weeks to write. I found

that really hard because I had always thought of myself as a loveable rogue but I realised I was not – I was a bad man!

That had a big impact on me to be called 'bad man'.

'The fact that a little girl was traumatised was even worse. That made me think of my partner's little girl. That really got to me.

'The more things you do wrong the more you suppress your conscience. Restorative Justice has given me back my conscience. Now I can't do anything without thinking of what it will do to someone else.'

Restorative Justice has given me back my conscience.

James Seymour and Leroy Smith

In 2018 James Seymour shook hands with the man who, 24 years earlier, held a gun in that hand and shot James.

The early years of James and Leroy could not have been more different. It is true that both rebelled but in vastly different ways. James rebelled against the extreme religious beliefs of his parents.

In contrast, Leroy's mother was murdered when he was two and his rebellion against society and the law proved disastrous. By the age of 13, he had all but given up on school. He was thieving, stealing cars and smoking weed – and, inevitably, spending time in prison.

Their paths would never have crossed had James not opted for a career with the Met Police. When they did meet, it was a life changing encounter for them both.

James recalls: 'In 1994, with ten years' service behind me, I was now stationed at Brixton. Married with two young daughters, I took as much overtime as I could cope with. On 9th March, my colleague, Simon, and I were anticipating another routine arrest for the possession of drugs, which would result in a quick caution in custody.

'A motorbike had gone through a red light. The bike was now on the pavement and Leroy and his mate were a

short distance away, still wearing their helmets. Simon and I were a little uneasy as we observed their body language: we feared a confrontation. We were right: the situation quickly became very tense.

'As I went up to Leroy's mate, he dropped something which I believed to be crack cocaine. Simon was struggling with Leroy and both fell to the ground. I spotted the gun but could do nothing to prevent Leroy shooting Simon. He was hit in the leg. Adrenalin pounded through my body but as I looked for cover I was also shot. It was like a red hot needle through my flesh passing over the top of my kidney and ripping an exit wound in my side.

'I attempted to stop the flow of blood and to assure myself, "I'm not dying here". I was desperate for help but my bigger concern was that other officers might arrive and put themselves at risk of also getting shot.'

Leroy was equally desperate – to escape. He fled to Holland and then to the US where he was arrested two months later. In February 1995 he was found guilty of attempted murder and of grievous bodily harm and was given a 25-year sentence. Although James did not detect any sign of remorse, he was satisfied that justice had been done.

Nineteen years later, Leroy was released from prison. He had decided to commit his life to engaging with black

youngsters, in order to divert them away from the path he had taken. At about the same time, he published *Out Of The Box*, in which he describes his experience of prison and what led him into a life of crime. James decided to make contact with Leroy and eventually they met.

James reflects on that decision: 'I thought that if he actually wants to make a difference to people's lives, I wanted him to know that I supported what he was doing. I always wanted him to change.'

Leroy admits he was only thinking about himself. 'When you live like I was, you are not thinking about other people, only yourself. What happened was a split second thing. And, of course, I realised immediately that the mess I was already in rocketed way beyond what I ever imagined. And I just fled.

'The man forgave me. I shot him point-blank – a policeman. I am a gun man and he is a law man. Now I can class him as a friend. I could never forgive anyone who did anything like that to me.'

The man forgave me. I shot him point-blank – a policeman ... Now I can class him as a friend.

James admits he was bitter towards Leroy. 'He didn't have to shoot us; he could have just fired a warning shot. But I never hated him.

'Forgiveness wasn't easy and took time. It's made me feel so good inside. I feel peace and my head is as pure as spring water. And I know his life has changed dramatically after our bonding. Our journey together is powerful and just beginning. Meeting with him removed the remaining ill-feeling about that night back in 1994.

'As Gandhi once said, "Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong" and that describes how I feel now – strong.'

Forgiveness wasn't easy and took time. It's made me feel so good inside.



STORIES
of
Forgiveness

Chapter 8

STORIES of Forgiveness

Katy Morgan-Davies

Katy Morgan-Davies was kept as a 'slave' for 30 years by her Maoist father who beat and psychologically abused her and his other followers. He brainwashed them into thinking he was God-like.

Katy was banned from going to school or mixing with other children; her life was restricted to the walls of the South London commune. She and the small band of female acolytes were manipulated and terrorised into following her father's every command. They spent their days being 'taught' about her father's central role in the world and singing songs eulogising him.

Katy recalls life in the cult: 'My earliest memory was that he was God, he was immortal, he knew everything and anybody who went against him would die. It was horrible, so dehumanising and degrading. I felt like a caged bird with clipped wings. I've been a non-person all my life and now is my chance to be myself.'

I felt like a caged bird with clipped wings.

'I used to think that the best way would be to die. That would be the only way to get out of his control, because

he can read your mind and everything – where can you escape from him? And the only way is to die. So that is when I used to feel suicidal.'

Katy first plucked up the courage to flee the commune in 2005 but the police persuaded her to return home. And then the violence escalated.

But eight years later, in 2013, she managed to escape for good and found support.

'He took my freedom from me and deprived me of family, a childhood, friends, love, affection and a sense of belonging. But I forgive him for what happened. Nelson Mandela said that leaving prison with anger, hatred and bitterness was like still being in prison.'

Katy hopes that one day, when he has faced up to his crimes, they can talk. She said: 'I don't wish for him to suffer but, yes, I want him to recognise what he did was wrong. I would like to reconcile with him in the future, if that is possible. But I can't make him do that if that's not what he wants to do, but the door is always open.'

I don't wish for him to suffer but, yes, I want him to recognise what he did was wrong. I would like to reconcile with him ...

Peter Cawthorn

One evening in July 2000 there was an armed robbery on Peter Cawthorn's ice-cream parlour in Johannesburg.

Peter explains: 'One of the men held a gun to my stomach while the 20 or so customers and the staff were ordered to lie on the floor, emptying the pockets of all their valuables. Two of my waitresses were shot dead, another was raped and I was hit with the butt of a revolver. We were then locked in a storeroom.

'We managed to break out of the storeroom after about an hour but it then took the police two hours to respond to our call. I was full of anger and bitterness, not only towards the robbers but also the police.

'I was eventually forced to close the parlour because I lost my customers who were scared that it might be attacked again. Apart from the personal trauma, I also felt a responsibility for the customers and staff (now without jobs) who had been traumatised. Over the coming months my bitterness became a longing for revenge.'

'Thankfully, with the help of counselling that desire for revenge and the bitterness began to fade and the need to forgive emerged. I realised that nothing keeps you trapped in the past more than an unwillingness to forgive.

'For me, forgiveness does not mean forgetting, but rather, that you agree to live with the consequences of the other person's action.'

... forgiveness does not mean forgetting, but ... that you agree to live with the consequences of the other person's action.

Mick and Lyn Connolly

In Liverpool in August 2002, Paul Connolly, aged 28 and shortly to be engaged, died after being stabbed with a 23cm kitchen knife by a complete stranger who had been bingeing on drinks and drugs.

Paul's parents, Mick and Lyn, suddenly found themselves needing to plan a funeral instead of thinking about a wedding. But, remarkably, within hours of Paul's murder, they announced at a police press conference that they had forgiven the killers.

'I didn't know how I was going to get through the next ten minutes without Paul, let alone the rest of my life,' Lyn says. 'I was totally taken up with grief and a crushing sense of loss. I didn't have the energy for anger. In the days that followed, I would wake up and the reality of Paul's death would hit me. I cried a river every day.' But her dedication to forgiveness never wavered.

Mick and Lyn sat through the last three days of the murder trial. Neither of the two men made eye contact with them, but at one point one winked at his own family. 'It was just as if he was rubbing salt in the wounds. Not only was there no remorse, there was no thought for us or for what he'd done,' says Lyn. 'It is an incredibly difficult thing, but I believe bitterness only harms you. It doesn't touch the people who have hurt you.'

... I believe bitterness only harms you. It doesn't touch the people who have hurt you.

Neither of the men has ever shown publicly any remorse for Paul's death and they have never agreed to the Connollys' request to meet them but that hasn't stopped Lyn thinking about what she would say to them if they met. 'I would ask what they were thinking that night and what made them do it. I want them to hear the words "I forgive you" and I would like them to hear me say that.

'I would also like to tell them about Paul and how his death has affected us, not to add to their guilt, but just so they can understand what they've done.'

Mick and Lyn now regularly participate in a victim awareness course run in prisons by Prison Fellowship. They speak of their family's experience and of how they

have been able to forgive their son's killers. They have taken huge comfort from knowing that sharing their experience has helped many men and women realise for the first time the impact of their crimes on the victims.

Diane Nichols

A real-life nightmare began for Diane Nichols when John, her husband of 13 years, killed the young woman with whom he was having an affair.

She was filled with hatred, wanting to destroy him the way he had destroyed her and their two girls. She became suicidal. Over time those thoughts subsided but her hatred of her ex-husband did not.

Diane explains: 'But the urge to just slip off into eternal sleep was gradually being replaced by a vow to myself not to let John crush me. I hated him too much to let him win. My rage was so much more comfortable than wallowing in hopelessness and seeing my life as nothing without him in it.'

I hated him too much to let him win. My rage was so much more comfortable than wallowing in hopelessness ...

Worse was to come for Diane, who had remarried. John had become a Christian in prison and he was a changed man. He now felt compelled to confess to Diane that he had been unfaithful throughout the whole of their marriage – through brief affairs and one-night stands – something which he had previously denied.

Diane was devastated and thoughts of taking her own life returned. One night she decided that she really did want to die and asked God to forgive her for what she was going to do. 'Amazingly, the next thing I remember is waking to my bedroom bathed in sunshine. I had somehow managed to sleep soundly despite all that weighed on my mind ... My spirit was light instead of burdened ...

'I sat up, puzzled as to what was causing such a lovely reprieve from all of the anguish I felt. Then, I heard it. The voice. The words ... crystal clear as if someone were in the room with me. "Suicide isn't the way to free yourself from your pain ... forgive John and you will find your peace ... forgive him ... trust in me ... I will show you how."

"Suicide isn't the way to free yourself from your pain ... forgive ... and you will find your peace ..."

'It startled me. I wasn't sure what I had just heard or where it came from, but I knew it was the absolute truth. This wonderful lightness in my heart, the joyous feeling in my soul was what I would be able to hang onto if I forgave John for all he had done ... By some miracle, I was being shown a preview. And I liked it. I loved it. I felt reborn.'

... the joyous feeling in my soul was what I would be able to hang onto if I forgave John ...

This experience began Diane's amazing journey of forgiving John, although the old feelings of hatred and anger still emerged from time to time. Alongside that, she explored and found the same faith in God which John had discovered.

But God had greater plans for Diane. He restored to her the love which she once had for John. She realised that her remarriage had been a mistake. She got divorced and became John's wife again in a ceremony in the prison. God had performed a miracle of forgiveness and reconciliation. But, more than that, both were now experiencing God's love too.

David

Despite a good upbringing in a loving family, David had become an alcoholic by the age of 15, as a result of the influence of older kids on his estate.

'Almost inevitably, crime and drugs also became a part of my life and I was only 16 when I got the first of many custodial sentences.

'My last sentence – three years for serious assault – was in 2007. During that sentence I started attending chapel, mainly to get away from my cell mate for an hour! On one occasion I was given a copy of a book, *Once An Addict* by Barry Woodward. It changed my life. Barry's life had been so like mine.

'When I finished the book I surrendered my life to God. I was not immediately set free from my addictions but I was set free from all my guilt. I was forgiven because I had asked Jesus to forgive all the rotten things of which I was now so ashamed.

'Knowing God had forgiven me gave me a wonderful sense of peace. I also wanted to apologise to the man I had assaulted. I had no idea how I might find him but I prayed that God would open up the way. Amazingly it did. Three years after my release from prison I spotted him at a football match.'

Knowing God had forgiven me gave me a wonderful sense of peace.

'I approached him and was able to express my remorse and explain how my old life was behind me. I asked him to forgive me and he did. It was just great to know that my victim had also forgiven me. It was such a remarkable answer to prayer. God is amazing.'

It was just great to know that my victim had also forgiven me.



A FINAL
STORY
of

Forgiveness

Chapter 9

A FINAL STORY of Forgiveness

The most remarkable of all the inspiring stories of forgiveness which I have read over the past months is the one with which I wish to close the book. In just a few pages, it encapsulates so much of what I have taken far too many pages to cover. Be inspired by the story of this absolutely remarkable lady. When she received God's forgiveness, Kim Phuc Phan Thi knew that she had a lot of forgiving to do herself. And she knew also that it would never happen without God's help.

Kim Phuc Phan Thi

Kim Phuc is the woman who, as a nine-year-old girl, was photographed in 1972 fleeing naked and in flames along Route 1 near Trang Bang during the Vietnam War.

Kim suffered horrific napalm burns that day from the bombs. She was left scarred physically and mentally. She endured years of painful treatment, including sixteen surgeries. She was consumed with hatred for the people who had made her suffer.

But when Kim turned her back on her Cao Đài beliefs and became a Christian in December 1982, she had to address that hatred which had become such a part of her life.

She had spent several months studying the Scriptures and had become convinced of their truth: that the God of whom the Scriptures spoke was the true Creator God and that He really had done all that He had claimed to have done. Most crucially, she believed that He had sent His Son, Jesus, to die for her sins.

At a church service on Christmas Eve, the pastor invited people to commit their lives to Jesus to find joy and peace. Kim recalls her response. 'I nearly jumped out of my seat then and there. How ready I was for love and joy. I have so much hatred in my heart, I thought. This burden of bitterness is too heavy to bear. I wanted forgiveness for my transgressions. I wanted to let go of all my pain. I wanted this Jesus.'

I nearly jumped out of my seat ... How ready I was for love and joy ... I wanted forgiveness ... to let go of all my pain ... I wanted this Jesus.

Kim woke up on Christmas morning to experience her first ever heartfelt celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. She was finally at peace.

But she was then faced with God's command to forgive others as He had forgiven her. She could not imagine

ever being able to love her 'enemies', as Jesus had taught His disciples. Kim counted as her enemies all who had any responsibility for her dreadful injuries: there were so many.

Kim began to draw up a list. It started with all those involved in the war: those who drew up the plans, the commanders, the pilots who dropped the napalm bombs and the communist officials who had used her for propaganda since her recovery.

Kim could not reconcile her longing for justice with the Bible's teaching on forgiveness. She could not see how justice could be served if she herself did not fight for it. Kim believed her enemies had to pay. 'If a person hits you one time or twice, perhaps forgiveness may be extended to him. But to suffer blow after blow, day after day, abuse after devastating abuse? That person must not be forgiven. I was surer than sure about that.'

That was what Kim wanted to believe but she came across other Scriptures which reinforced what she had read previously: God's way was forgiveness, kindness and mercy. She was reminded, too, that vengeance was God's responsibility, not hers.

Kim continued to battle with this. 'I understood what God was asking but I had many answers for God. "Father, yes, but you do not understand how severe is my pain!

And, yes, I know you say to forgive, but the terror, the destruction, the abuse, the scars! And, yes, I know that vengeance is to be yours, but all these years that have been taken from me! Is there not justice for me to be paid?"'

But Kim knew the decision she had to face. 'I had to decide whether I would travel the road paved with life and peace and joy, or the one marked by suffering and bitterness and rage. Would I hand over my life to the lordship of Jesus or not?'

I had to decide ... the road paved with life and peace and joy, or the one marked by suffering and bitterness and rage.

As Kim reflected upon what it cost God to forgive her – through the death of Jesus on the cross – she realised that there was really only one choice. As difficult as it would be, she knew that she had to be obedient to God and forgive all her enemies.

Her decision was severely tested in 1996 when, as an ambassador for peace, she was invited to speak at the annual Veterans Day in Washington DC, at which she shared her passion for peace. There, Captain John Plummer, a US Vietnam veteran and now a pastor,

approached her. He identified himself as the person who had coordinated the dropping of the bombs that day in June 1972. He expressed deep regret before asking whether Kim could forgive him. She reached for his hands. 'I looked deep into his eyes and I said, "It is okay. I forgive. I forgive!"'

Kim was thankful for that opportunity to forgive but that was just one person. She wondered how she could possibly forgive the others – all unknown – on her list. She begged God for wisdom and then began to realise that, instead of muttering curses toward those who had wronged her, she had actually started praying for them.

She prayed for everyone on her list, including individuals who had offended her or marginalised her because of her scars or neglected to help her or failed to treat her as a human being with feelings. And her prayers were answered.

Kim reflected: 'Wow, my heart must surely be changing, for I now felt nothing but love for the very people I wanted to murder ... I no longer looked for revenge. My enemy list had become my prayer list.'

... I now felt nothing but love for the very people I wanted to murder.

But Kim was not entirely free from a tendency to bitterness. 'Sometimes in a moment of weakness I would befriend my bitterness again and like a river raging over a broken dam, my cup would refill with wretchedness and rage. I would sense that level of blackest sludge rising in my soul and think, *Why did I do that again?*

'Eventually, as I got better and better at making wise emotional choices, I noticed that the darkness remained receded and that I was being filled up with something good. It was peace. It was light. It was understanding, compassion and love. And all of it was from the Lord: He was refilling me with clear, perfectly pure water.'

Kim has undertaken many speaking engagements across the world. On a visit to Turkey in December 2016, with Turkey having accepted so many Syrian refugees, it was no surprise that the Syrian war was the main topic of her media interviews. During her final interview she was asked to state her position on the tragic matter of war.

Knowing that her response would be broadcast to tens of millions of people across the region, Kim paused for a few seconds to ask God to give her the right words. She then responded: 'My 'position' on this, and all matters, is forgiveness. My 'position', if you will, is love. My faith in Jesus Christ is what enabled me to forgive those who wronged me – and as you know, the wrongs were severe.'

'My faith in Jesus Christ is what enabled me to pray for my enemies rather than curse them. And my faith in Jesus Christ is what enabled me to love them. I do not just tolerate them, nor am I merely civil toward them. No, I love them. It is this love, alone, that ends wars.'

My faith in Jesus Christ is what enabled me to forgive ... and ... love (my enemies) ... It is this love, alone, that ends wars.

Final Comment

Kim Phuc Phan Thi is right. There is amazing power, beyond what we can imagine, in the love which comes from God. It can bring to an end all conflicts and wars. And, more than that, it enables us to forgive and so bring to an end the hatred and bitterness that we hold against each other.

To forgive is very costly but the freedom it brings is priceless. And Jesus paid the ultimate price – His life – to purchase God's forgiveness, which is offered to us all. We can accept it – and be free from all our guilt and ready for heaven – or we can reject it and hold on to our guilt and face the consequence: God's wrath poured out upon us. I trust that you will accept the offer of God's forgiveness.

If you do not feel ready to take that step – a truly life-changing step – we will be happy to help you with any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact us.

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making sense of FORGIVENESS

We all have to face the issue of forgiveness at some point, whether to forgive someone, or we need someone to forgive us or whether we are struggling to forgive ourselves because of the guilt and shame that we are carrying.

making sense of FORGIVENESS explains what it really means to forgive and aims to help those who are finding it tough, as most of us do.

It also explains our greatest need which is to know God's forgiveness. We must ask God to forgive us if we want to be at peace with Him and enjoy the relationship with Him for which He created us.

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