

A photograph of a winding road through a forest with autumn foliage. The road is paved and curves to the left, with a white curb. The ground is covered in fallen leaves. The trees are dense and have vibrant autumn colors, including yellows, oranges, and reds. The sky is visible through the trees, appearing overcast.

I Forgive You:
A Personal Journey into Forgiveness

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I Forgive You: A Personal Journey into
Forgiveness

by John King

“For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive* my iniquity, though it
is great.” Ps 25:11

*The Hebrew occurs 46 times in 45 verses. וְסַלַחְתָּ לְעוֹנֵי

Dedicated to

All those whose lives collided with mine. I ask for your forgiveness.

Cover: A Photo of the back woods somewhere in Western New York taken by Al Knobloch, a dear friend.

A picture filled with the symbolism of forgiveness: a less traveled path winding its way peacefully through past memories that must die yet are alive with the promise of a new season of hope.

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®
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CHAPTER ONE
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CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

Forgiveness should be an easy thing to do when we realize this. We should never fault someone for something we are not sure of. And if God *is* sure of it, He has already forgiven them. So, there it is. This booklet should be complete on that note, but it isn't because we may still have lingering hurts. Jesus' prayer: "*Father, forgive them...*"¹—well, we may not 'feel' it! At least, not yet. I am not so sure I can say this prayer and mean it unconditionally.

I am empowered thru Calvary, thru His forgiveness, to live above the personal horror of past wars by forgiving others in turn. Yet, how can *I* be sure I am living that provision? How can I know I have left the past in the past?

Forgiveness is not a fruit of the Spirit and for good reason. Forgiveness should be one characteristic among others that defines our *humanity*— not our faith. Forgiveness is not limited to believers. In fact, forgiveness is perfectly human. But here's the rub. Because it is not widely promoted in a spiritual sense—it is hard to define. Modern psychology as a general practice, does not even reference its healing quality in therapy. Counseling today encourages the use of support groups instead to help us move on and away from those who were major players in an abusive past.

I am equally surprised by the number of believers whose hurt seems to be rooted too deeply in the psyche, too tangled up in their memories, to prescribe forgiveness alone as a realistic therapy. In an effort to give forgiveness a role in helping us reconcile with a bitter past, the term needed to be rescued, according to Dr. Dincalci, from

what he calls 'myths.' Dr. Dincalci in *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* in his third chapter identifies an even dozen of these.²

No longer needed for forgiveness to work are such activities as: reconciliation, restored fellowship, acceptance, and love. Because some of the people in our past are no longer available—they have since died or moved to places unknown—we need to recognize an inner peace without them. I need to see forgiveness as a reconciliation with and within myself. I need to know that, whatever forgiveness is, I have forgiven them in absentia.

As true as this is, what about the person who is still here? What about the family member, co-worker, school yard bully, irritating neighbor, or someone who still attends the church we attend—you get the point—who won't go away, but we wish they would? Some believers find it seemingly impossible to use forgiveness as a means to a peaceful acceptance of these persons still on the peripheral of their lives. And, sadly, that attitude deletes from the Holy Text the few scriptures with any relevance on this subject:

"Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake." 2 Corinthians 2:10

"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, you're heavenly Father will also forgive you." Matthew 6:14

Forgiveness is a self-healing principle, to be sure. And, to be equally fair on the subject, some people who have offended us want to go on offending us. Some don't think they have. Others, the majority, perhaps, of the non-penitent offender, have a reason for not caring if we forgive them or not. They may rationalize that they did God a favor or we had a hard lesson to learn or they are simply not emotionally into this forgiveness thing. Maybe *we* offended *them* and they are not ready to talk truce.

Do they need to know I have been offended but that offense is now history and I have forgiven them? Do they need to know that I no longer live repulsed by the sight of them but, to the contrary, I am reconciled with the past and want only for God's blessing on their lives! As a christian, I need to consider the message I have left on others who do not know I have forgiven them because I decided to use

forgiveness only as a way of putting *me* at peace. Do I care if I leave them with the impression I am still furious with them, out to get even with them?

If my forgiveness only benefits me, if the primary purpose of forgiveness is reconciling me with the past but not the living people of that past, does it not fall short of that purpose? How can an attitude that doesn't care about their peace claim to care about mine? How can we see their pain as independent of our own? How can we claim to forgive if the people we claim to forgive want to reconcile with us but we do not know that or we refuse to be reconciled!? Isn't reconciliation sometimes a vital part of the formula for inner peace?

And then there's this whole thing about debt. Jesus told the story that there was one who owed a fortune who was forgiven his debt but who in turn sued a former friend for owing him some pittance.³

In principle, all believers probably violate this truth when we are grateful for someone forgiving us or overlooking something regrettable or punishable we did but we don't share the same generosity of spirit when we are recipients of the offense. I do this all the time in traffic. I am glad when they let me into the flow of rush hour traffic but annoyed when they cut in front of me!

But worse, far worse, is how grateful we are of God's forgiving grace while we hold on tight to feelings of ill will to persons whose offense against us—in the scope of things and by comparison—was minor.

Perhaps, we attach too much feeling to forgiveness. We think we cannot forgive because we still hurt, or are still enraged, or because of what they did or said about someone we care about. (Forgiving an offense against us, personally, would be a lot easier.)

It seems ironic that forgiveness has to support some rational, some sound heartfelt reason that can out-argue another feeling. I get it. Corrie ten Boom is on to something here:

“Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.” — Corrie ten Boom

Some nonbelievers call Jesus' words from the cross mere rhetoric or at best words that could have been spoken as effectively pool side from a lounge chair. Why ever did someone, an innocent at that, have to suffer such violence to forgive us?

In my theology,—which you should check on with your pastor because I am often uncommon in my view—Jesus didn't need to die on Calvary to forgive us. He voiced His forgiveness to validate the completeness, the finality, and the total accomplishment of the work He set out to accomplish through His incarnation. He died to reconcile us to God, to make our peace with God available, to provide for a new beginning, a newness of life that would make God's love for us real again. This is where the pronouncement, the forgiveness comes in. He intended to show it. God already forgave us; that should be as evident in the Christmas story, His birth, as in His death.

Jesus didn't need to forgive us as much as we needed to be forgiven by Him as God.

Munch on that statement a moment. He didn't need to forgive us for His own peace but for ours. His forgiveness was for *our* sakes. It was a declaration of the solution to the sin question that went unanswered since Adam. How can we not share in this good news by being totally forgiving of others who have offended us!?

Stephen forgiving the jury that condemned his innocence might be the best testimonial to the power of this wonderful act of divine love. Stephen at his martyrdom had a perspective that transcended the obvious. He was not leaving this life as much as he was going home to be with His Lord. He refused to accept any feeling that would subtract from the absolute joy of meeting his Savior.⁴

We may not be able to insert ourselves into this narrative, were we called on to pay such a sacrifice for our faith. (So we might think.) Undeniably, forgiveness has an emotional component; so, a simple injunction to forgive for some may be just words. Theology has little to do with the heart that has been torn. Forgiveness is more than an academic worldview or a well defined greek word.

Forgiveness has to be an integral aspect of our walk of faith. We need to discover an ultimate truth that Stephen bore witness to: our peace, our ability to resign to what we cannot change and accept what life imposes upon us, the gentle soother of all that is unimaginable, is the heartbeat of a forgiving spirit.

Finding the needle of forgiveness in a haystack of personal pain might be easier said than done, though. How meaningful it is to have the testimonial of a Stephen who discovered a way to reconcile with

the irreconcilable, to stretch christian love to the breaking point and find surprisingly that it does not break.

How inspiring it would be to read the biographical sketches of all the Stephens who have discovered how to forgive. But that's not the purpose in writing this booklet. Neither is this short work intended to be a Bible lesson on forgiveness. Nor is it intended as some well thought out way of scolding someone already scolded by the very hurt they carry. This is simply an introspective glance at some of the dynamics involved in the true act of forgiveness and why it seems to be so hard to do for most believers, even though we consent to the need for it.

This is the story of my personal journey into this aspect of my christian faith that is the keystone of that entrance way into all my relationships as a believer. Church is just church without forgiveness. Fellowship becomes merely a social gathering without it—a plate of cookies when the real dessert is to be able to enjoy the sweetness of communion with someone I have forgiven and who forgave me.

This is a record raw with feelings—I must admit—that are hard to disclose because forgiveness doesn't want to disclose them.

“it keeps no record of wrongs” — I Corinthians 13:5

My whole idea behind this booklet is a peaceful meandering through my past, reading, as I go, the monuments marking the battlefield where the conflicts happened. As I go, I puzzle over the meaning of forgiveness and whether or not I have learned to cherish it for the divine gift it is.

CHAPTER THREE

Let It Go

All this, as profound as it is wise, led Dr. Dincalci to write that forgiveness “*is not about reconciling if you do not want it.*”¹ And with this I might take issue.

Renowned author and theologian, Dr. Lewis Smedes, says in his book, “*Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve:*”

“You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.”²

I began to wonder what I might say or do if I ran into someone who was part of a painful past and with whom I parted on not the best terms. Avoiding them, in my opinion, is not in the spirit of reconciliation if there is reason to assume they will not hurt me now. Often the circumstances have changed and the offender becomes the person in need of my support. Maybe they want to reconcile! What then?

And does this always mean that I have to disassociate from some of my friends because they are still friends with the offender? Not everyone defines fairness the same way. Do I have to start church hunting ...again!? A forgiveness that gives me inner peace but has no interest in *making* peace might fail me if somehow the very people I am not reconciled to keep popping up in my future relationships.

They might be family and family is not going to go away—something for which we should be thankful.

Face your apprehensions! Tell your hurts in the gentlest of inner voices to “Knock it off!” One of my teachers back in Bible college told the personal story of praying for God’s blessing on someone who had

deeply offended him. He relates that initially his prayer was just words—but words, nonetheless, we are encouraged to speak, according to Jesus:

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. — Luke 6:28

After a short time, he witnessed, he meant every word! (Not a bad idea when the heart is ready to try it!)

Forgiveness is a heartfelt spirit of reconciliation that awaits the opportunity to happen for real. It does not live with an unrequited longing for reconciliation—that would replace one pain with another—nor does it require we attempt reconciliation with persons who cannot or will not reconcile. But it is always ready to give a healthy relationship a chance because the ire that once kept them away or that demanded retribution is now gone.

When I am at peace with my past and my future, I am at peace with myself and I can be at peace with you.

There are only about 50 references in our Bible to the Hebrew term “to forgive.” The meaning generally is to be *gentle* (kind, understanding, sympathetic) and, therefore, *merciful*. (Our theological term: to *pardon*). In Ancient Israel, forgiveness was more a sacrificial attitude toward someone who better deserved retribution. The forgiver had to forgo their right to justice. It was not intended to assuage the forgiver’s rage as much as it was an act of mercy toward the offender. Forgiving wasn’t seen as a selfish act that brought peace to the victim of some violence (as we are taught in today’s parlance) as much as it was an act of letting go any thought of getting even or having the offender pay for their actions. A forgiving person need not say the words. They only need to embrace the wrongdoer. In a few cases forgiveness is evident because the offender still lives.

No one, other than God, in the Biblical text ever uttered these empowering words, “I forgive you.” Always, the miscreant begged for mercy. Always the person in the wrong, asked for forgiveness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deeper Things

Forgiveness is not just a theological idea to give a believer a sense of God's acceptance,¹ although, clearly, forgiveness is God's call to reconciliation. Notwithstanding God's touch on the soul, forgiveness certainly is a very human action of which we could speak without scriptural references. It is not a fruit of the Spirit, but somehow the fruit of the Spirit embraces it.

Perhaps in talking about the word 'forgiveness' in a New Testament context we might agree with Professor Trench: "...words often contain a witness for great moral truths—God having impressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know."²

A cursory glance at the many meanings associated with the New Testament word for forgiveness can begin to describe this powerful relational term.

Forgiveness, biblically, means to "let go" or "abandon." But what? An old accusation? A lingering hurt? An interest in revenge? The joyous notion of a karma that promises oppression for the oppressor? The thrill of schadenfreude? The happy notion of the punisher punished?

Instead of allowing an offense to impact my decisions by invading my thoughts and influencing my feelings, forgiveness means "sending" bad memories "away," sending them out of the room, while I sit in silent thought and plan my life. There is a real sense in which I must learn to "disregard" a past offense, but without suppressing the memory of it. I must "give up" the idea of getting even or exacting some form of vigilante justice.

I don't need to forget the trauma; I need only to live above it—move beyond it. I need to learn from my past those lessons that encourage my walk with God instead of limping along dragging the hurt behind me. God has commissioned the human quality of forgiveness to free me from this very weight. But, sadly, that's far easier said than done.

Forgiveness is a powerful friend. It can melt hardened hearts, disarm a defensive stance, defuse anger, and heal relationships. As believers, our lives should bear witness to this spirit of reconciliation. Forgiveness should be the message of the Cross spoken in every action and every word of every believer. Christianity should be a clear witness to the power of forgiveness. The Savior's cry from the cross, "*Father, forgive them,*" needs that witness to be heard.

Perhaps, love helps. Paul wrote: "*Love bears all things*"³ "*Bears?!*" Love "*covers over in silence.*" It puts a lid on my past not to protect it or preserve it but to conceal it from gossiping tongues and conniving minds—and that includes mine as well.

Forgiveness empowers one over personal hurt or rage. In the court of final justice we can stand with Stephen for the defense refusing to level charges against our offender and say, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*"⁴ With poetic justice, we still see sin as sin. It is never excused or valued. But we do forgive!

What is God's forgiveness all about!? This single eternal act of divine love defies description because we cannot know in our present state how final the resolution, how deep the love, how intense the passion, that required⁵ our Savior's death as the ultimate sacrificial act that spoke to His forgiveness of our sins. While theories of Atonement proliferate, one thing is for sure: When Jesus cried out "*Father forgive them*"⁶ He gave the term new meaning.

He gave a very human act of forgiveness a new and divine calling. He brought to life in that creative moment, in His death, a far loftier purpose for the soul of man. The heart can now beat with a new purpose, a new desire to bring about the reconciliation of all things.⁷ Forgiveness can now embrace a universe of wrong and live victoriously above that wrong. This is an infinite capacity to be merciful. This is the believer's inheritance. These are indeed "*...the deep things of God.*"⁸

CHAPTER FIVE

Forgive or Get Dizzy

Can we see forgiveness as a form of justice? Or is forgiveness always and only in contrast with the need to administer some law that was broken? If some personal principle of mine has been violated, if *I* have been violated, how can forgiveness be empowered to ignore that?

Some things can be black and white, right or wrong. When the 'law' was clearly violated, when the crime, which left me emotionally bleeding, was done with such clear intent, are they not guilty? And that guilt should not go unaddressed!

And I must ask: can I be forgiving and still pass sentence on someone who hurt me—maybe, so deeply that my life has changed direction and I cannot find my way back unto its original course?

Is it possible to confuse a spirit of forgiveness with a leniency that fails to hold someone accountable for something which they should be held accountable? Some people need to be punished—right!? It's, at least, socially rehabilitating. Society is better off for the rule of law enforced! We cannot let some offenders go unnoticed, unchallenged, lest they continue to offend! No society, no church, can long survive this way. My personal hurt is only a micro-cosmic part of a much larger—Mandelbrot like— world that is created when we allow this offense to hurt others, to spread like an infestation of pain. I am probably not the only one they offended! Is forgiveness justice ... really now?!

My mind is swirling in a confused and knotted collection of ideas. In later years of life, I have less confidence in my conclusions on these matters. I don't feel so sure of myself to be able to judge fairly the motives and actions of others who might have hurt me in the past. My

memories are vague. My logic is twisted into unresolvable questions.

Truth? Forgiveness is getting easier to do. It is the simpler approach to life.

Let me argue that for my part forgiveness is the just thing to do—the right thing to do. I leave the subject of retribution, judgment, vengeance, to God. Professor Vidu sees a difference between this form of justice and law. Against christian love and God’s grace we can admit with Paul “there is no law.”¹

“Justice is ‘infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule...,’ says Professor Vidu, while law is ‘legitimacy or legality, ..., calculable, a system of regulated and coded prescriptions.’”²

The Spirit of God is forgiving. His brand of justice is an expression of His grace and, as such, we can say that forgiveness is infinite (not merely 70 times 7), incalculable or a resource of love that does not need to take inventory of offense. The law weighs a punishment against the harm caused, whereas forgiveness has no such scale.

Law is legitimized—law is justified—when it *matches* the punishment to the offense. Forgiveness does not pretend to know the exact weight of sin to balance a fair punishment on the scales of justice. Forgiveness forgoes all this and simply expunges the record. A cleaned slate means we get to start over if we know how. Law is retributive. Forgiveness restorative.

There are laws and no one is advocating they be abrogated in the name of absolute forgiveness. What we do advocate is leaving the subject of law to the lawmakers—and that is ultimately God’s concern.

Should they die or should they live?

Ours is only to forgive.

Talk of absolute law sidetracks us. Let God be God when a definition of justice is required. Our part is to always forgive.

What is most important to note here is the effect an unforgiving spirit has on the supposed offender. “*Law...inscribes the Other within a language,*”³ to quote Dr. Vidu. This, to me, means that instead of listening and attempting to understand what another is feeling or thinking, we filter out what we don’t want to hear and re-interpret the rest in terms of—what I might call—our personal theory of “justifiable

non-forgiveness.”

The professor continues, “*It deprives the other of his or her alterity.*”⁴ Instead of caring enough to give someone else in relation to us the benefit of their individual convictions, feelings, and choices, we find a need to expose them to our ridicule and condemnation. Much of life’s ire is wasted on someone simply being themselves—not because their actions are harmful but simply because they are not us.

Law often enough deprives us of the joy of just being different. Law makes different into something terrible, something wrong. Forgiveness, on the other hand, can accept all the colors of personality, thought and feeling and allows me to be me in relationship with you being you.

Dr. Vidu agreeably argues: *just relationships transcend law.*⁵ . Forgiveness transcends law. Forgiveness becomes an act of ultimate justice that finds a more effective way of dealing with hurt through reconciliation.

What does all this mean? In Pauline english, “*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*”⁶

I can continue to churn the butter of my mind hoping that somehow things will coalesce into one emotionally tasty spread to cover all my hateful thoughts. But when I consider that my memories are vague, my feelings confused, my thoughts suppressed into forms only a professional counselor can hope to decompress, ...to be brutally honest with myself ...forgiveness seems simpler ...far, far simpler.

Forgiveness—as you know—biblically, means to “let it go.”

Yes! I, at last, see the wisdom in this profound truth. Always find a way to forgive and let God concern Himself with the rest.

“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.”⁷

CHAPTER SIX

Are You Sure?

This inevitably proved to me an oversimplification. I confused my lapses of memory with forgiveness. There is much that happened in the past that I could not swear to in a court of law because memory no longer served to recall the facts[?]¹—even as I, from time to time, nonetheless, would experience bouts of grief or despondency for seemingly no reason. Sometimes, I am told, things that happen to us can be so traumatic that we suppress the memory of them.

Besides this, I hate confrontation, which is what reconciliation sometimes requires.

So just saying something like: “*forget it*” or “*I don’t want to talk about it*” or “*bygones are bygones; think no more about it.*” isn’t the same as saying “*I forgive.*”

While I forgave them (so I thought); I could not afford to forget. They couldn’t be trusted to change. They couldn’t be trusted not to hurt me further. “*Forgetting about an injury,*” says the good doctor, “*might not be forgiveness but denial.*”¹

I didn’t recognize this distinction until I had a chance to revisit some old feelings about some church people from my past. I discovered that some of the emotional scars were still ‘tender’ and when it came to certain individuals and churches, I still crossed the street to walk on the other side. I am not so sure I was the best example of forgiveness as a follower of Christ. And although forgiveness should be the identifying mark of a christian,² it may not be so evident.

Knowing when I need to be forgiving is not always evident.

- I would deny that I was embittered, calling it ‘understandable’

hurt.

- Or I often mislabeled my feelings—for one, just to avoid the embarrassment of being found out.
- In my humanness, like a little child, knowing where it hurt—or why—was sometimes impossible for me to determine without professional counseling or, in some cases, a lifetime of reflection. (That’s why I am writing this in my seventies.)
- Then there’s my favorite metaphor about the pike and the tench.

I noticed I was becoming increasingly disinterested in some whom I saw as an offense to me. I needed to insulate myself from further pain. I wanted to run away but couldn’t. I rationalized that my fear of them to hurt me was justified. I needed to protect myself.

“Forgiveness,” Dr. Dincalci reminds us, *“does not condone evil or wrongdoing, nor does it ask for your injury.”*³

It gets worse. I found my view of church people infused with a fear born of—what I saw as—oppression or cruelty. Hyperboles are made of this stuff. I couldn’t identify the good people from the potentially bad ones; so, all were lumped into one description of what christians are really like. There were, to be sure, those few exceptions that earned my undying trust and who didn’t disappoint that trust.

But, for good or bad, in terms of some of my past relations, I eventually became Karl August Möbius’ pike, the fish (Google it), which was put into a tank with its favorite meal, tench. The tench, however, was out of reach being separated from the pike by a glass partition. The pike was prevented by this glass wall from enjoying his favorite meal. After a number of painful attempts, butting his head against this invisible shield, the pike gave up trying, at which time Möbius removed the glass partition allowing the tench to swim freely about the pike. The pike, hungry as it was, refused to attempt to eat the tench. I don’t know pike psychology but it had exhausted any interest in being further distressed or hurt by unseen forces that made no sense.

Like the pike, I swam now in a tank of christian fellowship but dined very little on their support and encouragement. Christian dialog became painful; so, although I wanted that dialog, that fellowship, I sat quietly disconnected and alone in the presence of all that spiritual food.

Obviously, something went wrong here. But what? This doesn’t

sound like the work of a forgiving spirit.

Many christians do not appear to carry the pain of past broken relationships too well. (We even church hop.) When bad things happen to good people (like us) we tend to assess and project blame—a very human thing to do. (Some, sadly, even blame God.) We hide in crowds and call it fellowship.

(Notice the *'we'* even though this is *my* journey into forgiveness? Allow me this projection for a few lines. There is no better support than among friends who have experienced or thought the same.)

We may keep an emotional distance from our offenders, not just the persons who hurt us but, their surrogates, as well, who remind us of those who may have mocked our naiveté or tore at our youthful innocence. The line between hyperbole and reality blurs: this is now how we begin to see *all* men or *all* women or *all* church people. They're *all* bullies! "What they did to us was criminal!" we contend, although this attitude does not support forgiveness.

Our emotions stabilize because we have taken counsel that advised us to avoid them. Because our feelings have quieted, our blood pressure has returned to normal, and we no longer medicate to deal with unnatural stress, we can sit in church (probably, to us, a new one) and enjoy once again messages on forgiveness. Perhaps the changing circumstances have masked the pain but the disease of an unforgiving spirit might still be there!?

To what degree should true forgiveness free us from the so-called 'baggage' of yesterday's traumas? Does a peaceful attitude mean that this past is indeed past? And what role does forgiveness play in all of this? Fear is often a very present friend to alert us to real danger, but is that what is happening here? Are most believers that dangerous to be around? Or do I simply have a people phobia, the fear of exposing my theological opinion to minds that will pick it apart—and me in the process? This is my personal journey. I am far more phobic now than I ever was as a teen.

This is serious business and real fellowship like any relationship building takes work and effort. It takes a lot of give and take—repentance and forgiveness. What can I say! But how well should my phobias 'play' with forgiveness? Do my irrational fears of the monsters who hide behind church pews have anything to do with my need to be forgiving? If I forgive—really forgive!—will these church

phobias go away?

Alan Paton, a South African Writer, Educator unequivocally declared *“When a deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive.”*⁴

CHAPTER SEVEN

Allen's F[r]iendship

Was my argument with the church in general: its theologies, its governments, its traditions. Did I have to find a way to reduce this powerful force down into a manageable fight? Did I need to center my malaise on one person who would be a surrogate for everyone and anyone who over the years injured my family or me? Dr. Dincalci explains,

"When you try to deal with offenses committed by something big, like governments, organizations, corporations, churches, etc., you accomplish nothing by keeping the general thought of "them." Think of specific situations and then each person in the unpleasant event. When you get to the specifics of a situation, you get closer to the truth. When you are working on offenses, you need to address all the smaller parts to achieve full forgiveness."¹

Of course, I won't admit that Allen was a substitute for others less visible, less obvious, less public. It's contrary to good christian ethics to indict the innocent. And if I forgive Allen but I cannot find peace in that, perhaps, Allen was not the man or did not stand alone. Have I made him a red heifer² that now must bear the sins of all the people who offended me?

Was Allen a true leader of discontents or was he my scapegoat. "*The problem with scapegoating,*" says Dr. Vidu, "*is ...that it actually works.*"³

How is it that I never thought it important to forgive any other man or woman in that ministry? ...because I didn't see these people as major players in this personal drama!? With them, there was nothing to forgive but Allen stood out as a Tory that went Whig. His support

soured into confrontation and that alone caught my attention.

How important, how instrumental, was he in a leadership role while the war of words raged on that led to my departure? Was this all in my imagination—even though circumstantial evidence was plentiful?

Or was it easier for me to anthropomorphize a defused and growing dislike and distrust in my ministry into one form, one man, whom I could then blame openly. (and maybe later choose to forgive?)

In my heart, I accused Allen of spreading this disaffection among others which eventually engulfed the majority (half plus one) of the congregation. I saw his support for my dismissal as critical for persuading an entire congregation to meet for that final vote. I imagined people meeting in small groups in his living room listening to reasons why I must go that sounded more and more reasonable.

I felt that if Allen and I could reconcile all would be well, but I made the mistake of knocking on his door with another, supportive, friend in tow and he objected to turning an off-the-record conversation into an on-the-record denouement.

So, Allen became the focus of my inquiry and he became the cause of my pain. He was to blame for my career coming to an end—and anything else of which I could accuse him that sounded rational. Once the dearest of friends and now just a stranger whom I doubted I ever knew, Allen alone would need to be forgiven.

But the beauty of forgiveness is that it makes this whole discussion moot. Forgiveness not only frees me from the pain of the past but from the anxiety that such unanswerable soliloquies generate in keeping that past alive. Forgiveness means that it doesn't matter any longer whether Allen stood alone or in a crowd (or if he was 'at fault' at all). If my heart is at rest and I am willing to embrace all my tomorrows in anticipation of all the blessings God has filled it with, and if—even in a virtual sense—I can put an arm about Allen's shoulders and want the best from God for him, there ceases to be reason to analyze my woes or determine their source.

And my thought was, I did forgive him but I feared speaking to him because he seemed capable of finding the soft spot in my armor.

And then one day years later, I ran into him in a store. He was now less impressive, less verbal, less frightening. I was years removed from his influence, his persuasion and the respect by which he charmed others into following him. He was older now and had endured a couple operations. Many of those alleged followers were

following others now or had been called to their final reward. He stood in front of me—in many ways—alone. His passion for confrontation seemed to be in retreat, defeated by the sheer passing of time and strength.

So, why should I not seal my forgiveness with a christian hug!
I did.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Bitterness Gene

We cannot recall some things. There appears to be nothing to forgive. A friend relates the story of a time they and their younger sibling played hooky from school which when their parents found out resulted in a stern discipline that my friend would never forget. But their sibling? They could not recall any of it!

I suppose the brain doc would recommend recalling some of this stuff thinking that it might still be affecting the way I see life and I need to deal with it through forgiveness. This point might be well taken. Talking to my wife, there are a few 'bad' experiences that I have totally forgotten. And parts of my memory by her recollection are outright inaccurate.

"You're right! They did do that, didn't they!? How nasty of them!"

When the school board where I taught began to read our mail—our unpaid bills—and sent a representative to our home to encourage me to address these for the sake of the school's reputation, my wife, Joyce, took offense. I became despondent. (I will say, they had sense enough to send the one person for whom my respect was without question.) I passed it off as a rude display of their insensitivity to my unemployment situation. Years later Joyce appropriately interjected this incident into our casual conversation.

One summer afternoon, a decade later, I was peering out the parsonage window to see an RV pull up into the church parking lot. It was the president from that school.

(The story is more extensive than just about snail mail. When a full time teaching position opened up, the school board hired outside the ministry to fill the post and consequently my family and I had to leave because, having lost out on the increased income that came with such a

promotion, we could not afford to stay.)

Here he was walking up to our side door to say, 'Hi,' and ask if he could minister in *my*[?] church and receive an offering.

I offered him a Wednesday evening pulpit with offering incurring the anger of my trustees who thought that was their decision to make. I was face to face with an opportunity to do to him in microcosm what he allowed to happen to me ..and I couldn't.

And if I am bitter—or was bitter—does it matter that I might have the wrong person in my sites? My brother was a pre-teen, nine years my junior. He and I were walking home one rain soaked day. As I strolled along at least a half of a city block behind him while he unwisely ambled along with his umbrella threaded through his arms behind him, he tripped and fell face first on the pavement. Since he could not bring his arms to the front to break his fall, it had to hurt and anger him. Standing up again, he looked back at me some 20 or so yards behind him and shouted, "*Why did you push me!?*"

How easy it is to rationalize a culprit for our own victimization. Does it matter that it might never cross my mind that someone might become a victim of my ire, even though, the evidence is not there to prove me right? I end up needing to forgive someone who would be aghast at hearing of what I accused them.

And then there was Alice (details a few chapters ahead) whom I would never have guessed was behind my church firing. I was looking at someone else. My daughter-in-law felt at the time that her landlord who attended the church was the guilty one. I disagreed with her. To this day I would befriend that landlord and his wife if I could. (They moved out of state, but before they did, Joyce and I enjoyed visiting her at the store where she worked).

I confided in one brother in one church that I felt was misrepresenting me in a series of matters. He shared my thoughts, though given in confidence, with the head of the board that was showing me the door. I have no lingering ill-will toward either. Honest!

We have intended to detain someone in our angst in a lifelong prison sentence only to find out much later that we imprisoned the wrong person. The real surprise is that we were the one locked away from our peace of mind.

*"Vengeance is mine,"*¹ saith the Lord. Is it unforgiving of me to take any

hope in this thought when someone runs over my loved ones (or me) with a truck load of hurt?

“...I will take vengeance on my adversaries,” our Lord promises, “and repay² those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh...”³

Amen!! Preach it, Lord!!!

Is this pronouncement limited to those who hate God or does this include *my* adversaries as well—⁴my alleged adversaries, the people I accuse of being adversarial?

The word *vengeance* in our New Testament is not a subjective term of enraged feelings. It is not a word that speaks to meting out blow for blow—a rage that simply wants to pound on someone. It speaks more of retribution or punishment, and correcting injustice.⁵ The word *vengeance* comes in different flavors, nuances. In verses⁶ of key interest to us here the word suggests that when God “takes vengeance” it will be an eschatologically predetermined judicial process. He is the judge of all the earth, the eternal jurist. It will be the final adjudication.

And at that time the banner of His grace⁷ will be raised high above all our fears and hurts waving in the soft breezes of His mercies and the sunshine of His unending love. At that moment the word *vengeance* will acquire its heavenly meaning for we will at last understand how in—what we call—*the simplicity of God*⁸, which is always and only the full expression of His being,—how—retribution will be the full and unfiltered expression of that grace, how the restoration of all things⁹ requires His judgment.

Is it possible that God’s judgment might be more merciful than mine? Could His justice be restorative to the penitent whereas I might still want my pound of flesh? While I hope for the day of final reckoning, God waits patiently for an opportunity to dismiss ‘with prejudice’—to hear words of repentance and cries for mercy so He might jump at the chance of forgiving them forever.

...As He forgave *me!* (but this point might be lost in my fury.¹⁰)

Is a desire to want God to “get even” for me an unforgiving desire? Is

a plan for personal vengeance sinfully wrong?

Maybe I am living with a lingering hurt and to me justice means leveling the playing field, punishing them equal to the amount of harm they caused me, although this is not measurable. How much punishment is that? Does vengeance come with a raging desire to keep punching them until I feel better, or until they hurt enough, or until I am satisfied that enough is enough?

It is amazing how many questions evaporate like the morning dew with a forgiving heart. Questions of degrees or methods of punishment, or how intensely God can or should administer retribution—such questions—morph into an academic exercise in hypotheticals when we learn to forgive.

CHAPTER NINE

Forgiveness is Boring

We know that some pain goes deep and closure is not automatic just because we attend church or just because the paths of offended and offender crossed in their travels and hugs were exchanged.

Most counselors will direct us to avoid such incidental meetings which might become a forum on what went wrong. Most people are unprepared to confront all the fears and infelicity, the hurts and the accusations, that might rise to the surface in such an exchange of words and ideas. Professional counselors generally do not use the term ‘forgiveness’ nor even have it in their bag of solutions. The word belongs to the church because it was raised in scriptural references. I noted, in addition, that the books on forgiveness which I perused—unlike the scriptures—emphasized forgiveness for the sake of the forgiver’s peace and without any need or recommendation for reconciliation.

But the biblical context is generally about God forgiving us because He *seeks* to reconcile! Consequently, there are few verses that instruct us in the art of forgiving one another —God apparently not seeing the need to overstate the obvious.

Sadly, the church has a poor record, historically, of making use of this piece of profound wisdom. I preached once on Paul’s passionate plea for the Corinthian church [2 Corinthians 2] to not overwhelm the repentant by rejecting their contrition but to forgive them, realizing that we all have a sorrow threshold that once exceeded raises the level of emotional pain beyond bearable.¹

The church board in their next meeting took issue with my sermon as they interpreted it to mean that I was condoning sin. But non-

forgiveness here means excommunication and it is a social form of capital punishment that needs to be thought through carefully. The church's indifference to the penitent or the church's need to administer some constitutionally required law of discipline often pushes the repentant out the door and damages, perhaps irreparably, her (the church's) witness. An unforgiving spirit is not a small thing, else Jesus would never have linked our forgiving so closely to His own—as did Paul.²

An unforgiving attitude is abusive. It is essentially sadistic. It is a cruelty that irrefutably misrepresents the heart and ministry of Christ. It is absolutely unchristian.

Christians, as much as I don't want to believe it, can live with vengeance, sustained rage, and no interest in ever reconciling—all things descriptive of an unforgiving spirit. We learn, in a search for peace of mind, to spin the bad stuff—so it doesn't sound so bad. One friend looked me in the eyes and said, "We've all done it." I hadn't done this particular "it" but I did not want to discredit his excuse; it was his way of coping with something he, no doubt regretted, but something that seemed to vindicate his membership in the human race: this is what people do. I don't think he thought unusual what he did or maybe he saw some benefit that came from it.

No one's an angel. (Spin, spin.) I, too, have a past—as uninteresting as it is—spotted or stained with regrettable decisions. I haven't forgiven myself for some of these. I can't seem to forgive myself. And maybe if you knew you would say, "Is that all!?" But it was, in retrospect, all me at the time. I need 'spin' to help me accept these regrettable 'mistakes.' (The word 'mistake' itself is spun! 'Mistake' is the same greek word as 'sin.' It just depends on how we say it.)

So, I went through the steps of rationalizing how it could have happened.

- I wasn't alone, I get to blame someone else.
- It was payback for the bad stuff done to me.
- I didn't know at the time it was wrong.
- It was a gut reaction to what they did.
- Stupid things happen because we are human. One of my favorite songs is "*Everybody Plays the Fool*."³
- It proved an important lesson at the time. I see some benefit there.

And then there's the deeper psychological analysis. Physiologically, the emotional (limbic) system develops before the intellectual. Being young and oozing hormones is a recipe for indiscretion. Excuses are the neocortex of the brain trying to make sense out of what has happened but where was my neocortex when I did it!?

"It may easily be a story created by the neocortex to smooth out the events. We like to think we see clearly and think clearly, but in truth, we don't. Our brain functioning and clarity of thought is not as accurate as we suppose. There are gaps. We have a brain not built on reasoning but on reaction."⁴

And still, with all these reasons to justify what I did, they don't soothe the conscience. Forgiving me must find another way around this mountain of regret.

But the biggest—and unspoken—excuse for being unforgiving, for not addressing the negative side of our thoughts is we actually enjoy the benefits that bitterness or hatred provides: a constant sense of self-pity, a handy dandy surrogate for all things that go wrong, and the excitement that gossip provides—to name a few.

In Season 1 Episode 14 of Star Trek, the Original Series, "Balance of Terror," Captain Kirk pursues a Romulan ship that has destroyed 4 federation outposts. In the course of the conflict, the Romulan vessel fires a ball of unknown plasma energy at the Enterprise forcing Kirk to order an immediate maximum warp retreat. The ball of explosive energy started catching up to them when suddenly it began to thin out and dissipate. It had a limited range. When it finally impacted the federation ship, they were able to absorb the blow with minimal damage.

The planet Romula was eventually at best in a tenuous truce with the federation. Throughout Star Trek's history which included the Deep Space Nine, The Next Generation, the Voyager, and Enterprise series, Romulans made a perennial enemy we could count on for intergalactic special effects to entertain us. And it all started with a ball of plasma the first captain barely survived. Forty years later, in the movie, "Star Trek," Kirk finds himself in battle against the Romulan, Nero, only this time in an alternate reality (from the future). ...still enemies after all these years!

It's almost as if life has no excitement to offer unless we can stay at war with someone. Some people seem to thrive on confrontation. There has to be a political foe who becomes the animus of talk radio that gives us satisfaction listening to it. We love to gossip and to do

that right, we need someone who is out of favor. Admit it, we don't want to watch Star Trek without Romulans. What fun is it in forgiving everyone, anyway!?

We like to win which means someone else loses to give us a rush of victory. We are combatants. The church is renown for its militancy.⁵ And in arguing down someone with whom we are at odds, we love to get in the last verbal punch.

In some non-believers' minds and in their ridicule, they see heaven as a boring place with no tension for us to play off one another, no losers to crown winners, no disagreement, no fights or brawls—things that were the spice of this life. Total forgiveness in the mind of the avenger has no imagination, no need to plot and plan the next move, to write the next diary entry or blurt out the next complaint.

Writing seems to even take on a near poetic tone, a more captivating narrative, where the words go negative. It is easier to write hate speech laced with the poison of pejorative slander and character assassination. It is harder to write 'nice'.

It is only when we are the hapless target of someone's venomous bite that forgiveness is the antidote. Otherwise it is a rather boring idea that robs us of our fun. Yet, no christian will admit it.

CHAPTER TEN

Who Are You, Really?

But, it is clear to me—and take this anecdotally—that forgiveness is not an elixir to solve all emotional or psychological problems. I don't need to forgive everyone of everything. Not every hurt is a matter for forgiveness; not every grief goes away just because we found someone to blame and then forgive.

I have tried to give this some thought. When should I forgive? Who should I forgive?

With spouses, unless a disruption ends in divorce, forgiveness might be better served by more adjustment or compromise. Counseling may serve more. And with siblings, what can we say? Mary and Pete were brother and sister who decades ago had stopped visiting each other for reasons particular to their own relationship. It appeared that hate ruled triumphant, but one day she decided to stop by and see him. He was overcome with joy. Tears filled his eyes and they wondered why this moment had not come much sooner in life. (I wondered, too.) As I already cautioned, reconciliation sometimes is the true expression of our forgiveness even if the word “forgive” is not spoken.

Some people are too distant to be hurtful. They are mere acquaintances or public personalities that I do not know enough about to take their jibes and verbal jabs seriously. They are more an annoyance than an offense. I get aggravated watching the news, especially the political craziness that passes for news, but I see no reason to forgive reporters or journalists. If I allow them to rile me to the point of distraction or sleeplessness, I need another approach to life. Forgiveness is probably not the answer.

* * *

In marriage, forgiveness eventually works its magic, sight unseen. In the closeness of the marriage relationship there should be, with time, more and more, a sense of belonging, of a merging of personalities, of a commonality of interests and values, and of a more meaningful friendship. Forgiveness for Joyce and I plays a lesser role now after 48 plus years. I may need to ask for her forgiveness if I yell at her. Yep! Sure! But I don't do that anymore. For us, forgiveness is a hidden feature in the communication. Forgiveness is doing its work on the relationship quietly and unseen as we grow together.

Did I ever carry an unforgiving spirit toward her? (This entire section was written only because I somehow knew you'd ask!) Regarding my relationship with my wife, did I ever disregard the biblical injunction: "...*don't let the sun go down on your wrath.*"¹ Sure. I even struggled with forgiveness, but through the years we have grown closer together and I have come to realize how much a part of my life she really is.

I have discovered that somewhere between news reporters and a spouse, between those fringe personalities and those whose lives are a part of mine are a crowd of persons that bear an influence on what impacts my life. They are more or less involved in my circumstances. They are more or less prone to advising me. They are planetary bodies whose gravitation pull effects my orbit.

But if I see this correctly, forgiveness serves when my interests and purpose in life collide with theirs and in that explosion I suffer loss. (Lost opportunity, compromised convictions, lower self-esteem, and a lot of hate to go around.) I find myself, for the sake of my peace, needing to forgive—with or without reconciliation. Now my entire universe of ideas and hopes may need a course correction to adjust to this loss. That adjustment must include a forgiving heart.

Forgiveness will be my lifeline.

I might be fighting the urge to forgive even though it is part of my human heritage. Forgiveness is the means by which all my uniqueness coalesces into community and co-operation and fellowship, co-working with others for the kingdom of God.

In terms of my humanity, I am a social being and a part of a society, the church and social groups I choose to belong to. I delude myself if I think this is possible without forgiveness.

For christians: is it wise to appropriate the promise to be at rest in

Christ ..and we kid ourselves if we think that forgiveness is not a necessary part of that.

Yet we ask the question: should I forgive them? I have had to adjust to personality types that grated on me. I have had to deal with someone else getting the promotion I thought should have been mine. I have had to eat crow, and admit I was at fault when I wish I could have in clear conscience pinned the tail on another donkey.

I have had to accept what life offers because it was what life offered and it was not a matter of forgiveness. I could only forgive them if I first invented some offense, brewed in the caldron of my pride, and projected outward on some poor innocent acquaintance standing around. Not fair!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alice in Wonderland

When we forgive we throw a lifeline to someone drowning in remorse. When we forgive we offer the penitent the gift of a revived spirit.¹ This is a resource everyone is blessed with, which is given for no other purpose than to be the cultural cohesion, the social bond, the marital glue, the adhesion of friendship, and most importantly, the restorer of personal wholeness, that promotes unity, a sense of belonging, and self acceptance. We all are born trustees of this priceless human attribute. We are all ambassadors of peace, if we so choose. We are all capable, through forgiveness, of living above our pain.

Is it even imaginable what life would be like if humanity was incapable of forgiving!? What if being human meant no regret, no remorse, no guilt, no sense of wrong when we did terrible things to each other? What if we never asked for forgiveness? What if we were incapable of saying, "I forgive you"? What if those of us offended were incapable of forgiving. What if all social reaction was driven by a spirit of revenge? What if we were not capable of saying with empathic understanding, "I hear you and I forgive"! What if the human heart saw no value in love! Relationships would implode were this ultimate embrace not given. A single relationship is like a single social cell in the body politic. If there were no forgiveness from anyone, humanity dies.

But this is not the case, says, Professor Vidu.

"It is in the ethical encounter that I am summoned, exposed, made uncomfortable by the presence of the Other. Out of this pure proximity, mercy and forgiveness spring. As I am faced with the Other, I desire to forgive and accept. But this desire does not spring

from any "reason." It is a pure gift."²

The professor is saying—to me—that my desire to forgive you and your desire to forgive me does not spring from reason but from the mere fact that we are face to face, and eye to eye. Each of us has this innate desire to be merciful. We are suddenly cognizant of a sense of caring about the outcome of things—of a desire to hug, to shake hands, or to embrace. Forgiveness becomes a natural and spontaneous pull of the human heart.

Forgiveness is an attribute of the human spirit that deflates anger and purges the soul of bitterness. Forgiveness, where possible, can accept back the estranged into relationship. Forgiveness believes in reconciliation. Forgiveness promotes peace and unity. Forgiveness is born of a merciful spirit that desires to be free from the pain of offense.³ Like the smile, it has a magical, yet predictable, emancipating quality; it is, a deep and timeless passion that transcends all cultural experiences.

For every buy there's a sell. There is a head and tail to every coin... and for everyone who is forgiving, someone is being forgiven. We may need to know we are forgiven to lift us out of a deep hole of despair. Our punishment, perhaps self-inflicted, may give us no peace until we know that we are forgiven.

Life, in some regards, may be on hold until we know we are forgiven or at least ask for that forgiveness. We got away with something terrible but on a personal level there is this inner voice rehearsing and re-rehearsing something that we regret more and more as time passes.

The good doc might suggest we learn to forgive ourselves and I concur. But it is not self-forgiving that we need but to be self-forgiven.

We are falling ever deeper into the chasm of lies about how happy and well-adjusted we are, how good life is, when all along we live sorrowfully conscious of a lost friendship, a harm we caused, a deep hurt we inflicted.

Without something as simple as asking someone's forgiveness, for fear they wouldn't give it, we rationalize reasons that it isn't required. We have learned to hide the truth with fake smiles. We thought we could learn to live happily ever after even with our offense but that's not how life is turning out.

We may fear to confront openly the very persons that hold within

their power the means to free us from this self-imposed burden of guilt. And this is true, even if they refuse to forgive us! It is solely in the act of seeking forgiveness with heartfelt sincerity that we are set free.

John worked in a furniture factory—something he loathed doing but he had tuition bills. For reasons he never went into, he decided to burn the place down instead of just giving notice. A young adult's brain—it is true—is still under construction until age 25. I have no other explanation. I will not pretend to know what he was thinking but when the gasoline fumes exploded throwing him clear of the building—even before he hit the ground—he sensed God telling him, and I quote, "Someday you will make this right!" He lived decades with this annoying prophecy unsettling an otherwise very well-adjusted and successful life. He became in time more convinced that making amends would be a necessary thing to do regardless the cost emotionally, legally, or any other way.

One day—years had gone by—John decided to visit the owner of the factory and come clean about what happened that night his business went up in smoke. The elderly gentleman listened, probably with a heart that had discovered over the years the value of forgiveness. John stood there awaiting sentence when to his surprise ...the old man forgave him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The 6th Stage of Grief

It had to be one of the happiest days in years—for me—to be packing up our few belongings and heading into Burgettstown, Pennsylvania and this little church on Shady Avenue, just across the creek from the main road. The Post Gazette Pavilion, which former President Bush #43 visited, probably put Burgettstown on the map.

The local folk in Burgettstown, in the old days, were miners primarily, and they were fiercely independent. Each local community originally represented an entire ethnic group, such as the Italian folk on “Dago Hill.” That name was spoken with affection, and not pejoratively. Slovan, just a few miles south, is where the Polish folk lived. Burgettstown is a one mile long stretch of route 18 just under 20 miles north of Little Washington. (We gave Washington PA. this descriptive to distinguish it from our nation’s capital.)

This was coal country—the world of strip mining.

Taking a step back, while still living in Cannonsburg, PA. (Incidentally, the friendliest people on the planet): one night I dreamt of a small church somewhere in the middle of nowhere and awoke longing to be there. Not long after, we were in this tiny church with its seating for 150 people and its under six foot, low, bathroom ceilings (the Italian people in our church were short)... and I recall walking downstairs into the fellowship hall (watch your head, low ceiling) thinking to myself, “John, you’re home.”

When we first drove into town to candidate this church, Joyce and I were 8 years married—still very young in our life together. Those first 8 years were not spent in luxury. They were difficult years financially—and for me, physically. They were years of confrontation and

searching for meaning. They were years of misunderstanding. They were years dotted with unemployment and a need for God to supply—and He did. (Not all was dire: these years gave us 2 of our 3 sons.)

When I resigned this little church after pastoring for 7 years, I didn't realize how much I would miss the opportunity to share ministry with such—what I shall call—genuine people. These folk were not politically minded. They never organized a coup d'etat or sabotaged my leadership through propaganda. When they got upset with me, they wore their feelings openly (on their sleeve, as the saying goes) or just skipped a few church services. They were outspoken in their praise as much as their grumbling. No notes were passed secretly under the table to undermine what I, as pastor, was trying to do. They simply were not good at cultivating grapevines of gossip to form public opinion. They were too open, too genuine, to use the political winds that might blow to topple my world. I never believed that they were of such a mindset, anyway.

Maybe all this praise is said in retrospect after moving to New England where ministry became far more political.

Well, since the church was small, and I was destined for greater things—so I thought—I resigned. Little did I know that the last week in that little town would be a tearful week of visiting them with a sorrowful farewell. These are people I had loved and prayed with through all sorts of traumas. This is the congregation I was praying for or for whom I was making hospital calls in the 'small' hours of the night. Joyce was at the bedside of Ruthie when cancer delivered her into the arms of Jesus. Hospital calls, home prayer meetings, counseling sessions, weddings, baptisms, and, sadly, funerals. We were involved in their lives and by the laws of relationship, they in ours.

Here is where we met Daisy and others like her, lifelong friends whose testimony had more impact on my life than a thousand bible stories.

My final hug and hand shake became an endless stream of tears for me as I went from house to house. I didn't know that the dream of a better future was going to exact such an emotional price.

I was grieving the loss of real ministry, real significance, real friendships. How providential when the childhood song came on the car radio—and I sang along as best I could with broken voice and blurred vision: *Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.* That

song never carried serious meaning for me until then. Awash with sorrow, I needed to know that: He loved me still. I felt terribly alone and lost as I tried to say 'goodbye' to my world—as I, in my despondency, thought this meant that, for me, pastoral ministry was at an end.

(When I did return to pastoring in Massachusetts, it wasn't the same. The church world had grown more political, more business-like, more corporate and theologically restrictive—or should I say, demanding. Besides, where would I find my coal miners in a high-tech culture!)

I might add in the spirit of full disclosure: that final week was somewhat traumatic for me; so, I feared to get that close again to a congregation. And yet, I still think that in that small congregation in that little town of, then, just beyond 1700 people, was where my ministry and calling would be defined, and a lifetime of learning wouldn't change that.

Joyce took the boys and went on ahead to our next assignment while I stayed back to say my goodbyes and collect a few leftover belongings. Joyce's experience in this move appeared different from mine. I, perhaps, needed that week alone to grieve. She was quick to leave. She might have been more apprehensive as we entered a new adventure at a desk instead of a pulpit.

Today, 34 years later, the original congregation is gone, either having moved away or since joined all the saints of God in the heavens. My recollections, if accurate, are snapshots of time that stir in my heart the fondest longings to revisit the past, to preach one more sermon of love, my love for them, to fellowship with them around a pot of weak coffee, to learn of the blessings God has given them since last we met. I want one more tearful goodbye while I anticipate a grand reunion with Christ.

Some of them angered me back then—to be sure—but now there is nothing but a desire in me to see them and fellowship with them again.

It was years later that I realized what I had given up when I was pastor in New England to an entirely different mindset. That was when I began to search for someone to blame. Why did I leave coal country? What went wrong? Surviving my jump off the cliff, I began to wonder who it was that pushed me. By now life was a complex mix of challenges, subterfuge, political maneuverings, and dismissals.

There was a splattering of happiness splashed on the canvas of such a dark picture—to be sure—but my dreams took me back from time to time to Pennsylvania and the old folk whose love of God’s Truth never became a theological reason for war. They knew how to shake the tree for the fruit without uprooting it. They seemed to know the secret of forgiveness.

Part of me wanted to replay the best parts of the story, to relive moments, that were real expressions of my longings and interests. And it is in such reminiscing that I, being human, began to look for the mistakes and the persons to blame for them.

Back in 1975, I sought to enroll in Pittsburgh Theological Seminary but they refused me having never heard of the little country college I graduated from. I kept telling myself: if I could relive life, I would want to be a textual critic perhaps minoring in archeology. I have been in love with the Scripture since childhood and I, in this life, want to get as close to the text as possible. For years, I went down over and over again in my mind a short list of persons whom I wanted to fault for messing up my future; persons I could hate if it were not for God’s forgiving grace.

I spent years in regret until I realized what the modern seminaries were teaching—something called the historical-critical interpretation of scripture. Students were graduating from Princetown Theological in New Jersey and even Gordon Conway Theological in Boston. MA. as atheists. (Not all of them, of course.) I thanked God, now, that I took another road into my future.¹

I spend years living with regret and anger needlessly. I could have thought happier thoughts, praiseworthy thoughts, thankful thoughts all those times I mused over my sorrowful lot in life which wasn’t so sorrowful after all. I needed a different perspective that could see what I was not looking at and bring me to a place of accepting my life for what it was and not for what it was not.

This only required a smidgen of self-forgiveness which I was willing to offer me. This was far easier than recursively visiting a list of make-believe offenders in my mind. This was the easier path to forgiveness.

Joyce and I made a few visits since leaving Burgettstown. On one visit, memorable for me and very telling, Joyce and I decided to visit anyone still living that was widowed and on the short list was Gizella who had

just lost her husband. The loss was still a tender scar upon the heart when we came knocking on her door. I lost track of the years that had gone by since last we visited her but here we were to pray with her—out of the future, out of the past—in this her hour of unspeakable sorrow.

This was my thing and it was as if God allowed me this brief opportunity to relive that part of pastoring that brought me to life, gave me a sense of calling, and validated for me everything good about the ministry.

In truth, there is no one here to forgive. I need to be thankful for all the moments God provided that honored my passion to be used by Him and that sense of fulfillment that only came when I was doing what I felt born to do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Out to Sea

When I pray, I am generally not kneeling but walking. One afternoon while circling the church parking lot and talking to the Lord about all this stuff, a peaceful feeling wrapped my heart in a warm embrace leading me to believe that, indeed, God—after how many days, I don't recall—was finally ready with His prepared statement on the matter. Two words seemed to drop from the sky, I felt them find my heart with such a theological thud that I could not disregard them, nor did I want to.

Exodus 3:7 “[and the] LORD said, ‘I ... heard.’”

If you can endure a sermonette, these words are the most meaningful thing God could have said to me in my complaint about the collapse of my world. These are what He said to Moses about Israel's enslavement on the eve of their deliverance.

David added his two cents:

“Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry”¹

John reminds us, “*And if we know that he hears us...*”² You know the rest.

God told me—may I say it this way. I believe it this way; God was saying that He was in the room when it all went down. I tearfully knew I needed to know nothing more. God didn't need to support my position or console me by justifying me or telling me how they would be punished for their arrogance. Nonsense! He said nothing more. I wanted to leap to life—but that would take time.

For now, maybe just for now and for how long God wanted to remain thoughtfully silent in all this, for now it was sufficient. I was at peace:

He heard!!!

At the time, I didn't think in terms of forgiveness no more than I was thinking about retribution. Truthfully, I went into the meeting only hoping to come out with my integrity intact. I pictured myself before God, the rightful Judge of these matters, while He replayed the video of my life. I didn't want to misrepresent all the virtues we have been taught should be expressive of our christianity—first and foremost His love.

I continued to stumble along with my annoying character flaws and verbal missteps, but God knows the heart. Before Him there is no reason to put on a face or feign innocence in matters of broken relationships and church dismissals. The naked truth, the unabashed and unadorned baring of the soul, only God sees.

Have I forgiven them? Do I sense that I need to forgive them? Is some of the stress that has followed me since then, in fact, seen in the muddy footprints of an unforgiving spirit?

I would meet with many of these brethren (some who have since died) and eat meals with them, fellowship with them, engage in mutual hug fests, exchange kind thoughts, and express an honest, heartfelt, sense of caring. And I feel great about this. I look forward to the immunity of heaven where hurt is impossible but fellowship will be rich.

However, the fear that ministry represents war more than love remains with me to this day.

Friendships are built on common experiences, shared feelings, and an empathy that is in sync with each other's pain. And that, to me, is how God relates to us.³ The men that night around that board room table were equally God's friends; so, this truth serves them also. But in that parking lot, it was just God and me and His friendship was conspicuously part of that moment.

I didn't have to explain things to Him. I began to express my lingering fears, my unfettered apprehension about living with no job in New England where the cost of living is ceiling high—and we have 3 sons. It seemed as if He interrupted my sniveling with a kindly smile. That evening as the sun was sinking behind the trees and night was coming on—in more ways than one—He interrupted my anxious thoughts in a whisper.

He heard.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It's Your Fault

Was it my fault? I plan to talk more about this.

I am Mr. Hurd from the Bob Newhart show—full of self-doubting, self-abasing, and self-blaming. In one episode he became angered at Mr. Carlin, a member in the support group led by Bob, the psychologist. Bob commended Mr. Hurd for his anger, something he never showed; he epitomized a marked lack of self-respect. After the group session, out in the waiting area, Mr. Carlin continued his abusive verbal assault on Mr. Hurd. In outright rage, Mr. Hurd grabbed a knitting needle from Mrs. Bakerman's sewing bag, and stuck ...*himself* with it.

It is so easy for some of us to search for all the problems of life internally and think we have found them. Self-blame seems reasonable. I can see my mistakes in the story of my life that explain all the bad things that ever happened to me and my family. If someone else talks this way, I counsel them to consider the possibility that they are being subjective about their past, too hard on themselves, and seeing fault where there might not be any, blaming themselves for things that were outside their control.

But with me, life, for the most part, has been a need for self-forgiveness.

Should I fault the church?

The churches I pastored since never measured up to the simple vision and love evident in those coal-mining communities. And I blamed these high-tech churches for not measuring up.

I suppose ultimately our residency in that tiny town gave me a longing for something I would never find elsewhere in ministry.

Pastoring blue-collar workers, their families and even their 'clans' who see God's Word as a way of life is a whole other thing from pastoring white-collar workers who see God's Word more as a support for their life-style.

It is the fault of the times we're in? (I wrote a book about this possibility.) Today's pastorate is very different from how churches were led a few generations ago. Modernism has all but redefined pastoring in ways I could never imagine. I would no longer feel at home as I did there and then. I am an old fashion clergyman lost in the future.

I came to believe with absolute certainty that there was something very real, very biblical, about those early years in Western Pennsylvania and even if the church has changed—and it most definitely has—no reinterpretation of truth will ever discredit the spiritual reality of those days.

But does all this change mean someone has to be at fault because of my despondency? Must someone be responsible for my pain!?

I still ruminate over my personal history but—honestly—I tire of it. I want forgiveness to free me from this search. Is it possible to exhaust the memory of hurtful feelings? I'm there ...I think.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dei Culpa

You cannot sue a government that does not permit itself to be sued. And God, by virtue of His station as the definer of right and wrong, should never be blamed for injustice. God defines justice ..holiness by Who He is. Even "*if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*"¹ So, I cannot see where God could be criminal in the details of my life. Whatever God chooses for me *has* to be right ...by definition. But this doesn't at all address how I *feel* about it. If God is, in any way, responsible for my sorrows—call it discipline or tribulation or whatever theology describes my angst—it still hurts and I still have questions as to why or what He had in mind when He called me. ..and I am not alone in this question for the ages which more than a few of us retirees now ponder.

But, nonetheless, did any one in the Biblical record accuse God of being unjust? Habakkuk complained,

"How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"²

But does this rise to the level of blaming God? Both of Lazarus' sisters seem to reprimand the Savior,

"Lord, ... if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³

And then there's David and the Psalms replete with the moans and groans that seem to legitimize his complaints:

"I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail,

looking for my God."⁴

Yet all this emotional back and forth, up and down, is part of the process while we wait on God to rescue us. Questioning God's delay[?] is not the same as questioning His motives. Asking God "why?!" is the heart trying to see life through a divine perspective. We often struggle here. But no Biblical writer ever accused God of not caring--not saving. (The apostles came close.⁵) They all came around in the end to praise God's faithfulness.

Yet feelings can be confused in moments of painful ignorance, when life is a perfect storm of anything and everything that could go wrong. When God's silence makes prayer seemingly an exercise in futility. In our desperation, we may sound like we are blaming God for, at least, not stopping the hurt. This is not the case!

We are with the psalmist on this:

"My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"⁶

These feelings are understandable. No believer should compound their misery with an emotional flagellation, a mea culpa, that needlessly adds to their agony. Don't kick yourself for entertaining such thoughts in those times when each second seems an eternity away from deliverance. Tell Him how you feel but try to be 'nice' about it.

These are not words that blame God or that spell discontent with His providential care. These are cries for mercy that are the true mark of a believer. What makes us Christians when it is all said and done is our recognition of God--not as a punisher but as a God of mercy. What identifies us as believers is a prayer life that persists in asking Him for His mercy. These are spontaneous outbursts of a prayer life gone viral because we hurt.

And it's all good because God is on His way!

There are some things that simply cannot happen without hurting us so deeply that life has been permanently altered. Nothing is what it was. When you love somebody, they are a real part of who you are becoming. The sadness of losing them to tragedy has no description. The grief overwhelms all future hope. Life seems to dead end in that moment of what seems like a final goodbye to someone who was our inspiration, the meaning in our life. It is here that we often look for

someone to blame. And in some minds and hearts God owns this one. Where was God and why didn't He prevent this tragedy?

There is no argument that can soothe the heart or make one 'feel' reason. There is no theology for this but God is capable of providing an empathic embrace, of a grace that can hold us tightly, in such a time until we can see through the haze of our grief and once again trust Him ultimately to make even this work for some eternal good.

He is not at fault.

I have sought to apply Peter's reasoning:

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Where can I go if I blame the One Who *answers* prayer, Who sustains me and comforts me in my sorrow, Who provides for my needs?

God will still prove Himself faithful!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Give 'Em Attitude

Timing is everything when it comes to forgiving someone. I recall the rather comical story told by a couple that attended a church I pastored back-in-the-day. While she was home preparing a candle-lite meal for the two of them, he was delayed, after work, innocently enough, spending the early evening at the gymnasium before heading home. When he arrived home, she was furious beyond words. She was hurting over the miscommunication that now was his fault. She began to reprimand him, hurling words—not plates, thank goodness—at him, punishing him with her words. He tried to interrupt her with a request to be forgiven. In the language of the heart he was beyond sorry, he was conscious-stricken and apologetic, but she didn't want to hear it. She probably said something like this:

"You just march in here and say, Sorry!!!! I don't think so, Mr.!! I need time, time to vent this anger. What do you propose I do with hours of rage building inside me while you take a swim?! I am suppose to just say, "I forgive?" Absolutely not!! You're going to hear me out, first!"

And the end of that rant probably went something like this:

"Your dinner is in the fridge ...goodnight!"

Is forgiveness all that's needed to release that emotional pressure? Is forgiveness a panacea, the emotional elixir, for all types of abuse? Dr. Dincalci alludes to this, saying:

* * *

“Forgiveness wipes away the damage of the past whether the hurt occurred thirty years ago or thirty minutes ago. It allows us to experience the present moment, the only time we really live.”¹

Nothing said here denies the fact that forgiveness is a process—a time consuming effort. Forgiveness is a lesson taught that once learned applies across all relationships. These are life lessons. Like a mechanic that needs to get his or her hands greasy, or the programmer who spends hours debugging coding algorithms, I had to get in there and get dirty, feel the burn, experience life, in order to value genuine forgiveness when I finally recognized it within.

“You know you have forgiven someone when he or she has harmless passage through your mind.”²

Grandma used to say, “I’ll learn you.” And I had to learn the value of forgiveness. I needed to learn that there are other perspectives on an experience than the initial painful one. I needed to listen to what I wasn’t hearing when my accuser was talking. I needed to read hearts as well as words. I needed to look past my original interpretation of things and find one that had a future worth living. I needed to discover that forgiveness had a voice in this circumstance or encounter. I needed to learn to forgive.

Now we know why counselors exist—not just to take our money. But when I saw a counselor in my need I was reluctant to tell him things—no good reason, just who I was at the time. Besides, if the counselee had their way—tell me it isn’t so—the session would be taken up as an enabling, supporting and justification session and not a time to seek healing through a changed perspective and forgiveness.

I have known persons who have quit counseling sessions because it was painful for them to hear where they needed to change, to hear that part of their problem was within themselves, to learn that to get well they needed to let go of the bitterness. Who wants open heart surgery when a pain pill will suffice? (You do understand, I am talking psychologically and spiritually.)

Talking about these things with the Lord—which was never a 5 minute rant but a lengthy diatribe toned down a bit to sound more respectfully reasonable—was the only thing that brought relief to the emotional convulsions I was experiencing. I felt at times somewhere

between betrayed and raped—not to be too blunt, but candid. Many sessions with God later I began to see the dim glow of forgiveness on the far end of that dark tunnel of despondency. My attitude was changing ever so discernibly for the better. I was learning the value of a forgiving spirit.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Pull Your Pants Up

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Path To Forgiveness

I have lived a charmed life—relatively speaking. The old adage, a Persian proverb: “*I complained I had no shoes until I met a man with no feet,*” sometimes works for me to be more accepting of life and, thereby, more forgiving of others I might blame for my misfortune.

When I reached the senior year of my bible college experience, I applied to a seminary in Philadelphia, PA. to continue my education. I had an increasing passion to learn the biblical languages and maybe go into the field of textual criticism. It wasn’t to be. I had pristine credentials, personally. I had the reference of my language teacher, who himself was taught by the professor of Hebrew studies at the seminary ..and who himself was, in turn, taught by the author of the text book we were using.

But the year before I came along, a student from our school who enrolled at this seminary became fanatically outspoken about the pentecostal experience—speaking in tongues. Admissions at the seminary needed to take a year off from accepting students from our little bible college to let things settle. The window of opportunity closed on me because of an inconsiderate and unwise but sincere classmate who preceded me to the school.

You might think, “So what!” But this was my planned and joyously anticipated future—now changed. I couldn’t blame the classmate. I didn’t know who he was. I blamed the denomination and the emphasis it put on a theological position that put me in an unacceptable light by association.

How can I find a path to forgive *a denomination*?

It helped to walk in their thoughts. Some of the leaders within the denomination were not college grads. (I am not speaking about the

school I attended. The teachers there were Master's and PHD level instructors.) At least one denominational leader that I spoke to had no more formal training in bible than what was provided in Sunday School or a summer camp. Back then many pastors believed that one needed only to open the mouth and the Lord would fill it. (Central Bible Institute—now, CBC—of the Assemblies of God was the inspired dream of a scholarly leadership that was, at the time, under fire because they were breaking from this traditional view.)

The pentecostal experience is real and some feel the need to defend it in their apologetics and theology—and not without reason. My misfortune makes more sense in the light of all this. It took time and prayer, seeing where my life eventually was going and the blessing in all this to finally forgive them.

Don't you hate those people who win lotteries! This might not be a matter for forgiveness, unless we need to forgive the fates for treating them so handsomely and forgetting about our needs and interests.

Maybe Godah, let's not go there....

"Rejoice with those who rejoice." Paul admonished.¹ It is a clear path to accepting another whose blessings seem to outweigh mine. (I say 'seem' because there can be no true comparison between their life and mine, their interests, circumstances, abilities, etc. and what makes up mine.)

In 1972 I taught the biblical languages at a small bible school in Western Pennsylvania. This opportunity provided a limited income to support my family. I wanted to go full time; so, when a position opened up, I applied. They gave the post to another person: a *woman* with far less qualifications. (Here I go again assuming too much to justify my hurt. And my chauvinistic slip is showing.) I could point to the benefit I had been to the school and thought if given the chance I could put our little school on the denominational map. I gave them a library. I put it on the Dewey Decimal system (boxes and boxes of books, commentaries, grammars, etc.)

How do I forgive the school board for this blatantly unwise oversight?

I began by congratulating my co-worker for her promotion. And the fact she was a '*she*' was only significant in my hurt. Once I saw how excited she was, how thankful to God, how energized to come to class, I knew I couldn't in my heart and thoughts deny her this opportunity. Forgiving the board got easier, even though, another

door closed and we were moving on.

I was in my early teens and just mixing it up with the kids on the block. It was a free moment when nothing else important was happening and back in those days on the west side of Buffalo, New York, we were a neighborly set. We were known as the “City of Good Neighbors” not without reason.

I was bouncing a small rubber ball with a four year old boy who lived next door. It was a fun time when suddenly the ball errantly took a chaotic bounce striking the little guy in the nose. His sister who was watching him followed him crying into their house while I waited anxiously to apologize for hitting him with the ball.

The point of this story? When she returned to the street, she told me an apology was unnecessary. He blamed the ball!

He blamed the *ball!*

What a great idea, to forgo a need to forgive or be forgiven because just a bad bounce is the cause of our woes, not the people. Is it possible to change perspective on our misfortune that gives the persons in this ongoing drama a lesser role than we had designed for them in our imagination? Would this make the call to forgiveness easier to answer!?

Before passing this idea off as so much four year old nonsense, if you are a believer, take another look at Matthew 18:3:

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

There is something to be said for innocence that finds it easier to “let go” petty arguments, to renew friendships, to start each new day, new.

We know that some hurt is too traumatic to pass off with an “I forgive you, don’t let it happen again”. We do not pretend to suggest that the word “forgive” is that magical or powerful that it can immediately insulate us, protect us, from bitter or hateful feelings. But a believer should have a head start since we come into relationships knowing that Christ has given us a capacity to love those who do not show love toward us. And we keep quoting the theology that it is the nature of man to be hurtful until they become like Christ. ...also, God hating the sin not the sinner ...or something like that.

Perspective is everything. We often need to circle a situation or a

relationship and see it from a different angle not in the hope of explaining it away but in the hope of understanding it more completely. It *was* the ball! And sometimes there are details once known that shed the clear light of day on our most frightening nightmare.

Carl and I were playing baseball with a small group of guys at the church picnic. I was in center field when the ball came in my direction and I missed it. When we changed innings Carl's ire descended on me like a hive of angry bees. It seemed out of character for a best friend who was nothing but complimentary and supportive—never mad with disappointment—but now, putting the game over our friendship.

I was stunned and while I pondered the end of all friendships, Carl was playing center field and he, too, missed a fly ball that according to his dad, who was watching all this drama take place, he should have caught.

At the end of the half inning, his dad was merciless. It appeared that in his eyes, his son, Carl, was useless and inept and blind. (My memory now is far gentler than his dad's rage then.)

I saw then that Carl was simply reacting to my missed ball like he had been taught by example. I no longer saw Carl's reaction to my miscue as a potential friendship destroyer. I "let it go" without further incident. I forgave Carl for something for which he didn't even know I needed to forgive him. Yes, I was deeply offended when one of my closest friends tore into me like an angry coach who just benched me. Yes, I thought Carl violated the rules of friendship in how he spoke to me, but on hearing his dad yelling at him, all that instantly melted into nothingness.

Not every situation in life is so conveniently reducible to insignificance but many are. It depends on perspective. Admittedly, we may need counseling to gain perspective. There are times when we cannot do this on our own.

Sometimes we may be more open to forgiving someone their offense. But other times the hole of despair their actions push us into is too deep to climb out without someone else throwing us a rope.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I Love Me, I Love Me Not

In a positive way: I am the servant's servant at heart. Over the years, friends have mistaken this for humility, but inside I have a driving interest in personal achievement. I want to be able to—not so much boast as to—see value to my life and to offer a legacy to subsequent generations of family. I am a contributor—or I want to be. I want to share in the responsibility to make a work environment or someone's perspective on their life a bit friendlier. I love to teach—anybody, anything.

The point being that when I offend, I work against the very principles I espouse. I contradict what is natural for me. Worse: each misstep further supports my low self-esteem issues. I need to forgive myself, get up, emotionally, and walk on with a resolve to learn from the experience. And to some degree this has happened.

Because of my low opinion of myself, I seem to spontaneously forgive people for offending me—almost as if I deserve it. But is this genuine forgiveness?

Because I am a servant at heart, I see church board members in power struggles with pastoral leadership as misunderstanding and miscommunication issues instead of a dangerous attack against—to reference a Biblical phrase: 'the Lord's anointed.' Maybe I have been gravely mistaken due to my temperament.

Because I am a teacher at heart, I often see other's nastiness, verbal rampages, and hurtful interactions as part of an overall learning experience—even for a board member who is learning to get along with a pastor. My discomfort? God just happened to chose me for that lesson. I was dismissed from two pulpits but it all seemed like part of

the necessary process by which God elected to bring His people to a place of fuller ministry. I was an important link in the chain of their development as a church. (Okay, I might be full of myself but seeing the good in a situation has its benefit. The most meaningful one? My being able, now, to forgive.)

God's people are learning to find a quiet peace and a more resigned acceptance of God's leadership. Going forward they are discovering the value of honoring the call of God on each life and the part pastoral leadership plays in this. It is a sifting out of interests that are inappropriate for ministry. It is a process by which God puts the pieces of our lives together to eventually make one beautiful picture.

It seems that with this perspective forgiveness is a catalyst that encourages us out of our darkness of mind into the light of our next assignment for His glory.

December 7, 1988 I took a flight from Boston to Pittsburgh to meet with the Executive Board of the religious organization of which I was a member. Two months earlier, I had been removed from the church which I pastored by the district officials of the organization. I was very tired, having worked an audit shift (all night) at a local hotel to make "ends meet." Adding to my befuddlement, I couldn't sleep on the plane.

Having arrived, I dozed a few minutes in the waiting area while the board prepared to meet with me. They had called this meeting to get to the bottom of my discipline. Some of them were enraged at the thought that this could happen on their watch without their knowledge or authority. The board wanted to be impartial but the questions asked of me were difficult to answer. By now I feared I was incriminating myself. After all, my mind with lack of sleep was a mishmash of words that sounded in my head like they should go together—but I wasn't sure. The meeting was a useless exercise. The meeting represented the concern of friends who were ready to defend me but I gave them no cause to do so.

There is a side of me that I have had a chance in the retiring reflections of old age to examine more closely. This is something I never did in my twenties but I am doing now in my seventies. Admitting some of the stuff I did in my earlier days is raising feelings of remorse that may require self-forgiveness to affectively lay to rest. I have written about some of these in my memoirs and won't rehash them here since they

are difficult for me to talk about. And besides, in terms of forgiveness, it is not wise to keep bringing them up!

Truthfully: it seems I have been at odds with someone or someone's sense of leadership going all the way back to Bible college and my junior year when I was the assistant editor of the year book. They didn't want me for the editorship in my senior year even though I was in training for that very position. (I took a weekend off when a "cut" was due at the printers. Ouch!)

I found out that I am not perfect and that in my humanness I have done things that suggest that the bullies have a point, that my struggle for self-respect now has one more mountain to get over. There was and is a side to my personality that needs to be more self-disciplined.

Going back, I amaze myself with the number of times controversy surrounded me. In 1972 I was refused ordination because my theology was considered 'vague' by the denomination's district board. But that was okay because I never saw ordination as anything more than my mother's boast. I was ordained in '82.

But somethings I own alone.

Charlie was dying, but I was working my new ministry—about 70 miles north, a little more than an hour's drive away—and delayed my decision to see him when he asked for me. I never went and he died alone. This remains in my thinking unforgivable.

Charlie and I had a good history. I helped lay a cold water line into his 2 room shack-like bungalow where he and his wife, Ruthie, lived—the same Ruthie, Joyce spent those final moments with. For reasons I care not to explain, Charlie reminded me of 'Ferdie' back in Buffalo. Ferdie was a close friend of dad's and often helped us take bundles of newspapers or scrap copper to the Junk yard for a few extra dollars. These were my kind-of people because they were real, simple, folk I could relate to and with whom a friendship was not a political devise to garner favor.

But Charlie was dying and wanted to see me, no doubt, for me to pray with him, to share those final moments of this life and I wasn't there. Forgiving me for this is hard.

Over the years, it has been helpful in this regard to commend myself for not doing some of the terrible things done by other people my age or in my neighborhood or in my world. I have been somewhat proud

of any achievement or significant thing I did as a morale booster—and God knows I needed it.

I pushed myself to achieve, to get semi-good at something (whether it was learning Biblical Greek or some computer language) and this became the inner voice to drown out the noise of all the things I did wrong. In a sense, I wanted to “make it up” to family where I had disappointed them. On the scale of self-evaluation I needed to set the weight of the good things about me to balance off the bad.

Self-condemnation was so confusing. Living with regret because, when I should have zigged, I zagged, is an emotional whip with which I continued to beat myself instead of leaving all this with God and where necessary, in the spirit of true confessions, simply forgive myself and move past it.

Luke attended the little church I pastored in West Cape May, New Jersey. When the offerings became worryingly short, he offered me a partnership with himself as a painter. I had painted houses in Buffalo through my late teens and it seemed an exciting idea to partner with him. With each paint contract, our friendship grew until I got it in my head that a partnership meant that Luke was my total equal. I soon failed to recognize his expertise as a professional and the decades he put into honing his craft. His wisdom seemed no wiser than mine and I began to see myself as someone very capable in this business. This would have consequences.

That summer we painted the home of—we affectionately called him—Santa Claus. The elderly white bearded, pop bellied gentleman wanted us to include under the contract a series of small tasks for no additional money which meant that the longer we served his interests the smaller my paycheck became from that job. I told Luke I would not be returning to his place for any additional work. Luke, however, thought it was better for business if we accommodated our rather demanding client. This disagreement would prove to be a very serious change in our—until then—close relationship.

Luke spent the next few days back at Santa’s place while I continued working on the Chalfont hotel a few blocks away. The hotel was being renewed as an historic site. I reasoned that I had that right to ignore Luke since we were partners, but the partnership was now in trouble. Our relationship would never be the same.

One day Luke informed me he would be painting the cubicle of the Chalfont. It is a small room atop the hotel. But I also wanted to work

on it; so, I followed him up the ladder while Luke seemed to intentionally step on my hands rung upon rung as we climbed. By the time I left Cape May, a month or so later, our friendship had to be on life support and neither he nor I seemed to care whether or not the plug was pulled on it.

A few years later, my family and I revisited the seashore town where Luke and his family lived. I genuinely missed him. He asked me, then, if I could return to the shore so that we could resume our partnership and friendship. Forgiveness was everywhere evident even though the word was never mentioned. It was an emotionally tearful reunion that now in reflection causes me regrettable embarrassment at how childish I had been back then.

I must confess that when I hear that another 'good' person has the same temptations, or the same problems, or the same errors in judgment, I find it easier to forgive myself because I know I can forgive them. One thing is true: my fury is directed inward; so, I can easily encourage the other guy to, in repentance and self-forgiveness, rise above their regrets, bless their offender¹ and get their soul back.

Can I take my own advise!?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sad Night Visions

But a deacon, or someone who appeared semi-important, stopped us from strolling through. Without apology he pointed out that all the rooms were in use. There seemed to be the vibe of "you—are—not—welcome—here" in his voice.

Whereupon Joyce turned back and headed across the sanctuary, spotting someone—a homeless friend. I don't know how I knew that. It was a dream.—Joyce knew from her past. As I exited the sanctuary—alone—their voices faded in the distance. I do not know what they were talking about.

A little later I found myself in one of those 'forbidden' rooms in which the instructor was teaching that morning on the Pauline Epistles. I decided to join in—looking forward to a good bible study. Sitting in front of me was someone who knew me and after a short while my "friend" asked the leader if he knew who I was, recommending my biblical expertise to the group. The instructor nodded in silent agreement that he had heard of me, but the frown he wore gestured an unspoken disinterest. A wave of rejection washed over me.

I took my exit, dejected, drifting my way toward the parking lot and away from everyone where I would wait in silence for my wife.

I awoke. Is there meaning in such dreams or are they just so much pizza sauce? It was 3 AM, and though dreams are seldom remembered, this one lingered. Who can sleep when such thoughts beckon a hot bath and a soliloquy to express themselves! Besides, I decided it was time to get up and get ready for work.

* * *

My best guess as to the dream? It seems that hurts are imbedded deep in the psyche covered over by the busyness of life until one night in an unprotected moment a dream finds them.

It seems like the hurts of 20 years ago are still real. Some church people back then toward me were less than loving—at least as I saw it. I know in my heart I have—and have been—forgiven and the past is clearly the past. Besides, many of the players in this drama are now gone to be with our Lord. But the wound caused by our broken relationships is obviously somehow still tender to the touch of memory ...or at least in a dream or two.

Here is a long sentence:

- If forgiveness required my complete and forever emotional co-operation, that is to say,
 - if all my bad memories had to be reworked until they were good memories, that is to say,
 - if I needed to change my perspective on all that ever happened that caused me hurt until no hurt remained, that is to say,
 - if I needed to be permanently “over it,”
- I guess I am still harboring an unforgiving attitude.

But that's not how I see it.

- I know that in my heart I was glad over the years following to revisit and be revisited by many from our past and enjoy a reconciling hug.
- I know I can look forward to a reunion in glory with the very christians that seemed to offend me the most.

I know I have forgiven and have been forgiven.

But the dream was still just as real as ever to me. My feelings were exposed raw to the light of recollections thought expunged. Add this note: the instructor and deacon in this dream were unknown to me and usually the people from my past are identified in dreams—for good or ill.

And what of the homeless friend? What ever does this mean?!

And yet, it makes sense to me. My wife and I are more likely to sense a connection with those who are socially of lesser importance than the "deacons" of this world. There may be a sense in which those who have less are more sympathetic toward our struggles

and have provided us a welcome. Others in self-interest seem to have a need to push and shove past us while they are on their way up.

Maybe I am that homeless person who sees myself as not belonging anywhere in particular and yet wanting to be around others of like faith.

- Perhaps, this was God's way of bringing to light something that needed to be seen by me.

- Perhaps, this is all part of some healing process.

- Perhaps, I needed to see that forgiveness and emotional memory are not always in sync.

- Perhaps, a dream provides an emotional release, so that, my reality will be less encumbered by the feeling. I can live my life free from these feelings; I have left them on my pillow.

Something to think about with my morning cup of coffee.....

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Keystone

It is the unforgiving spirit within a church that rips it apart. There is little else a devil needs do after it starts a good rumor flying than to sit back and watch with delight while we find ingenious ways of rationalizing how God is using us to rid the congregation of people we now have grown to hate. And the beautiful part of all this is that we confess love. There is no admitting or facing the animosity that bubbles up from a heart that shows no forgiveness. We are totally self-deceived, praising God, while we wield a sharp tongue and cut innocence to pieces.

And most pastors seem ignorant that all this is taking place right under their noses. There is no emphasis on counseling forgiveness or reconciliation because it is the most energy draining and resource consuming of all ministries. To promote—not just preach—a spirit of forgiveness takes a vision that has nothing to do with fund raising or remodeling sanctuaries—things most visions itemize. It has every thing to do with promoting a solid and emphatic teaching of God’s Word that like the writer to the Hebrews warned is a painful operation:

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” — Hebrews 4:12

Digging out deep feelings that have festered unchecked maybe for months or even years is an operation on the soul God must perform and He uses the knife of His Word to do it. The healing process initially hurts beyond words. To employ another metaphor: we are for

the first time looking on the dark side of the moon of a smiling reputation that only, until now, faced outward on a world of friends that had no idea there was that side to us.

Forgiving offenses against me is relatively an easy thing compared to forgiving those who have hurt my family. When a son was told by a church trustee to stay away from those friends who were part of the church youth group he attended—and the trustee used expletives to make his point a bit pointier—no one was more enraged than I. My boy reacted by going behind the church and pounding the side of the building with his fists (one of the youth was an eyewitness). My son no longer attends church. The pain he felt still lingers in my memory. If such action were prosecutable, would I?

It does not help me to rehash the painful accounts of abuse inflicted on my family. Suffice it to say that over the years every member of my family has been targeted. None of this is new. My story is told by thousands of pastors—and parishioners.

Nobody died, thank God! Everyone went on with their lives scattered in as many directions; so, we have adjusted to the past, but does this mean we are reconciled to it? Do we have to? For me, so much of church is show anymore. So much is impractical ritual designed to give ordinary humans a sense, with a religious twist, that God will be there in their hour of need. [And He will be, not because of the twist but because of grace.] Until then, life goes on same-old-same-old as it does for all of us.

Many “christians” are indistinguishable from the society they live in. In the civilized world, we don’t stand out anymore. We are simply part of the current culture, unidentifiable in any unique way as christians. But the early church was known, according to history, by their love!

That sounds cruel and crude, I know. But I purposed to be honest in writing this about the impact church people have had upon me. My vision for ministry is just about non-existent now. If I could have a pulpit here or there, I would want to focus on the message of Calvary alone. There is nothing else to talk about.

There you have it. Have I forgiven them for their verbal abuse toward my family? I think so. Yes!

I love going to church now for the *message*—of *Calvary*; so, I attend a baptist church because they emphasize it in sermon and song over and over again—but without the militancy.

* * *

The good doctor might be right. Although from God's perspective forgiveness leads to a reconciliation, that may not be the case with us. Christians tend to adjust to their broken relationships by moving about, shuffling congregations to form new ones. We church hop.

And psychology has no problem here because forgiveness is a frame of mind to bring each of us to a place of inner peace while avoiding the persons who disrupted our lives and whom we need to forgive. Avoiding them going forward, not seeking reconciliation, may be at times sound guidance. The doctor counsels us to fill our lives with people who are supportive, understanding, sensitive, and loving.

But, again, it does not represent the Biblical idea which encourages forgiveness as a way to reconcile. On top of this, biblical reconciliation, for which forgiveness is a prerequisite, was for the benefit of the offender. It was not a private issue with God as if He needed to forgive us to be at peace. Calvary, vindicated by God's forgiveness, provided a way back to God, a reconciliation for us with Him.

If God used forgiveness in the modern sense, Jesus' death would have been—no pun intended—overkill. His death on the cross would make no sense if it were intended, exclusively, or even, primarily, to give the Father some relief from rage.¹ It was the *Father* who gave us *His Son* [John 3:16] which speaks to His love not His wrath. We, too, were not forgiven in absentia. Calvary was for our benefit because it was for our salvation. We are in a very real sense beneficiaries of such a glorious act of His grace.

Forgiveness is a powerful friend. It can melt hardened hearts, disarm a defensive stance, defuse anger, heal relationships—and for those who want it, forgiveness has provided eternal life.

As believers, our lives should bear witness to a spirit of reconciliation and healed relationships. Love—not American-style but God-style—should be the message of the Cross spoken in every action and every word of every believer.

How do I know I have forgiven them? How do I know that I would reconcile with them if they wanted to reconcile with me? How do I know that my attitude and my feelings toward them are all positive? I just do!

Should forgiveness mean that a relationship can start over? Relationships are built on trust and the hope of trust. In relational

terms: nothing could be simpler than *forgiveness*.

But how many times can someone drink at the well of someone's forgiveness before that well runs dry? The theology says 70 times 7 but the source of God's love and forgiveness is endless. That well of living water can never go dry. But when a believer doesn't tap into that source through prayer, forgiving others may become a far more challenging thing to do.

Forgiveness is still the keystone of the entrance into all my relationships from God to family to church to society to forgiving myself.

Endnotes

Chapter Two

- ¹ Luke 23:34
- ² Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind, The Blocks to Forgiveness* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition: 2011).
- ³ Matthew 18:23-35 23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.[b] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

- ⁴ Acts 7:60 "Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep."

Chapter Three

- ¹ *ibid.* Kindle Location 627
² *ibid.* Kindle Locations 898-901

Chapter Four

- ¹ The only Old Testament verses are about God forgiving us, not our forgiving one another.
² Richard Trench. *On the Study of the Words Lectures* (New York: W. Widdleton, publisher. Unknown), 56.
³ I Corinthians 13:4.
⁴ Acts 7:60.
⁵ Dr. Sharon Baker in "*Executing God*" would soften this description in this a postmodern world. She would not say, 'required' but that Jesus' death was the ultimate sacrificial act of our killing Him while He proclaimed in that moment a profound, intellectually fathomless, and divine forgiveness.
⁶ Luke 23:34.
⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:18 "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."
⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:10.

Chapter Five

- ¹ Galatians 5:23. Is it possible to conclude that the total expression of the fruit of the Spirit could somehow be void of a spirit of forgiveness? This is the ultimate question of theology.
² Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014). p. 202.
³ *ibid.*
⁴ *ibid.*
⁵ *ibid.* p.203.
⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:6
⁷ Romans 12:19

Chapter Six

- ¹ *ibid.* Locations 1236-1237.
² Mark 22:15 "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."
³ Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition: 2011).

Kindle Locations 626-627.

- ⁴ Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition: 2011). Kindle Locations 668-670.

Chapter Seven

- ¹ Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition: 2011). Kindle Locations 1039-1042.
- ² Numbers 19:1-3 "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: "This is a requirement of the law that the Lord has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke. Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence."
- ³ Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014). P. 205.

Chapter Eight

- ¹ Isaiah 63:4 For I looked forward to the day of vengeance, and then payback time arrived. See Romans 12:9
- ² Render a judgment. This word can mean to requite as well as to penalize.
- ³ Deuteronomy 32:39-41
- ⁴ 2 Thessalonians 1:6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you
- ⁵ 2 Corinthians 7:11 "...what readiness to see justice done..."
- ⁶ Hebrews 10:30 "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'"
- ⁷ Luke 14:14 "Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."
- ⁸ Wiki: "In theology, the doctrine of divine simplicity says that God is without parts. The general idea of divine simplicity can be stated in this way: the being of God is identical to the "attributes" of God. In other words, such characteristics as omnipresence, goodness, truth, eternity, etc. are identical to God's being, not qualities that make up that being, nor abstract entities inhering in God as in a substance."
- ⁹ Acts 3:21 "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."
- ¹⁰ See Matthew 18:26-33

Chapter Nine

- ¹ 2 Corinthians 2:7 "Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."
- ² 2 Corinthians 2:10 "Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have

forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake.”

³ Written by J.R. (+1985) Bailey, Kenneth Maurice Williams, Rudy Clark • Copyright © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc, Carlin America Inc, BMG Rights Management US, LLC

⁴ Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition: 2011). Kindle Locations 2162-2164.

⁵ Among other things: a gross misapplication of the concept of denominationalism.

Chapter Ten

¹ Ephesians 4:26.

Chapter Eleven

¹ Psalm 51:8-12 “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

² Adonis Vidu. *Atonement, Law, and Justice*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2014), pp. 200-1.

³ I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Chapter Twelve

¹ I have since studied and wrote about this method in my work, “Challenged: Living Our Faith in a Postmodern Age.”

Chapter Thirteen

¹ Psalm 106:44

² I John 5:15.

³ John 15:15 “You are my friends if you do what I command.”

Chapter Fifteen

¹ 2 Timothy 2:13.

² Habakkuk 1:2.

³ John 11:21, 32.

⁴ Psalms 69:3.

⁵ Mark 4:38 The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

⁶ Psalms 42:3.

Chapter Sixteen

¹ *ibid.* Kindle Locations 809-810.

² Rev. Karyl Huntley – Senior minister, Golden Gate Center for Spiritual Living. McGinnis 2006.

see Dr. Jim Dincalci. *How to Forgive When You Can't: The Breakthrough Guide to Free Your Heart & Mind* (The Forgiveness Foundation. Kindle Edition. 2011). Kindle Locations 892-895.

Chapter Eighteen

¹ Romans 12:15

Chapter Nineteen

¹ I Peter 3:9 “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Chapter Twenty-One

¹ This reveals a basic point of my theology that Christ’s death was not to appease a divine anger but to provide for our reconciliation to God without an end run around His holiness. His holiness was satisfied not His wrath.