

*The* **FLAG** *of*  
**FORGIVENESS**

**THE MURDER OF  
CARL G. WEST**



**S H A N E   W E S T**

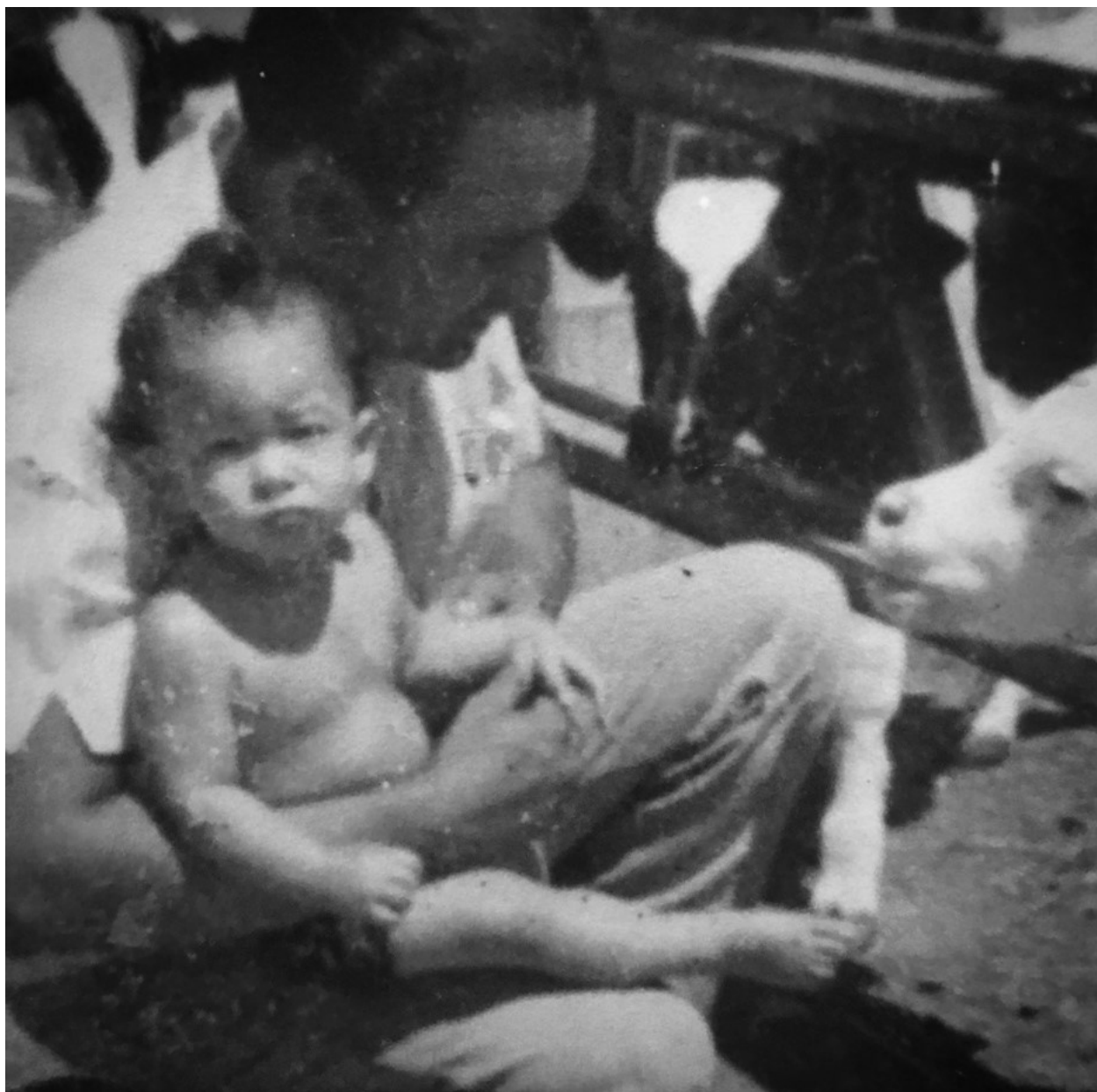
# THE FLAG OF FORGIVENESS



*The Murder Of  
Carl G. West*

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SHANE WEST



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## INTRODUCTION



When I was first inspired to write about forgiveness, I did not understand how vast the topic is. I realized that most people cannot fulfill their goals and dreams because they have focused their attention on the past. It is human nature to live in the past or the future, but we can all benefit from focusing on the present—that is where forgiveness takes place. Digging further into forgiveness, I soon understood that many of us have completely downplayed it or abandoned it entirely. We simply do not know how to handle the resentment and often the bitterness we feel. Some people are lucky, and they learn to forgive early in life. But for people like myself, the inability to forgive leaves a wound that reopens often. Each time we are hurt and unable to forgive, we feel that same pain. That pain that for many of us is a common feeling in our lives.

Forgiveness can leave a bad aftertaste. For whatever reason, it is seen as weak. You will have to understand that it is quite the opposite—forgiveness is an act of maturity, bravery, courage, and intelligence. Most importantly, it is a direct connection to your heart—it is love itself. Many people are unwilling to forgive. They take their resentment to the grave.

These people leave themselves defenseless against their uncomfortable feelings of resentment, anger, and blame. One must be willing to learn to cope with these feelings if they want to reap the benefits of forgiveness. It is the first step, and it is vital to the entire process. When we carefully choose our actions, we change our reality and that of others. But our choices may not always align with others'. This simply leads to conflicts. We all experience these conflicts—otherwise, we would never learn a thing and we would mature.

We can arrive at this maturity level by eliminating the conflict within ourselves as we experience conflict with others. By sorting through this conflict, we set the stage for true forgiveness.

You can learn to forgive. It is easier than you think. When you understand how an incident causes resentment and anger, you can switch your mindset. Instead of continuing to place blame, you can start the process of forgiving. If you want to experience true happiness in your life, stop looking outward. Happiness is achieved within. You can achieve genuine happiness by freeing yourself from these stories of the past. You can finally confront these ghosts. When you face them, they will evaporate and disappear into thin air!

The ghosts simply disappear and you will no longer be haunted by your past—you will be more present in the now. I learned this firsthand, and I welcome you to read my experience.

## CHAPTER ONE



### **The Murder of Carl G. West**

What an amazing revival we were having in West Sacramento, California. Souls in the altar, people reaching out to God, and God reaching down to every one of us. We had been in revival for several weeks and once again the water baptistry was full. I was getting ready to baptize new converts in the Mighty Name of Jesus Christ.

I had just baptized a woman named Heidi. With my arms still wet with baptistry water, somebody quickly came and handed me the cordless phone from the church office. I could tell by the look on their face that the call had to be of utmost priority. It must have been important if it interrupted a baptism. I dried off my hands on my suit pants and quickly said hello. Quickly, I recognized that it was Jack Alisea, a pastor and old friend of mine from Kerman, California. With his voice breaking, Jack said, “Shane, your father was murdered last night. Shane, in the early hours of the Fourth of July, your father was shot and murdered.”

I do not remember much after I heard those words. I do recall leaning against a car and moaning in grief. My wife Dana quickly came and asked what the call was about. I whispered to her, “Dana, my father is dead. Dad was murdered last night. Shot in the face by a man named Robert. Dana, my father is forever gone, and I never even had a chance to say goodbye.” Dana, in her loving way, whispered back into my ear as she held me, “It’s going to be alright baby. Everything is going to be alright.” I remember crying and saying to her, “It will never be alright baby, my father died. And what if he died lost and went to hell?”



Dana and I flew from Sacramento to Fresno to be with family and make preparations for my father's funeral. I remember finding out that Robert, the man that murdered my father, was a lifelong acquaintance of his. There had an argument over a woman and a swamp cooler. This man whom I had never met drove seven miles to my father's doorstep. When my father answered the front door, he was shot in the face at point-blank range.

Once again, I was met with hurt and pain. I found myself wondering what I would do if I were to meet Robert. My father was only 53 years old. The man had his hang-ups and was an alcoholic for so many years of my young life. What would I do? To be fully honest and transparent, for some time, I knew in my heart that I would do to Robert what he had done to my father! I would not use a weapon per se—I would get much more vengeance if I were to use my hands.

Thoughts like this tormented me for months. I began to see how hard forgiveness is when it concerns such an awful act. I had been preaching forgiveness for years but at that moment, I was being challenged by it. Further, I had to navigate forgiveness for a person whom I hated but had never met. How would I manage that? This man took my father from me. This man took the grandfather of my children, whom Dana and I would have years down the road.

I was the preacher who delivered sermons just about every night and saw miracles, deliverances, and salvations, quickly realized that it was me in need of deliverance myself. Who exactly could I turn to? As an evangelist, I was depending on God, and other men to book me for revivals. There was no way I could share the hatred, the bitterness, and the unforgiveness that was eating away at me.

## CHAPTER TWO



### **Standing Somewhere in the Shadows**

It was a hot summer day in Selma, California and only a handful of family and friends were there to say goodbye to my dad. I remember wondering beforehand if any of his beer-drinking friends would show up to pay respects to the tall, dark, Cherokee Indian who loved to drink and fight. Many have said this about my father: the more he drank, the more he wanted to fight. I had asked a young lady from our home church to sing a special and the song she chose still brings tears to my eyes. At times, I still listen to it and wonder if I ever will be able to get over this hurt, this pain. The song was “Standing Somewhere in the Shadows.” I wept to this song as I saw my father’s casket. I wondered if I would ever be able to get over this pain. Immediately after the song was sung, the final words were spoken. My father was a veteran of the Korean War. A driver of tanks, 1st Cavalry Division, he spent years in Korea. Naturally, the funeral home placed an American flag on his casket.

I cannot put into words what happened in the closing minutes of my father’s funeral. I must say however, that you may not see the significance of it. You may not see it as hurtful as I did. But all that I can hope for is that you can somehow relate. Regardless of what others say and feel, we know our own pains. I watched as they folded the American flag. I had never seen a flag folded but it seemed they were not very respectful while doing it.

The funeral director came and presented the flag to my grandmother, Flora. Flora and my father were always so close—as close as a mother and son could be. He lived

with her many times throughout the years. Flora was getting old when my father was murdered. I felt that the flag was safe with her until she found the right time to give it to me.

My father and I were always close. Even through the abandonment, hurt, and alcoholism, I always saw him as a hero. Sometimes a child sees no wrong in his parent or tries to justify their bad actions. It was well-known that my father would have wanted me to have any of his personal belongings. I had gone to the doorstep where my father was murdered. The flies were still buzzing around the blood-stained dirt where my dad had taken his last breath. I went into the house. All that was left to me was a pair his cowboy boots, a rodeo belt buckle he had won, and his wallet with five one-dollar bills in it.

So, when I saw my father's flag on his casket, I quickly understood that this flag could be proudly handed down to my children. They could then pass it down to their children, and so on. I watched my grandmother stand and walk through the rows of guests. I was shocked when she handed my father's flag to Cary, my half-brother. Cary is the son of my father's first marriage. He is a wealthy construction owner in California. Many years ago, Cary cussed at my father and wanted nothing to do with him. Cary always spoke so negatively about my father and his alcoholism. Through many years, my father tried to reconcile with him, but Cary would never allow them to make amends.

For years, Cary claimed to have "washed his hands of Carl West." As a matter of fact, it had been over eight years since they had last spoken. Everyone had known that the bridge between my father and Cary was never repaired. Too much time had passed, leaving Cary full of hurt and disappointment.

So, watching my grandmother hand over the flag to Cary—the very one thing that my father would have wanted me to have—hurt so deeply. I must say, the hurt that my

family caused somehow surpassed the hurt that my father's murderer caused. It was only a flag, but it was my flag. It was a flag that my father was honored with. He would have wanted me to take it home and hand it down to his grandsons one day.

It was only a flag, but it was all he had really left behind. It was only a flag, but it was something tangible—something that honored the man who was taken from me so unexpectedly. Immediately, I wondered why my grandmother would do that. Was it because she had considered his wealth? Was it because he could afford to support her further down the road? Why would my grandmother do something that she knew would be so hurtful?

Cary had not spoken to my father in the last eight years of his life, yet, he got the flag. Why would she have such disregard for my father's wishes? I still have not found the answer, but I did learn how to handle being hurt by family!

## CHAPTER THREE



### **God Is Watching**

I remember getting into our rental car and driving away from my father's funeral. I cried and told Dana that I would never speak to that woman again. The hurt she had caused at the funeral was as great as the pain of losing my father. You may be thinking, "Shane, it was only a flag!" But that was my flag, from my dead father, that would someday be given to my sons, and it hurt so deeply!

I could never have known the pain that can be felt unknown to others—unseen and undetected by even your closest family and friends. I left that funeral in California and continued preaching weekly across the United States. Looking back, I see now that I had not given myself the proper time to mourn my father's death.

The night of the funeral, I was back in Sacramento preaching to others, "God has a miracle for you." I began to obsess over my grandmother's offense. To be quite honest, I was not only offended, but I had been hurt like never before.

I found myself harboring so much bitterness and resentment. I carried on as an evangelist, and I also carried out the promise I had made to my lovely wife Dana—I had not spoken to my grandmother in years.

Something very ironic would happen from time to time. I would be in a revival in some city, preaching conviction, preaching about slipping off into eternity without knowing Jesus Christ. As I would give an altar call, I so often would see God beginning

to deal with me. Me? Yes, me—the evangelist who did the preaching, the evangelist who wept for others to come to the altar.

I wept for myself, though nobody could see it.

No one knew the betrayal I felt. No one knew that I was eaten up by bitterness for a little old lady who had once changed my diapers. Still, time moved on, and nobody knows it but me.

Our first son, Dakota, was born five years after my father’s funeral—five years after I was robbed of my father’s flag. Not long after Dakota’s birth, we were blessed with the arrival of another amazing son. We called him Zane.

I continued to preach. I continued to travel and evangelize the United States. I even found myself preaching some large camp meetings and conferences from time to time. Although twisted, I still honored my word; I had not spoken to my grandmother in many years.

One late afternoon at our home in Texas I was watering the lawn. I always find it so peaceful. Dana was in the house with our two sons. Dakota was about five and Zane was just 16 months younger.

It was a peaceful evening. The sun was setting; a cool breeze drifted through. Our yard had been mowed earlier that day, and that smell that I love so much—fresh cut grass—was so strong in the air. As I watered the shrubs, I heard the voice of God. Not an audible voice but a small one that resonated in my spirit. God asked the question that I will never forget. God whispered to me, “Son, are you a Christian?” I was shocked by this odd question that my God had asked me. Am I a Christian? “God, you know I’m a preacher, a full time Evangelist preaching all around the world. Of course, I am a Christian.” God spoke so softly and said, “I’m not concerned with your title or denomination that you minister in.” He spoke so plainly the second time, “Shane, are



you really a Christian?” At this time, God had my full, undivided attention. I cried softly, “Yes, I am, Lord, but why are you asking this question to me?”

God once again whispered, “If you are indeed a Christian, why is it that you have hatred and bitterness towards your grandmother? Why is it, son, that you refuse to forgive her and set the both of you free?” I then realized I was in a very serious conversation with God—one that I had never thought would or could take place. My grandmother? Lord, you are hitting below the belt! You know what she did to me at my father’s funeral. You know, God, the hurt that I felt. You know, God, how she took the very last thing on this earth that my father wanted me to have and keep for his grandsons.

I said back to God as if he did not already know, “God, you know what she did to me.” The Lord spoke softly again and said, “If you were truly a Christian, would you not do what I would do. Would you not reflect the forgiveness of Christ? After all, son, to be a Christian is to be Christ-like.” As tears flooded down my face, I said, “I have been so hurt, God. I don’t see how I am the one wrong.” Then God said to me, “I know that you were wronged, Shane, but you are wrong for handling your grandmother the way you have. You were indeed wronged, but now you are wrong.”

I then had an idea pop into my mind. I said, “Lord, she has never asked to be forgiven!” Once more, God whispered to my spirit and touched my heart. God said, “Why don’t you be a better person than that? Why don’t you simply forgive her without making her ask or beg for forgiveness? Do you really need someone to ask your forgiveness before you grant them forgiveness, son? Did I not pray while in my flesh, Father, forgive them for they know now what they do?” You must forgive son!”

My argument was lost. I saw clearly that I had acted poorly. I was always in church but really wasn’t living like church! I saw that it was indeed my flesh that was in control, and that I was acting so oppositely of what Christ would do.

No other words needed to be spoken. God made His point so very clear. I was amazed at the feelings I had—feelings of repentance, feelings that truly provoked a deeper level of love in my heart, and feelings of overwhelming desperation to reconcile with my grandmother. I was no longer bitter at Robert; somehow, God allowed me to move on.

I now see that it was the bitterness towards my grandmother that could have cost me my soul. I was more concerned, however, that the bitter feelings I harbored were impacting my relationship with God. To be quite honest, nothing is worth losing out with God! I knew I had to do something, and I knew I had to act quickly.

## CHAPTER FOUR



### **Reaction to God's Action**

After God had wrecked me on that late afternoon in Gilmer, Texas. I ran into the house. Dana thought something was wrong, seeing that my eyes were still watering; she could tell I had been crying hard. I picked up our house (can you imagine we actually lived and were happy before cell phones?) and I dialed a California 411 to ask directory assistance for my grandmother's phone number. Yes, back then you could call and provide a name and matching address, and the operator would give you the phone number. Wow, that seems like another life altogether.

When I got my grandmother's phone number, I immediately called. I was shocked to hear her voice on the other end, and I could she was shocked to hear mine, as well. I spoke to her and said, "Hello, Grandma. This is Shane." She began to weep as she expressed how much she had missed me over the years. I began to cry as well, asking for her forgiveness. We apologized and wept together. I will never forget what my grandmother said to me: "Shane, I'm so very sorry that I hurt you by giving the flag to Cary." I had not yet expressed any one thing that I was mad about. God was working behind the scenes. Something brought it into her mind and spirit that she had hurt me by giving my dad's flag away.

We never really know what God is doing in a person's life. So often, we are somewhere cursing a person, not knowing that many times that person is somewhere praying for God's help. Could it be that at the very seasons in life when God is trying

to bless His children, we are guilty of cursing what He blesses? I was once again reminded of that verse of scripture in Romans that shares the amazing truth.

**“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.**

Grandma and I began to talk about family. We talked about the amazing memories that we had shared with my father, and how much he was truly missed. My grandmother told me that my father would be just crazy about Dakota and Zane. I then had to apologize to her for something that had just dawned on me during the phone conversation: my sons were four and five, and she had never even seen them.

A grandmother to me and a great-grandmother to them, she said she would love to meet our sons. I told Grandma; you are going to love these boys. They will remind you so much of my dad. Grandma, forgive me again and if you would like, I would like to come out to California and spend some time with you. While we visit with you, we can be reconciled as a family. You really do need to meet your great-grandsons.

The trip to California was booked soon thereafter and we flew to California. My grandmother Flora was able to meet Dakota and Zane. We laughed, we cried, we reunited, and we reconciled. The trip was amazing. There is so much power in forgiveness. There is so much love in doing things God’s way. Our sons never did see Flora again. My youngest son Shane II never had the opportunity to meet Flora, but thanks be to God, I feel I did the right thing. I overcame bitterness when I forgave, and reconciliation followed.

My grandmother died knowing we were once again a family. I am so thankful that God commanded my attention that warm Texas day while I was watering shrubs. Because of Him, there is no longer bad blood among our family. Who can do that but God?



## CHAPTER FIVE



### **Who But God?**

What an amazing feeling I had. What a wonderful peace I felt deep within my soul as my family and I boarded the flight home to Texas. I quickly found myself in another revival—several cities in several weeks. Dana and I counted the services we participated in. Dana and I had the privilege of preaching an average of 300 services each year for the first ten years of our ministry. Now that my grandmother and I were reconciled and God blessed me such a mighty way, I had never felt better!

Soon after, I got a phone call and received a very special invitation from a well-known pastor. His name was Norman Paslay; he pastored Calvary Church on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio. We booked a series of services right after my family and I had arrived from California. It was no surprise to Dana that I would share the story of forgiveness and reconciliation in the pulpit somewhere, sometime soon. The place was Calvary Church in the beautiful State of Ohio. That service is still fresh in my mind.

It was a Sunday morning, and as I ministered on the subject of forgiveness, I shared my testimony about my grandmother and me. I shared many things in that service: the murder of my father and the unforgiveness of the murderer and my grandmother. Then, I shared how God spoke so mightily to my heart that afternoon in Gilmer, Texas.

I shared about my father's passing—how he died too young and how unfair it felt to lose him to a stupid argument. I wept as I shared how awful I felt that my father



never did come to hear me preach. Later that same year, I preached what many refer to as my most requested sermon: “The House My Daddy Was Going to Build.”

That morning at Calvary, there was such an amazing anointing. The presence of God moved so greatly in our midst. I was able to share with tears flowing down my face how God spoke to my heart, and that I made the phone call and did what I felt God was calling me to do in asking for my grandmother’s forgiveness. I shared how my family flew to California —how my family rented a car and drove to the small town of Madera, where my grandmother and I embraced and cried with each other. I was able to share how grateful I was to God. That He loved me so much He would speak to me and not let the bitterness steal my soul for eternity.

Even though I lost my flag, even though I would probably never get that flag back, I preached that I was okay with it. I shared that I always had taught “Family First,” and I had let myself and my family down because of unforgiveness. My grandmother Flora and I reconciled and were living in harmony as a family once again. The altars were full that Sunday morning. Many of the church members shared in later services how God allowed them to climb that mountain of bitterness and resentment to find the victory through forgiveness.

We closed the revival services after that Sunday morning. Like always, I found myself in a new city or town, preaching for another pastor, doing my best to reach souls for Christ’s sake.

It had been about three weeks since that Sunday morning service in Ohio, when I received a phone call from a man that I had never met. He went through his pastor Norman Paslay, and reached my wife at home. She gave him my whereabouts and told him that a weekday afternoon is the best time to reach an evangelist (I’m not sure if you know this, but full-time evangelists love to stay awake all night and sleep during the day).

I received a call from a man who introduced himself as the Command Sergeant of the United States Army, 1st Cavalry Division—shockingly, the same division my father was in during the Korean War. He began to speak to me about how he had been a member of Calvary Church in Cincinnati for several years, and that he was present when I shared the testimony. He heard me preach about the flag that was stolen from me, the forgiveness, and the reconciliation between my grandmother and me. He said, “Shane I have thought night and day for the past three weeks about your father, his murder, your stolen flag.

I have no idea why, but it’s as if God has given me a burden for you for the past three weeks. I have been praying for you and constantly asking God how I could make this hurt up to you!”

This Sergeant Major continued, “Shane, I have racked my brains trying to figure out how I can make this up to you.” He said, “I realize that I had nothing to do with your loss, but I do want to have something to do with getting everything back that the enemy stole from you.” I was surprised at this man of God’s transparency and the burden that he shared with me. I wept on the phone when I heard his voice begin to crack.

This man I had never met said to me, “Shane if you will come back to Calvary on a Sunday evening in the near future, I have an idea of something that I could do that may be a blessing to you and your family.” He said, “Brother I want to be a blessing to you, I really do!” I had no idea what he had in mind, but I later found out he was working with my wife Dana to gather old pictures of my father and me.

I quickly scheduled a Sunday service to be back at Calvary in Ohio. It was during December, a slow month for revivals, so it came together perfectly. I thought to myself, “I am once again reminded that there’s nothing as special as the timing of God.”

As we entered the church sanctuary that amazing Sunday in December of 2003, I could feel God's presence. My family and I were greeted and seated as if we were royalty. Many of the church members at Calvary came up to us and gave us hugs, showing us the love of God and expressing great support for our ministry. Yet, I still had no idea what was planned, or what exactly was going on. I have always had a special honor for Sergeant Majors.

Usually, these are the top non-commissioned officers (NCOs) of military branches who have worked their way up from the rank of private, through hard effort, blood, sweat, and tears.

I was looking around the sanctuary when, all of a sudden, I heard bagpipes! Bagpipes in a church? I wondered what was going on. Pastor Norman Paslay came and quickly sat down beside me. He said, "Shane, are you ready for your father Carl to be honored?" I saw a PowerPoint begin to play on the large screen in the church. The PowerPoint filled was filled with old images of my father and me—the images that Dana has sent him weeks before. The sound of bagpipes swelled, and I was stunned to witness a full-blown U.S. Army Honor Guard marching down the aisles of that Ohio church. I saw the man who had reached out to me.

I knew him by his sharp uniform and five rows of ribbons—by his stripes: three up and three down with a star in the middle. This star, though, had a wreath wrapped around it. He was indeed the Command Sergeant Major that I had spoken with on the phone. This was the very first time I had seen this man; he was following a full bird colonel. Several members of the United States Army Color Guard walk up to the platform in their dress blues, taking my breath away.

What a sight to see! I had never seen anything like this in person. And to think this was for my father, Carl G. West!

Suddenly, the Sergeant Major took the pulpit and addressed the large congregation. He began by making opening statements concerning my father and his military service. He began, “Welcome today to this service. We have gathered today to honor the memory of an honorable United States soldier and his son Shane West” He then spoke of a DD 214 file that he had requested to honor that of Sergeant Carl G. West, 1st Cavalry, Korean War. He began to list the awards and accommodations that my father had received during his service in the United States Army.

As he spoke—as my father was being honored—the PowerPoint of pictures had not only my family in tears but many others in the congregation.

My family sat in shock, in amazement. I then heard, “Please stand for the 21 -gun salute.” Outside of Calvary Church stood seven other members of this honor guard, poised with rifles, preparing to be heard from outside on the church parking lot to the inside of this beautiful sanctuary. Tears fell down our faces as we heard the shots. There were three loud shots, performed by seven armed servicemen who were selected for this very elite Honor Guard. Many people including myself at the time have no idea what the 21-gun salute is.

A 21-gun is a military tradition that originated in the 14th century. The 21-gun salute, commonly recognized by many nations, as the highest honor rendered.

Then, I heard the easily recognized United States Military “Taps” being played. At the same time, the full bird Colonel and his Command Sergeant Major began to fold the American Flag. With tears rushing down my face, I saw such honor and patriotic pride that only Americans can truly know. I had no idea during that service, while holding onto my sons’ hands, that Dakota would become a United States Marine. At the time of the release of this book, my son Zane, may very well be enlisted in the United States Air Force. I found soon after the beautiful service, that there has always

been great symbolism in the folding of our American Flag. For those that may not know:

**The first fold** of our flag is a symbol of life.

**The second fold** is a symbol of our belief in eternal life.

**The third fold** is made in honor and remembrance of the veteran departing our ranks who gave a portion of life for the defense of our country to attain a peace throughout the world.

**The fourth fold** represents our weaker nature, for as American citizens trusting in God, it is to Him we turn in times of peace as well as in times of war for His divine guidance.

**The fifth fold** is a tribute to our country, for in the words of Stephen Decatur, "Our Country, in dealing with other countries, may she always be right; but it is still our country, right or wrong."

**The sixth fold** is for where our hearts lie. It is with our heart that we pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

**The seventh fold** is a tribute to our Armed Forces, for it is through the Armed Forces that we protect our country and our flag against all her enemies, whether they be found within or without the boundaries of our republic.

**The eighth fold** is a tribute to the one who entered into the valley of the shadow of death, that we might see the light of day, and to honor mother, for whom it flies on Mother's Day.

**The ninth fold** is a tribute to womanhood; for it has been through their faith, love, loyalty, and devotion that the character of the men and women who have made this country great have been molded.

**The tenth fold** is a tribute to father, for he, too, has given his sons and daughters for the defense of our country since they were firstborn.

**The eleventh fold**, in the eyes of a Hebrew citizen, represents the lower portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon, and glorifies, in their eyes, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**The twelfth fold**, in the eyes of a Christian citizen, represents an emblem of eternity and glorifies, in their eyes, The Lord Thy God.

“When the flag is completely folded, the stars are uppermost, reminding us of our national motto, "In God We Trust" (Military).

After the flag was folded, the United States Army Colonel came down to where my wife and I were seated. The Colonel bowed onto one knee and spoke these words that I will never forget: “It is with great honor and extreme pride that we, soldiers of the United States Army honor your father, Carl G. West, and present this American Flag to you Shane West. The first flag was stolen from you, but may this flag serve as a reminder of the greatness of our God as we honor your father and present this to you this day!”

What the enemy meant for bad God truly turned it to be an amazing experience. I cannot help but to stand in awe and the amazing love and compassion of my Savior. Who would do such an honor for a man they had never met? Who would think of bringing a full honor guard to help commemorate the life of my father? A life that was taken from me. A flag that was taken from me. Where else could one expect an event



like this? Where else would a group of people gather together in a church building to help a man named Shane West be encouraged, strengthened, and restored?

Who hasn't been hurt by the actions or words of another? Perhaps a parent constantly criticized you growing up, a colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. Or maybe you've had a traumatic experience, such as being physically or emotionally abused by someone close to you. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness — even vengeance. But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. The reality is if I would not have chosen to forgive my grandmother, then I would not have had the testimony to share that Sunday in Cincinnati. If I had not shared that testimony that Sunday in Cincinnati, then I would not have ministered while that Command Sergeant Major sat listening in the congregation.

If that Army Command Sergeant Major had not listened, and heard my testimony of forgiveness that Sunday in Cincinnati, God would not have had the opportunity to deal with him to help Shane West. If he would not have listened to the voice of God, then I would have never had the amazing experience to be a part of a full-blown Military Service, giving honor to my father, and being handed such a blessed flag. I would have never been on the receiving end of such a God-Given blessing.

The funeral home has just a generic flag. A flag that is never truly folded in a way that gives the deceased honor, or tribute. The enemy took a generic flag and had used that to cause hurt and pain in my life. God however had so much more planned for me, but first I had to forgive! I preached a message many years ago entitled, “The Doors of Destiny Swing on Small Hinges.” The small everyday choices we make are often the small hinges that the Doors of Destiny swing upon for each and every one of us.

What could happen in your life? What type of a miracle could God give you, if you choose to let it go and forgive? What could God's reaction look like in your life, if you also chose to take action and forgive. Remember God always has a reaction to our positive actions in life. How much more does God have planned for you, if you would be sensitive and sincerely seek God's help, empowering you to forgive?

Could you be like me possibly having the testimony that we've been hurt, wounded and done wrong? We have lived so long hurt. And wounded. The Bible even mentions those that have a wounded spirit often cannot heal. Could we share possibly that though we were wronged, we became wrong through our reaction to the offender? Many that will be reading this book will definitely have the testimony of being wronged, being hurt, being devastated.

People reading this book could also be like me and harbor bitterness, and ill-will towards those that handled us wrong. I believe it would blow our minds if we would have the ability to take a quick peek into our futures, and see the great things God desires to give us, if we would step out by faith, and give those that have hurt us genuine forgiveness. What could God give you in your life, if you were to give forgiveness to others?

## CHAPTER SIX



### **I See Roadblocks**

As I am writing this it is very late, and we have been making preparation for a Sunday Service that I will be ministering in at an amazing church in Mississippi. I realize that this may sound crazy, but it's almost as if I see in my mind roadblocks. Yes, I see roadblocks that are preventing your blessings. Blocking your provisions. Blocking your healing. Blocking your miracles. These roadblocks however are not actually roadblocks, they are barriers. I see them clearly; they are barriers, and they are holding back God's Hands from moving for you, and blessing you with so very much more in your life.

The sad thing is many times the people that have done us the most wrong, don't even think about us anymore. So not only are we the prisoners of unforgiveness, but the one that imprisoned us is going about their lives. I had this thought come to me a few months ago. When praying about how so many people get hurt in church and mishandled by others. I felt God spoke to my heart. Could it be that ...

***God wants to see how we handle people that have mishandled us!***

Who hasn't been hurt by the actions or words of another? Perhaps a parent constantly criticized you growing up, a colleague sabotaged a project, or your partner had an affair. Or maybe you've had a traumatic experience, such as being physically or emotionally abused by someone close to you.

These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger and bitterness — even vengeance. But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Being hurt by someone, particularly someone you love and trust, can cause anger, sadness and confusion. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility can take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice. Some people are naturally more forgiving than others. But even if you're a grudge holder, almost anyone can learn to be more forgiving.

## **What are the effects of holding a grudge?**

If you're unforgiving, you might:

- Bring anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience
- Become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present
- Become depressed or anxious
- Feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs
- Lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others

We all go through things in life that are not fair. People do us wrong. If you hold on to the hurt. You go around dwelling on the offense, thinking why did they say that about me? Why did I lose my loved one? Why did that friend walk away from me for no apparent reason? Why did my family member hurt me so bad? Why did God hand

me such a terrible hand in life? If we are not careful, we will begin to open the doors to bitterness?

When you're bitter, it affects every area of your life. Bitterness poisons your attitude to where you see things constantly in a negative light. And many times, this is the true reason people don't have good relationships in life. They're easily offended. They'll jump down your throat for the smallest thing. It's not you nor I, it's simply the bitterness coming out.

You may have a good reason to be bitter, something was unfair, hurtful, that caused you much pain. But holding on to it is only going to make it worse. It's going to steal your dreams robbed you of your joy. Bitterness can keep you from your destiny.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



### **Bitter or Better?**

I know people that are still bitter over something that happened 20 years ago, bitter because they were mistreated growing up, bitter because a relationship didn't work out. You have to let it go. God sees what's happening. He knows what wasn't fair. He knows who walked away and who was left bleeding from the hurt and the pain that was done to you. He knows how to make it up to you however. He knows how to bring it out better in your life. Let it go and trust him to be your vindicator. The longer you hold on, the harder it is to get rid of it. The more you dwell on it. The more you relive it, the more you let it bother you, the deeper it gets planted.

The key is to forgive quickly. Let go of the things you don't understand and learn to forgive quickly. When you feel the bitterness is trying to take root right in your spirit and mind, pray and tell God, I'm turning this over to you. I know you're my vindicator I know you'll make my wrongs right. Lord You said you would give me beauty for these ashes.

I've found bitterness is always knocking at the door. Many times, we are faced with the opportunity to get bitter. You didn't get things in your life that you were expecting to get. You didn't get that promotion at your job that you thought was coming your way. You didn't marry that person that you loved with all of your heart. You were born in a dysfunctional home, with dysfunctional parents. Bitterness will come before you even realize, and you will be living with a chip on your shoulder. That's not fair. The medical report wasn't what you wanted. Bitterness will show up and begin to accuse



you and the God you serve. Your heart will cry out why didn't God answer my prayers, as bitterness begins to quickly come in?

At the office, a coworker says something to try to make you look bad in front of people. Just a little offense, just a small seed. If you ignore it, no big deal. But if you start dwelling on it, and start thinking of how you can pay them back. Next time you see them, you give them the cold shoulder, then that little seed will begin to take root. Before long, it will grow and pollute other areas of your life. That's why it says in Hebrews make sure that no root of bitterness springs forth and causes you. It refers to bitterness as a root.

You can't see a root. It's hidden, it's underground. But here's the problem. A bitter root produces bitter fruit. If you have a root of bitterness, it will contaminate your life. I know a young man that became disgruntled with his employer. His boss was an older man and he didn't feel like he had been treated fairly. He moved on to another state. But over the years, he never let it go. He became more and more offended, kept talking about it, bringing up all the ways he wasn't treated right. His boss was good to him, but this young man kept dwelling on his boss and different situations. The young man kept blowing things out of proportion, because he wouldn't let it go. That small offense turned into a root of bitterness. He used to be happy, fun to be around. Now he's bitter and very sour in life. He is seen by family and friends as a man that always has a chip on his shoulder. It's affecting his relationships. It's affecting his career.

Proverbs says, guard your heart with all diligence for out of it for the issues of life. One of our most important responsibilities is to keep our heart pure. Life is too short to live offended, not forgiving, bitter over what didn't work out. You have to guard your heart. It's easy to let what's on the outside, get on the inside. It takes discipline to say, I'm not going to dwell on that offense. Not going to go around feeling sorry for myself because something didn't work out.

You only have so much emotional energy each day. It's not an unlimited supply. Do you know how much energy it takes to hold a grudge and to go around offended? That's wasting valuable energy that you need for your dreams, for your children, for your destiny. Quit letting what's on the outside, get on the inside, start guarding your heart.

The Apostle Paul had plenty of opportunities to live offended. Paul said in one place, Alexander the Coppersmith did me wrong, but I'm not worried for I know God will pay him back. Basically, Paul was saying was, he did me great wrong, but I'm not upset, nor bitter. I don't have a chip on my shoulder, because I know that God is fighting my battles, and God will be my vindicator.

What's interesting is you can't see a root. But a root is where the tree gets live. We see the outside the leaves, the branches, but the roots are what's feeding the tree. When your roots are healthy, positive, and hopeful, you will see encouragement, life, strength, peace and hope.

The problem is, if you have bitter roots, you're not being fed the right things. You wonder why you don't have any energy. Why you don't laugh anymore. Why you don't dream like you used to. It's because those bitter roots are feeding you bitterness, self-pity, anger and that's what is draining all the strength, passion, and joy out of your life. They're feeding you what they are. The good news is, you don't have to live with bitter and painful roots. You need to ask God to show you what's causing you to be bitter. Maybe there's somebody you need to forgive. Maybe it's a dream that didn't work out. You're still sour about it. Maybe it's a mistake you've made and you're still beating yourself up.

If you will be honest with yourself and say, God help me to get rid of this root of bitterness. God, I'm still angry over what happened when I was 10. I'm still hurt and bitter towards that person, God I'm still grieving over my loved one that I lost 12 years

ago. God, I don't want to be bitter. I want my passion back. I want to love again, like I used to, I want to dream again. I don't want to be bitter; God I must get better!

God help me to let it go and move forward. That's the first step to getting rid of a bitter root. Ask God to help you forgive the person that hurt you. Ask him to help you release the bitterness, the resentment, the grudge, and the grief. When you get those contaminants out, you'll not only feel the weight lifted off of you, but you'll get your joy back. You'll start dreaming again. And you'll see the new things God has in store.

Many years ago, there was a great outbreak of disease in a small village in Africa. People were being overcome by nausea and sickness. After a couple of months. It was so bad people started dying. Word quickly reached the main city and they sent out experts to try to find out what the problem was. After several days of testing, they discovered their water was contaminated. This little village got its water from a mountain stream. The researchers began to travel upstream to find out where the problem was. They traveled for many days and nobody could find out what was wrong. They finally came to the source of the stream.

Everything on the surface looked fine. They decided to send some divers down to get as close to the source as possible. Much to their surprise, they found a big mother pig, and all of her piglets were stuffed right there at the source. Somehow the pigs had fallen in and drown and became wedged right at the opening. Now all of this crystal-clear water was being contaminated as it flowed past the dead pigs. All they had to do was remove the pigs and once again, just a short time later, the water was perfectly fine.

It's the same principle in life. We all have unfair things that happen. Things we don't understand. Too often, instead of forgiving the people that hurt us, instead of letting go the wrong we've held on to it like these pigs, it's contaminated our stream. It's polluted our lives. We wonder why we're negative. While we can't get along in relationships, while we keep losing our temper. We think this is just who I am. No, that

is not who you are. You were created in the image of God. He made you to be happy, healthy, whole, secure, not bitter, angry, and resentful. You need to go back and get rid of what's contaminated in your stream. You need to find those pigs and remove them so they cannot contaminate your source.

Forgive the people that did do wrong. They hurt you once, but don't let them continue to hurt you. They can't stop your destiny unless you allow them to. You're not forgiving for their sake, but rather you're forgiving them for your sake. So, your stream doesn't stay polluted. Quit reliving that dream that didn't work out, or that relationship that ended so abruptly. Quit reliving that business that failed, and the contract that didn't go through. Let it go. God has another dream waiting for you.

You had to go through those closed doors before you could come to your open doors. It may not have been fair, but God saw what happened. You have got to get rid of the pigs and turn it all over to Him. If you would do this and step out by faith, you'll start dreaming again. You'll start believing and hoping again. God will pay you back for what didn't work out. He's going to open doors you never dreamed would open. He's going to bring people better than you ever imagine. What's in your future is much greater than anything from your past. I guess what I am trying to say is, Get rid of those pigs! Don't let a dead pig keep you from your destiny. Don't let a bitter root contaminate your life. It's time to move on, it's time to move forward. It's very freeing when you can let things go.

I would love to challenge you while you're reading this book to say, God, they did me wrong and I have had so many disappointments, but I know you'll turn what was meant from our harm and use it to my advantage. I lost a loved one. Yes, I still miss him/her but I'm not going to live bitter the rest of my life. I know they're with you, and you have a new beginning for me.

That's how you beat bitterness. You guard your heart. You don't let what's on the outside, get on the inside. In the Scripture, a lady named Naomi had some tough times, she was living in a city called Moab. She was a widow; her husband had died. Years later, both of her sons were killed. And sometimes life just doesn't seem fair. You have more than your share of bad breaks. It's easy to get bitter and give up on your dreams. But God wouldn't have allowed it if it was going to keep you from your destiny. Yes, it's difficult, but God promises he will give you a grace for every season. He won't let you go through more than you can handle.

When that bitterness comes. You have to put your foot down and say no, I'm not going there. I know God is still in control. I know his plans for me are for good things, not bad. What you're going through may not be good, but God knows how to bring good out of it. But every thought will tell you, it's never going to get better, you might as well be bitter. Don't believe those lies. You wouldn't be alive unless God had something amazing in front of you. He has a purpose for you to fulfill.

Naomi had gone through so much she thought she was done. She even changed her name. Naomi means my joy, but she was at a place in life that she didn't want to be referred to as joy, so she changed her name to Mara. Mara means bitter. Now when people called her Naomi, she would tell them, don't call me that, call me Maura. I'm bitter. I'm broken. My dreams are shattered. Just let me live in my pain. She let the bitterness get on the inside. Maybe she had a reason she had been through a lot of losses. But just because you've been through loss, doesn't mean you're not going to win again. Does it mean you've seen your best days? You may have had bad breaks, but don't change your name.

God is not finished with you. The enemy doesn't have the final say, God does! Naomi moved back home to Bethlehem. Her daughter in law, Ruth went with her. I can imagine when her friend saw her, they came running out Naomi, I can't believe it's

you Naomi, but Naomi didn't look the same, and she quickly said, don't be happy for me. I went out full, but I'm coming home empty. She was saying I went out with my husband, my two sons. But look, now it's just me.

Have you ever gone out full, big dreams, big goals, but things didn't work out the way you had planned? The marriage didn't make it. Pregnancy didn't last. My hopes and dreams seem to have all fallen through. Like Naomi, you could easily be bitter. Here's how merciful God is. Even though Naomi thought she was done. Even though she gave up on her dreams. God said in effect, Naomi, you started out with joy, and you're going to finish with much more joy than you had at first.

You may have changed your name, but I didn't change your name. You had trouble in Moab. Don't worry. I have a blessing waiting for you in Bethlehem. What's interesting is even though Naomi changed her name, the scripture never refers to her as Mara. It keeps calling her Naomi. Have you changed your name so to speak? Are you living bitter negative, thinking about everything that didn't work out?

Do yourself a favor. Get rid of those names you put on yourself and go back to being who God created you to be. God didn't change your name. He still calls you blessed, prosperous, favored, healthy, strong, victorious. I challenge you. No, wait a minute, God challenges you to go back to your original name.

You may have had trouble in Moab so to speak, but get ready. God has an amazing future waiting for you in Bethlehem. Instead of sitting around bitter, Naomi started helping her daughter-in-law Ruth.

There was a man Ruth was interested in and Naomi started giving her relationship advice. She told Ruth, go wash your face, and put on this perfume, wear this outfit and go see this man named Boaz. Could it be that God is saying to you right now, get up and wash your face? Wash the hurt away. Bitterness, pain, and hurt doesn't look good

on you. Wash your face. Wash that look of despair off of your face and smile again. Laugh again. Be happy again.

I feel like telling somebody that is reading this book right now, pause for just a moment, and quit reading this book. Go and go wash your face! You've got a bright future. Bitterness doesn't look good on you. God says He has so much more for you. Naomi turned her focus away from her own problems and started helping somebody else. Her joy began to come back. When you're tempted to be bitter, one of the best things you can do is get your mind off yourself, and go be a blessing to others.

Ruth ended up marrying Boaz. They had a baby and when Naomi saw that little baby, she was so excited. It was like something breathed new life, new purpose back into her spirit. She never dreamed she would be that happy again. God is saying, my blessing is going to override your bitterness. My favor is going to make up for your pain. what God has planned for you cannot be stopped by people, by bad breaks, or by loss. Even if you change your name. God is so merciful; He's still going to do something amazing. He's still going to get you to where you're supposed to be.

**Mark 16** tells how Jesus had just been crucified and Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to the tomb early one morning to put perfume on his body. They wondered how they were going to roll the stone away. But when they arrived, the stone was already moved. They walked in the tomb saw a young man dressed in white was an angel. They were afraid. He said to them, you're looking for Jesus. But he is not here. He has risen. He has gone ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Notice he is not here. He is there. The angel was saying in essence. I know this looks bad, and I know you're hurting. I know you're disappointed, but don't stay here. God has something better waiting for you there. In other words, here is the disappointment. Here is the bad medical report. Here's the dream that you dreamed, but that dream never came to pass. The career that you banked on so passionately didn't work out. That one person that

you loved so deeply, hurt you so deeply. If you stay here though, you'll be discouraged. If you stay here you won't be able to move forward as God desires you to. You have to go "there"; this place is empty but this isn't how the story ends.

Sometimes the reason God doesn't comfort us in the disappointment is because He doesn't want us to stay where we are. Yes, the loss is painful. Yes, the setback wasn't fair. But God is not here. He's gone ahead. He's waiting for you there. God is not in your past, in what you lost, and what didn't work out. He's in your future. Don't get stuck in here, but move forward to the place called "there." "There" is where vindication is, "there" is where new beginnings are. "There" is where you'll find your healing. You see what was really being said, and what I'm really trying to say right here is, your "next" is far better than your "now".

If the two Marys would have stayed at the tomb in self-pity, crying and sobbing saying, I can't believe this happened. They would have never seen that place called "**there**". They would have never seen the Lord. Are you living in the "here" while God is waiting for you "**there**"? Are you stuck in a disappointment? bitter over a bad break. angry over what didn't work out. It's time to leave "here" and go "**there**". "There" is where God is waiting for you. "**There**" is where the blessing is. God has already gone ahead. God is already lined up the next chapter. Your house was damaged in the storm that's "here". Yes, that's disappointing. The good news is God has gone ahead. He's waiting for you "**there**". He has restoration already lined up.

**Luke 15** is the story of the prodigal son. This young man took his inheritance and left home. He wasted all of his money, living wild, and partying, and making poor decisions. The Bible says in **Luke 15** that this prodigal son finally came to his senses and decided to go back home. His father came running out to meet him and welcomed him with open arms. He was so glad to have his son back. He told his staff to go kill the fatted calf. They were going to have a party.



Well, the older brother was out in the field working when he heard all the music, the dancing. He asked someone what the celebration was all about. They took hold of him, and shouting, your brother has come home. We're having a party to welcome him back. **Verse 28**, says the older brother became angry and refused to go in. His father came out, pleaded with him. Come on, son, come in. Your brother is back home. He said, Dad, I've worked for you all these years been slaving away. Always do what you ask. But you've never given me a party or even a killed a skinny goat on my behalf. Yet you go and kill a fatted calf for after all he's done. You can hear the bitterness in his spirit. It's not fair. You haven't treated me right. I'm not coming into your party.

Here's my point. The party went on without him. His bitterness didn't stop the party. It just kept him from going into the party. Sometimes we're holding on to unforgiveness, anger, resentment, thinking that it's hurting the other person and the truth is, the party's still going on. Your absence isn't a game-changer. You're not hurting us, you're hurting yourself.

Are you letting bitterness keep you out of the party? Are you letting a disappointment keep you from enjoying today? Why don't you let it go and come on in to the party? Life is happening. There's a celebration going on. Today is a gift. Don't let a bad childhood keep you out of the party. Don't let divorce, a breakup, cause you to be sour and sit on the sidelines. Come into the party and start dreaming again. Start loving again. Start believing again. Start breathing again!

We have no guarantee that we're going to be here tomorrow. Life is fragile. Time is too short to live offended, bitter in self-pity. God knows what you didn't get. Quit trying to get people to pay you back and go to God and He'll make it up to you. If you come to the party, you'll get rid of what's contaminating you. I believe and declare, you're going to experience a new sense of freedom, better relationships, greater joy, clear

vision, and declare that every root of bitterness is coming out right now. You're going to rise higher, live happier, and reach the fullness of your destiny in Jesus' name.

I believe that by now you have decided, or at least considered what you should do about the hurts in your life. Even those that had made you feel the deep pain for so many years. May I say, if you choose to forgive, the blessings of God upon your life will be limitless! If I may, can we discuss a little more about the topic of forgiveness?

## CHAPTER EIGHT



### **The Difficulty and Necessity of Forgiveness**

When we understand the benefits we gain from forgiving, it is easier to get ourselves motivated to actually do it. It will help you to feel motivated to learn how to forgive, and to keep forgiving. Some of the benefits of forgiveness are very practical, whereas others could be considered “spiritual” benefits, e.g., being morally “correct” and “proper”.

Sometimes people are challenged by the idea of doing forgiveness for practical reasons rather than the moral ones. It is better to forgive to gain practical and materialistic benefits than to not forgive at all. Whatever causes a person to start on the path of forgiveness is ultimately good, even if their motives are only rooted in functionality.

You benefit immensely when you choose to forgive, and so do those around you. Whether you need to forgive others or need to forgive yourself, doing so sets you free from the past and allows you to fulfill your true potential. Forgiveness allows you to shed your limiting beliefs and attitudes.

It frees up your mental and emotional energies, so much so that you can focus on creating a better life. Forgiveness helps you achieve even your most functional and immediate goals. Perhaps you want to find a better job, earn more money, have better relationships, or live in a nicer place. Forgiveness helps you achieve all of these. If you have not forgiven, a part of your inner energy is trapped in resentment, anger, pain, or

suffering of some kind. This trapped energy will limit you. It slows you down, frustrates you, and makes it difficult to move forward.

Your goals and decisions will all be influenced by these burdens. As you learn to forgive, that energy is liberated and can flow into creating the life you want, rather than limiting you. If you do not want to learn to forgive to benefit yourself, do it for the sake of those around you—your family, your friends, and your community. Your thinking will be clearer and more positive than before. It will be easier for you to be kind and generous. People in your life will respond positively to your improved attitude.

Is a forgiving person more pleasant to spend time with than an unforgiving one? Yes, of course, they are. The quality of your life depends on the quality of your relationships. Learning to forgive will improve each of your relationships and benefit your loved ones.

Forgiveness can help you strive for financial success. It shifts your attitude so that you will no longer resent those wealthier than you. If you want a better job and to earn more money, a positive attitude toward the place you work, towards your boss, and toward colleagues, clients or customers is a great place to start. People who have a positive, helpful attitude stand out in any situation.

If you are a religious or spiritual person, then learning practical ways to forgive will enhance and deepen your relationship with God. It can free you from guilt and self-doubt. Life will open up in front of you. You will find yourself to be a much stronger and more capable person than you imagined. Parts of yourself, which could not thrive in the frigid and frozen soil of unforgiveness, will start to grow. You will begin to let go of struggling and striving. You will find an easier flow.

If this all sounds like an exaggeration, then let it be for now. Try as we may, we often have a hard time understanding how we are supposed to forgive others for the

harm they have done to us. Consider that some of this harm is quite excessive and even unthinkable. In those instances, forgiveness may seem downright impossible. In Matthew 18, Jesus discussed the restoration of someone who has sinned. Jesus talked about going to that person and addressing the issue in various manners.

Then Peter asked a question. **Matthew 18:21–22** records the exchange: Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (NASB) Jesus gives a number—seventy times seven (some translations arrived at 77). As Jesus says here, forgiveness has no measurable end. We can assume that Peter was navigating a personal relationship. Peter was fed up with someone who wronged him. I even wonder if Peter had come upon the seventh infraction. Maybe he was hoping the seventh was the last time and he could retaliate!

The idea that forgiveness is an ever-open door is a hard concept for us as imperfect human beings. We all have a need to be forgiven—by God and by others. We also have a need to forgive. Until we can forgive, we will continue binding ourselves to the past, even if it was only yesterday. My thoughts on forgiveness are always met with questions. These are some of the questions I have been asked repeatedly throughout our ministry. Maybe you have asked some of them as well.

- Who deserves forgiveness?
- Do I have to forgive others?
- What happens if I don’t?
- Is it possible that someone wronged me so badly that I am justified in holding on to resentment for the rest of my life?
- What is this business about “forgiving yourself?”
- If I can’t forget it, does that mean I haven’t forgiven?
- Doesn’t the other person need to apologize to me?

- What does my forgiveness have to do with God forgiving me?
- If I forgive the other person, do things have to go back to the way they were before I was wronged?

## **What Forgiveness is Not**

Misconceptions and misunderstandings about forgiveness are everywhere. Before we talk about what it is and how to go about it, let us talk about what forgiveness is not.

### **It's Not Avoidance**

Forgiveness is not a matter of ignoring the harm done to us. In *Design for Christian Marriage*, Dwight Small said, “Forgiveness is not merely a soft attitude toward a harsh fact; forgiveness is the vital action of love, seeking to restore the harmony that has been shattered.” In other words, forgiveness requires an acknowledgment that wrong was done.

In other words, forgiving others does not mean I simply ignore their wrongdoings. This is avoidance, not forgiveness. If we could just ignore the wrongs committed against us, we would not need to forgive others. Acknowledging that actual harm was done is a crucial part of forgiveness. By ignoring the harm that was done to us, we deceive ourselves about what actually happened.

This is never helpful, as it can result in self-blame for the negative emotions we feel. Acknowledge the harm that was done.

## **It's Not Excuse-Making**

Forgiving is not excusing someone's wrongdoings. C.S. Lewis said, "If one was really not to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposite." Like avoidance, making excuses is a way of allowing another person to escape accountability. This is harmful to both parties. When we assist others in denying their responsibility, we remove their ability to learn from situations.

In **Galatians 6:7**, Paul said, "...whatever a man sows, this will he also reap" (NASB). Paul does not give this as an excuse. Rather, he illustrates that we are responsible for our actions and the consequences of those actions are God's way of teaching us. When we make excuses for others, we take away this God-designed teaching tool.

## **It's Not Reconciliation**

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same. It is important to recognize that reconciliation means the relationship is restored. This is not necessary for true forgiveness to occur. Forgiveness may lead to reconciliation, though one can forgive without it. In other words, you do not have to re-enter or maintain a relationship with the other person for forgiveness to occur. In some situations, it may be quite unwise to do so. **Romans 12:18** instructs, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (NASB). Notice this: "so far as it depends on you." Remember—you are only in control of yourself. You are not given the right to control another person's thoughts, emotions, or behavior.

You cannot dictate how that person responds to you. Only they can make that choice. Live at peace with others as well as you are able to. Control and limit your own wrongdoing; if others continue to be hurtful, know that you have done your part.

Sometimes, we must forgive without the other person changing their behavior. There are countless examples of this. Abusive relationships, repeated theft, persistent drug abuse or other addictions, chronic lying, and other such ongoing problems may make reconciliation unwise; each situation is different. Again, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation in some cases, but certainly not always. We will discuss this more later.

## **What Forgiveness Is**

Defining forgiveness is not the easiest of tasks. The clichés we have been given about forgiveness can cloud our judgment. “Let it go,” “Get beyond it,” and “Rise above it,” immediately come to mind. We can even get spiritual and talk about “forgetting those things which are behind” (Philippians 3:13). Jesus said it plainly in Matthew 6:14. The word “forgive” was translated from the Greek word “*alphiemi*.” It means to release or discharge, as in releasing someone from a debt (see also Matthew 18:21–35).

When you trespass someone, you create debt. Incidentally, the word “trespass” means to fall away from someone after being close. If I trespass against you, I have done something to you that has caused separation in our relationship. Jesus says we should forgive others. That is, we should release others from their debt to us. That’s it. Period. Forgiveness is the act of discharging debt and no longer seeking payment.

## **When We Do Not Forgive**

In **Matthew 6:14–15**, Jesus said, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” We use this scripture as if God adds another tally my sin scores every time I do not forgive. I have not forgiven Joe for overcharging me for the work on my car last Tuesday.



As a result, God takes notice. God does not have a heavenly scoreboard—He is not that petty. Instead, God wants us to realize we are as imperfect and fallen as the next guy, and we need forgiveness in our own lives. When we do not forgive, we put ourselves on a pedestal believing that we are righteous, and others now owe us because of our own righteousness.

That attitude prevents us from gaining God's forgiveness because we do not believe we need it in the first place.

Our lack of forgiveness results in us not seeking a relationship with God through His forgiveness. We all have trespasses—things that have separated us from God. We need God's forgiveness to establish a relationship with Him. Unforgiveness robs us of humility. We may well believe we are seeking after God, but this self-righteous attitude prevents closeness with Him.

This is the reason Jesus says if we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven. We only receive forgiveness from God when we recognize our own fallen, imperfect condition. When we are close to God, we cannot help but to recognize our own fragility and need for Him (**Isaiah 6:5**).

Humility comes when we recognize our own fragility in comparison to God's majesty. When I see myself as fallen and in need of forgiveness, I am able to extend grace to others. Forgiveness is given because I understand my own flawed imperfection. When I recognize my own lack of righteousness, I am capable of seeing the only difference between mine and others' lack of righteousness is the way it is expressed. Their sins are different than mine and vice versa. We all need forgiveness.

## Collecting Payment

I won't bore you with the story, but Dana and I went through bankruptcy several years ago. It was a humiliating experience. I had to look at the court's trustee and say, "I cannot pay the debt I owe." Through a variety of circumstances, I had come to the point where I needed forgiveness—to be released from the debt. The court granted that and sent a "**Notice of Discharge**" to everyone I owed money. This discharge prevented them from legally trying to collect payment from me. The calls stopped; the letters stopped.

Here's the thing. I can go through the statements and tell you how much I owed my creditors. It could be added up. If someone takes \$10.00 from me, they have created a debt of \$10.00. Pretty simple calculation. Is there a calculation for how much is owed when someone verbally assaults us? What about someone who spread a rumor about us? What is the calculation we do when someone abuses us? Is there a number we can place on that? How much does an unfaithful spouse owe? What about the drunk man named Robert who murdered my father several years ago? What is the price tag for that guy?

In most situations, the "debt" that is owed to us cannot be measured. There is no method for adding up the amount due. Yet, we often spend a significant amount of effort seeking out payment for this immeasurable debt. This is the day-to-day result of unforgiveness. Before my bankruptcy, creditors called sent letters and threatened to sue me in an attempt to get payment. Yet, I could not pay them. I wanted to. I would have gladly done so. But I could not and there was nothing I could do to change that in the short term. My inability to pay them never stopped them from seeking payment. Only the discharge—the forgiveness—did that. Many people go through their lives attempting to get payment for the pain they have experienced, only to never have the debt settled. This happens in a lot of different ways.

In terms of personal hurt, the act of “collecting payment” is not necessarily targeted toward the person that did the harm. The offender may not even be around when we are trying to collect. As you can see in the few examples given above, a lot of times we are looking for some external validation of the harm.

In other words, we want someone to agree that we were wronged or to tell us that we really are worthwhile. But on and on we go. Make another phone call, mail another letter, and file another lawsuit. All of these attempts come up empty. The debt is never paid, but we keep trying. How about you? Are there ways you are trying to get paid for the debts owed to you? Friend, I want you to know that this is normal. We all do it. We all have that desire for debts others create with us to be settled. When we release and discharge the person from the debt, we stop seeking payment. So, the obvious question is, “How do we do that?”

Let me share with you something awesome. If somebody hurts you, if you'll give it to God, he'll be your vindicator. Think about this. Whatever we place in God's arms, He takes the responsibility at that very moment. Think of handing a small child to someone that you trust. Once you hand that small child into the arms of that trusted person. That trusted person takes full responsibility in holding and guarding that small child against any harm. If we can see that in an earthly person, how much more will God do for us when we truly hand off our hurts and pains to him? If you've made mistakes, and we all have, quit beating yourself up and receive God's mercy. It's new every morning.

If there are some things you don't understand, you worked hard but you didn't get the promotion, or you did your best but your marriage didn't make it. Instead of carrying around that baggage, you have to be mature enough to say, God, I don't understand it, but I trust you and I refuse to live bitter. I'm not going to go through life

looking in my rearview mirror. And we'll keep moving forward knowing that my best days are still up ahead.

**Ecclesiastes** says, better is the end than the beginning. You may have had a rough start, but you don't have to have a rough finish. Better is the end. Maybe you went through a disappointment. Somebody broke your heart. The medical report wasn't good. Don't get stuck on what happened yesterday. God is saying something better is coming. There may be some rough places in the middle, but don't stay focused on the betrayal, because better is coming!

Paul was an expert in letting go and dropping the negative. If he had not learned this principle, he would have become bitter, angry, God, why is this happening to me? It's not fair. He felt it so strongly. One translation of that verse quoted, he said, I have not attained it all yet. But this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind. He was saying, I'm not all I should be. But one thing I have down. One thing I'm good at. I know how to let go of the past. He was an expert at “dropping it.”

Sometimes we spend more energy holding on to the negative than we do letting it go. What if we were to do like Paul, and start focusing our energies on moving forward, dropping the offense, dropping the guilt, dropping the heart? How did you drop it? Stop thinking about it, and stop talking about it.

Don't relive the negative things that have happened to you. The reason some people never see the better is because they're always opening up old wounds. Every week they call their friend. Can you believe what they did to me that happened 10-20 or perhaps 30 years ago. We're still dragging it up like it happened yesterday.

If you're going to get free, you need to not only **drop it**, you need to **bury it**. Have a funeral for it. Put it away once and for all. Make a decision. You're not going to talk about it another time. When you're tempted to speak about it just zip it up, that

betrayal, that failure, that disappointment is **dead**. You **buried it**; you had a funeral. It's over. It's done. It's in the past. Now, if you go dig it up, it's going to stink. It's not only going to make your life sour, but nobody's going to want to be around you.

When you carry around stinky stuff, you may not realize it, but that makes you unpleasant. When you're bitter, you push people away. When you're offended, angry, live in guilty, it pushes opportunities away. You have to get the stink out of your life. You have to come out of what was and come into what is. Don't say another word about that breakup, that disappointment you went through. Don't tell another person about the mistake you made. That's over and done. You buried it; you had a funeral. Now, don't talk about it anymore. You can't have your mind in yesterday and expect to go forward.

The truth is, every person has baggage. We all have things that could cause us to be bitter and live with the heaviness. The difference between the people who are positive, happy expecting good things, and people that are bitter, discouraged, and negative, is that the second group, continue to hold on to all the baggage for life.

## CHAPTER NINE



### **Drop It Leave It Let It Go**

The first group has learned this principle to drop it, and let it go. **Mark chapter 11**, Jesus was talking about what we should do when somebody does this wrong. Verse **25**, he said in the Amplified Version, forgive them and let it drop. Leave it and let it go. Notice the principal, drop it, leave it, and let it go. Maybe somebody is talking about you trying to make you look bad.

You could easily be upset, offended, try to pay them back. Why don't you try a different approach? Drop it, leave it and, let it go. God will fight your battles. Well, they betrayed me Shane West. They walked away from me Pastor. My advice to you would be, don't waste another minute being bitter. Drop it, leave it, and let it go. You took a step of faith, but it didn't work out. The business didn't make it you could easily be sour. Things seem to never go your way and now you are carrying around so much junk!

The reason it says to leave it is that you'll be tempted to go pick it back up. You may drop it at first and that's good. That's the right thing. But tomorrow morning, when you think about what they said, how rude they were, if not careful you'll go and pick it back up. Do not pick up the hurt, pick up the bitterness. I know people that have been picking up the same offense for 30 plus years. It's no longer a bag. It's attached to them like a backpack always worn. Like an old jacket that you see on someone all the time. It's a part of who they are, you have to leave it.

The hurt and the offense may not have been fair. But God saw what happened. He is a God of justice. He's promised that he will make your wrongs right. When you leave it, that doesn't mean that you're weak. You're giving up. You don't care what they did to you know, you're saying, God, I trust you to be my vindicator. I trust you to open the right doors. I trust you to get me to where I'm supposed to be. Maybe at 10 o'clock in the morning, a coworker is rude to you. You drop it, leave it and let it go. But when you see them at noon, again, you're going to want to be tempted to pick it back up. Just say No Thanks. I'm leaving that offense where I dropped it. I'm not carrying any negative baggage.

In 1881 James Garfield was elected the 20th President of the United States. Six months later, he was shot in the back. The doctors were able to save his life, but they couldn't find the bullet. He was recovering just fine but back in those days, they thought if they didn't remove the bullet, it would cause them problems later on. So, they did more surgeries probing all around, but still they couldn't find it.

Alexander Graham Bell developed an electrical device hoping to locate it. That wasn't successful, and two months later President Garfield died, not from the original gunshot wound, but from the infection that came from all the probing around. He may have lived many years if they would have just let it go, and given him time to heal. Sometimes it's better to leave things alone. If you're always probing around your hurts. Picking at your wounds like picking an old scab. Picking at your failures because you just can't seem to let it go. If you keep your past stirred up, you'll never get well. You have to turn it over to God. You may need to pray a prayer and say, God, I don't understand it all, but I'm not going to keep probing all around. God, I trust you. My life is in your hands.

I'm asking you to quit looking back! God wants to do something new, but you have to let go of the old. Don't be like those that refuse to let go, and hold on to things that are going to poison your future. A poison that takes you to an early grave.

Do like the Apostle Paul, focus your energies on forgetting what lies behind. Something you need to drop, and offense or hurt of failure. There's no better time than now. Today can be a turning point. make this decision with me. You're going to get rid of your negative baggage. You're not only going to drop it, but you're going to leave it. If you'll do this, I believe and declare, God is going to give you beauty for ashes. He's going to heal your hurts like Ecclesiastes he says something better is coming. Joy is coming. Divine favor is coming to the fullness of your destiny in Jesus' Name.



## CHAPTER TEN



### **The Path to Forgiving Others**

Let me start this by saying everyone is different and everyone has their own path. Yours may need to go back and forth or it may fly straight through these steps. Do not look at these steps as linear instructions. In reality, we usually go back and forth between them several times in the process of forgiveness.

#### **1. Recognize forgiveness as a process for humans.**

Forgiveness is an event for God. He is all-powerful and perfect. We are not. Forgiveness is a process for human beings. You are probably capable of instantly forgiving some wrongdoings. However, those deep wounds that are created when someone causes significant pain—of any kind—usually take time to heal. Be patient with yourself and do not think you have failed if your healing is not instantaneous. You are a human being with limits. Forgiving big things might be a long process for you and that is fine!

#### **2. Acknowledge that you also need forgiveness.**

When we are not forgiving, we place ourselves in an elite position. An attitude of self-righteousness develops as we see others as “sinner” and ourselves as the ones who deserve repayment. Unforgiveness causes us to lose sight of our own flaws and failures. This is not given as a condemnation by any means. The truth is we all have some degree of self-righteousness. Even statements like, “I might have done [this], but I would never

do [that],” are a reflection of self-righteousness. Those thoughts may be true. However, it is a way for us to magnify others’ flaws and failures while minimizing our own.

Again, this step is not to condemn you. Rather, to remind you that you and I are also in need of forgiveness (Romans 3:23). When we can see our own need to be forgiven, it levels the field.

### **3. Acknowledge the hurt.**

Avoiding pain is not forgiveness. Excusing sin is not forgiveness. To truly forgive, we have to acknowledge that we were harmed. Forgiveness is not ignoring that you were wronged. Are there some wrongs that we should ignore? Yes! Perhaps the cashier was a little rude. Maybe your spouse was having a rough day and was short with you when you called at lunch. Perhaps your roommate or your sister wore the sweater you were planning to wear. Choosing to fixate on such minor irritations and annoyances may be a sign you enjoy drama.

Genuine pain comes from things others do to us. It is important to acknowledge it. We have to identify the hurt. It could be physical, emotional, financial, or spiritual. Until you can say what the hurt actually is, forgiveness cannot occur.

### **4. Identify the ways you have tried to collect payment.**

This is a hard one. Most of us are somewhat unaware of this. You may need the help of a counselor or close friend to even begin to tackle this, and it is quite alright if you do. It will be worth it! When you think about the wrong that was done to you, it was done within the context of a relationship. Sometimes the relationship existed long before the incident occurred. It may have been a one-time encounter. In either case, your path crossed the other person’s and a trespass occurred. Because the wrong done

to us occurred in the context of a relationship, we can usually identify how we seek to collect a debt. We must look at how we behave within our relationships.

This is the best place to start. When trying to identify the ways you are trying to collect payment for the debt, take a look at your closest (and most dysfunctional) relationships first.

### **5. Release the person and discharge the debt.**

This means one thing and one thing only: stop seeking the payment. This is especially hard when we examine our old wounds. Since the incident, you have likely developed a strong pattern of behavior that is associated with your pain. You may need a counselor or an accountability partner, or a pastor to help you identify ways in which your collection tactics may resurface. When we move past the temptation of playing the victim, we can begin the process of forgiving the people who offended us. I have found that the offenders needing forgiveness usually fall into three distinct categories: contrite, unrepentant, or unavailable. Reaching the point of forgiveness toward each comes with its own benefits.

Your destiny is too important. Your time is too valuable to go through the day weighted down by a fence by guilt, by disappointments by hearts. You have to make this decision to not only drop it but to leave it. Don't give in to the temptation to pick it back up.

There was a man in the scripture by the name of Ahitophel. He was one of King David's right-hand men. For over 25 years he served as an advisor and close counselor to David, but when David's son Absalom made an attempt to take the throne, Ahitophel was one of the first ones to desert David and go with his son. He started advising Absalom telling him what he should do to overthrow his father. Well, this revolt wasn't successful. Eventually, Absalom was killed.

The Scripture says that Ahitophel was so distraught that he went out and hung himself. But why would a trusted advisor of King David for so many years suddenly turn on him? Ahitophel was the grandfather of a lady named Bathsheba.

She was the woman that David had an affair with and had her husband Uriah killed. Then David took her as his wife. Could it be that Ahitophel turned on David's so quickly, because he never got over what David did to Bathsheba and to Uriah?

This man instead of forgiving David, dropping it, leaving it, letting it go. It was in his spirit for so many years. Think about that. All those years that poisoning was simmering on the inside. The outside he looked fine. Everything looked like it was okay. This man that looked so very strong and advised kings, himself was much darker inwardly than then anyone could have imagined. A man that appeared so strong while in the courtyards with David, but on the inside something wasn't right.

Tragically, he ended up taking his own life. And of course, what David did was wrong. Ahitophel, in the natural, seemed to have good reason to be bitter, angry, upset. But when you carry around negative baggage year after year, you're not harming the other person. It's contaminating your own life.

The hurt that is coming to your mind while reading this book. It's that very hurt and pain and sorrow that is inside of you trying to eat your spirit as cancer eats a sickened body. I must say it again, it may not be easy, but for your sake, not theirs, **drop it, bury it, leave it, let it go**, and walk away with your head high. When you do, God will heal your hurts. God will restore your broken places. God will pay you back for the injustice. But when you hold on to bitterness, unforgiveness guilt, actually You're not holding it, but it's holding you. That poison will lead you down the wrong path.

Ahitophel had everything going for him, a successful career working for the king, a very respected position, but because he wouldn't deal with his negative baggage, he

missed his destiny. It cost him his life. Don't let that be you. Don't play games with negative baggage, bitterness, unforgiveness, guilt, **drop it, bury it, leave it, let it go,** and **walk away** with your head high.

## **Contrite Offenders**

Sometimes good people do bad things. Sometimes bad people turn good. In either case, a contrite offender does something to hurt you, and afterward feels genuinely sorry for their actions. This makes forgiveness an easier process. A contrite offender will many times actually ask for forgiveness or at least leave the door open. In these cases, you benefit by bringing closure to the incident and letting go of any ill will toward the person who hurt you.

The offender benefits when you forgive them as well. They know that they did the wrong thing and your forgiveness gives them permission to release their own guilt and focus on the future, rather than their past indiscretion. A contrite offender recognizes their own need to be forgiven and gains immediate rewards when they overtly receive that forgiveness.

## **Unrepentant Offenders**

Other times, the person who hurt you did so intentionally, or simply does not care that they caused you harm. They may not feel that they did anything wrong and will have no part in asking for your forgiveness. Trying to forgive the unrepentant offender is more difficult. Unless handled properly, confrontation may cause more harm than good. Unrepentant offenders may not know that they've done you wrong, but you need to forgive them just the same. You must if you wish to release that pent-up anger and resentment, regardless of that person's disposition. Forgiving those who do not

want to be forgiven is freeing to your own soul and relieves you of the burden of resentment.

The unrepentant offender benefits as well. If you can forgive them, they will see in you an attitude of forgiveness that they may lack. Seeing that kind of light in another person can only challenge your own spirit. Even if the offender or situation is such that you are unable to offer verbal confirmation, forgiving them in your heart will lead to a more positive attitude.

If you're holding on to resentment and bitterness, it will certainly color your interactions with that person, causing disharmony. When you have forgiven them in your heart, whether you announce it or not, it will be visible in your relationship.

## **Unavailable Offenders**

The third category of offender houses those who just cannot be reached for you to offer your forgiveness. It may be someone you are unlikely to ever encounter again, like the angry woman who cursed at you in Walmart. It may be someone you have never seen at all, like the anonymous driver who dinged your car in the parking lot. Or, it may be someone who was important to you, but is now deceased or cannot be tracked down. In these cases, the offender will never know if you maintain a grudge or if you forgive them completely.

This person will never receive any direct benefit from your forgiveness. Truly, they may never even realize their own actions were hurtful. But that does not relieve you of the need to forgive, because as we have seen, the opposite of forgiving is holding on to bitterness and resentment. These are barriers as I mentioned above just a short time ago. That will harm you regardless of the offender's availability.

You will benefit from forgiving them even if they never know it. Your friends and family will benefit when you release your negative emotions and let go of the incident. Forgiving those who hurt you is always good for you.

## **What If The Person You Forgive Does Not Change?**

When it comes to forgiveness, you need to focus on what you can control and let go of the things you cannot. An important facet of forgiveness is recognizing that you are not responsible for the other person. You cannot make someone accept your forgiveness. You cannot expect to change someone else's behavior by forgiving them.

Many times, forgiving someone will have a profound effect on his behavior. Often, a repentant individual will gratefully accept your forgiveness and earnestly seek to avoid the offending behavior in the future. This is the optimal result, but it is not guaranteed and it is not necessary to your act of forgiveness.

## **Toxic Relationships**

When the individual in need of your forgiveness is either aggressive or rude toward you after you have forgiven him, it should not in any way change the fact that you have forgiven the offense. Don't let his or her attitude alter the choice that you have already made. Remember that when you have truly forgiven, it is as if the offense had never occurred. Allowing the offender's subsequent actions to pull you back into your state of bitterness means that you have not completely forgiven him.

If a person displays a pattern of continued behavior that is toxic to your happiness, you need to consider your relationship with that individual. There comes a point at which it is better to withdraw from an unhealthy relationship. But even when a relationship becomes so toxic that it must be severed you still need to forgive the

offender, or else bitterness will follow you long after your interactions with the person have ceased.

## **Forgiveness is an Attitude**

Ultimately, the other person's behavior after you have forgiven should not be a factor in your attitude toward forgiveness. The Christian Bible tells of a disciple who asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone. "Up to seven times?" he added, hoping to impress his teacher with his willingness to forgive. "No, up to seventy times seven times" was the teacher's response.

The point was not to force the poor, uneducated fisherman to do the mental math. The point was, and remains, that forgiveness needs to be an attitude ingrained within us, an attitude that is not limited by rules or doctrines. Forgive easily and move on. Let the offender worry about his actions. You focus on what you can control.

## **Freedom Through Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is a path to freedom. You have been wronged and therefore debt is owed to you. Like the creditors prior to my bankruptcy, you can go through life making futile attempts to collect payment. However, the person who owes you cannot repay the debt. When you forgive or release the person from the debt, you actually release yourself. Does forgiveness benefit the other person? Sometimes it does. When reconciliation is a goal, it certainly benefits others for us to be able to release them from their wrongdoings. However, there are plenty of times when reconciliation is impossible or undesirable.

There may be people we will never see or talk to again whom we need to forgive. The point is not to provide some showing of grace to others, although that never hurts. The point is to free yourself from your futile attempts at getting the debt paid. The point is freedom. Wounds scab over. These wounds are not yet healed, but we act as



though they are. We carry on and act like everything is fine. Yet, every time we go after another payment—usually in some type of dysfunctional way—the scab is ripped off and the wound is reopened. It is difficult for wounds to heal this way.

When we do not forgive, we stay captive to our past by having these constant raw wounds. This is the opposite of what Paul desired for the Philippians. He said, “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead...” (**Philippians 3:12–14**; NASB). In other words, Paul must cut the lines that anchor him to the past, so he can be free to reach for the future. Paul had suffered from many wrongdoings during his ministry. He chose to cut the lines. If we are as successful in this as Paul was, we can acknowledge the pain of the past while focusing on the future.

The most significant aspect of the freedom we gain from forgiveness is the freedom to pursue our relationship with God. Through acknowledging our own imperfection, we understand our need for God and His forgiveness. This allows us to seek after Him fully without the weight of our pasts. We all have had negative things happen to us. People did us wrong. The company we worked for laid us off for no good reason. My neighbors were rude to us. It's easy to go through life offended in self-pity, blaming others, blaming ourselves, even blaming God. Because we're always looking back, reliving the negative, we end up carrying around all this baggage that weighs us down.

One of the best things we can learn to do is to take all the junk and drop it! We need to just let it go. Whether happened 20 years ago or 20 minutes ago, don't carry negative baggage from yesterday into today. You won't live a victorious life, if you're always reliving what didn't work out, rethinking of who hurt you, the mistakes you've made. The reason it's called the past is that it's over. It's done. It's history. Now do your part and let it go.

Well, Shane West, they betrayed me. They walked away broke my heart. That's why I'm bitter. That's why I'm upset. They hurt you once. Don't let them continue to hurt you by always thinking about it. As long as you're dwelling on that it's going to keep you from the new things that God wants to do in your life. God said he would give you beauty for those ashes. He said he would pay you back for that injustice. But you have to drop the hurt. Quit dwelling on it. Quit talking about it.

You move forward, there is a new beginning in front of you. But God will not release new opportunities. As long as we're holding on to old hurts old failures. You may have a lot of negative things in your past, you had a rough childhood, you lost a loved one, your business didn't make it. You could easily go around with a chip on your shoulder, not trusting anybody, very bitter, and very resentful. But everything you've gone through has deposited something on the inside. You're not defined by your past. you're limited in God's eyes by your past.

You may not realize it, but you came out stronger, with more confidence, greater experience. If that hadn't have happened. You wouldn't be prepared for the new levels that are coming your way.

**I've heard it said you can be pitiful or you can be powerful, but you cannot be both!**

You may have made a lot of mistakes; and you very well may have a lot of regrets. I want to get this in your thinking today. You can't do anything about yesterday. Living guilty and condemned doesn't make it any better. You have to drop it. If you get rid of that negative baggage. You'll not only feel that heaviness releases off of you, but then you'll step into the new things that God has in store.

The Scripture says, Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom, not where the Spirit of the Lord was. If you're always thinking about yesterday, last month, last year, there's no freedom there. That's where the Spirit of the Lord **was**. This is a new day.

There are new victories, new opportunities, new relationships, quit living in what was, and come over into what is right now. Right here as you are reading this book, God can be looking in your direction. God just may be waiting for you to “let it go” so He can step right in. There is freedom for you. Right now, there are new beginnings, new joy, new peace, a new victory. Living in the past will only keep you in mediocrity.

It's time to drop it and move forward. You may be a product of your past, but you don't have to be a prisoner of your past.

Nothing that's happened to you is a surprise to God. Before he laid out the plan for your life, he already knew every person who would hurt you. Every mistake you would make. Every loss you would go through. The good news is for every setback, God has already arranged a comeback.

For every disappointment, there's a new beginning. For every failure, He plans a beautiful restoration. He told me many years ago when I felt so far from God. He said, Son, I want to restore you, never do I plan on replacing you. Praise God His redemption power! You have to put your foot down and say that's it. I may have gone through some disappointments. I may have made some mistakes. But I'm not going to waste the time I have left on my journey in life, worrying about what I could have done better, and bitter over who hurt me.

Upset over what didn't work out. I'm stepping out of the walls, and I'm coming over and back into God's presence one more time. I know that the only way I can get into God's true presence is by me, dropping the offense, dropping the guilt, dropping

the condemnation, dropping the failure, dropping the pain, and the hurt. I'm not living my life with any old baggage; I will live my life free.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



### Reconciliation

Reconciliation and forgiveness are not the same. To reconcile means to come back together in a relationship that is similar to the one before the separation. In some cases, this is not possible and in others, it is not advisable. In cases of abuse, for example, it may not be wise for reconciliation to occur. In **Matthew 3:7–10**, Jesus urges the Pharisees to reconcile themselves to God. In verse eight, He tells them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance”.

In other words, show repentance through your actions. Reconciliation requires repentance—a change in behavior and attitude. But still, forgiveness can be given without this process. I do not have to hold you accountable. That is God’s place (**Romans 12:17 – 21**). There are times when reconciliation cannot occur. This may be from lack of repentance, lack of contact, or great separation.

Sometimes the offending party denies responsibility for the act, the harm was done, or the need to change. Maybe the offending party is deceased, moved away, or otherwise not in contact with us. Other times, the gap is so wide that reestablishing trust is unrealistic. Whatever the case, reconciliation is not always possible. For example, abusive individuals create deep, wide gaps in their relationships. Sexual, physical, and emotional abuse show that the separation created can simply be too deep to expect reconciliation.

While the abused person may forgive, the ability to trust the offending person is gone. Attempts at reconciliation in these circumstances are likely to be futile or at the least fraught with difficulties, as trust within the relationship has been destroyed.

## **Oh, there is one more offender that needs forgiveness**

There is an offender who does not fit into any of the above categories. This is the one person who can cause you the most harm, be the most oblivious to your best interests, and the hardest for you to forgive. Can you guess? Yes, it's you! By virtue of being human, you carry within you the potential to do self-destructive and foolish things. You can hurt your loved ones and yourself. You may be hurting right now because of something that you did in the past. Forgiving yourself is in many ways more difficult than forgiving others. Because you know your heart, you cannot get away with partial or false forgiveness.

## **The Dangers of Self-loathing**

When you are unwilling to forgive yourself, you turn the force of your bitterness and anger inward. 2,000 years ago, a wise man wrote that a house divided against itself cannot stand. So too, you cannot function properly if you resent yourself. Your relationships, your work, your physical health, and your emotional well-being are all likely to suffer significantly if you are in a state of unresolved conflict with yourself.

You may be able to get by for a time, you may be able to fool those around you, but in the end, you cannot be untrue to yourself. Being bitter against your own soul for the mistakes of your past will lead to only one thing: self-loathing.

If you are harboring an unforgiving pain within, it is nearly impossible to forgive others. Pain piles upon pain and your heart becomes hardened. In a tragically short amount of time, your self-loathing will turn into an angry, seething loathing of

everything and everyone around you. When you reach that stage, you become very hard to love. The loathing that you broadcast will be returned to you — until you forgive yourself and begin restoring a healthy sense of self-worth.

## **The Joys of Self-forgiveness**

Self-forgiveness brings about a corrected self-image. Free from blame, we can see our true potential and feel good about ourselves again. When you stop flagellating yourself for the sins of your past, your future looks much brighter. Forgiving yourself is not easy. There can be no tearful confession, no heart-to-heart talks because all is already known and there is but one heart — a heartbroken by a war that can have no winner. Forgiving yourself requires a conscious effort to let go of the past and take an active step toward a happier and healthier future.

There can be no falsity, no deceit. If you are going to forgive yourself, you've got to go all the way. Let the mistakes of your past stay in the past. Push them away as if they never happened. When you can honestly do that, only then can you earnestly forgive others, only then can you begin to move away from bitterness and toward your true goal: happiness. You've done everything that you're supposed to do. Even though you were in the right, you took the initiative to purge the anger from your heart and earnestly forgive the person who wronged you.

That should automatically reconcile you with the other party, right?

Not so. Forgiveness is only one part of reconciliation. Just as it took two people to disagree, it takes two to repair the damage. No matter how genuine your forgiveness, no matter how sincere your desire to restore the damaged relationship, you cannot do it alone.

I have heard the statement, “You have to forgive yourself,” countless times. The problem is, no one ever taught me what it actually meant. Forgive me for what? Harm I did to myself? The times I hit my thumb with a hammer? The car accident where I drove my car through the living room of an apartment on the corner of Fruit and Shields Avenues in Fresno, California? (yes, that actually happened)? What, exactly, does forgiving myself even mean?

I have concluded this: **if forgiving others means releasing them from the debt they owe, then forgiving myself must be releasing myself from debt, as well. Too often, we spend time and effort trying to pay for our past sins.**

We all have pasts filled with bad decisions, failures, and misdeeds. We have all been vindictive, vengeful, manipulative, and deceitful. If you stole \$20 from someone, go pay them back. Hey, maybe even give them \$40. That’s an easy one to calculate. The problem is that we sometimes spend great amounts of energy trying to pay for our past sins, to no avail. Paul tells us we are saved from our sins through grace, not because we are able to pay for them (**Ephesians 2:8–9**). You can never pay for your own mistakes. The best you can do is repent. This means two things: genuine sorrow and a change in attitude and behavior. Once you have repented, you are finished.

Maybe you have seen *Back to the Future*. Unfortunately, Dr. Emmett Brown was a fictional character. Yes, the DeLorean was a cool looking car and the flux capacitor was an awesome invention. However, it was just a movie. None of us has a time machine. As I held on to these moments in my life, they were all stored somewhere in my memory bank and played out in the form of anger. If ever I was angry, it was always compounded by events that had taken place in my life that I’d not accepted. Until I truly could forgive myself for my past, then I would remain a prisoner to what I could not change. And if that was the case, I’d be a prisoner forever.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



### **Forgiving the Man Upstairs**

I preached a sermon titled, “**Forgiving the Man Upstairs.**” Needless to say, the title grabbed everyone’s attention. (I have a reputation as an evangelist of coming up with some crazy and wild sermon titles) Well my subject was not about “a man upstairs as many reference our God to be” but rather it was about an elderly man and his wife of nearly 60 years. The sermon spoke of the deadly and tragic storm of Hurricane Katrina many years ago. An interesting fact is that Hurricane Katrina remains the costliest hurricane in U.S. history, causing an estimated \$161 billion in damage along the U.S. Gulf Coast. It destroyed or damaged more than 850,000 homes. Between 300,000 to 350,000 vehicles were also destroyed, as well as 2,400 ships and vessels.

I began to share the story of this elderly couple that faced Katrina together. Though they had been married for nearly 60 years their neighbors and friends told reporters that they still lived as if they were still on their honeymoon. This couple had seen and rode out many bad storms in their life, so the man told his lovely wife, “We can ride this one out as well.” The couple embraced themselves and soon after the sirens sounded, they could tell Katrina was different than any other storm they had faced. The little elderly wife begged her husband to evacuate. She wept and cried asking him to help her to the car not to worry about belongings, she begged her husband, please let’s leave. Let’s evacuate and go to a safe place. She just wanted to be safe from the storm. He assured her that everything would be just fine, but it deep down he began to second guess and wonder.

As the storm raged with high winds and massive flooding, the couple headed quickly upstairs, in a frail attempt to stay safe from this beast called Katrina. Within the hour the flood waters began to fill their house as they cuddled upstairs together, Electricity was lost and darkness began to set in. They were holding tight to one another as they had done so many other times through the years.

Eventually the storm calmed and passed. The flood waters did not reach the second floor of the couple's home. Tragically though when the calm finally came, the man knew that something bad had happened to his wife. She had a massive heart attack and was dead while still in her husband arms. It wasn't the wind, nor the debris, flood waters, or any aspects of nature, that took her life.

The sweet elderly lady died due to the great stress and panic that her heart and body could not handle. She took her last breath cuddled in the arms of her lifelong love, and the man just cried and wept realizing she was gone.

What followed Hurricane Katrina was another storm that also was deadly. Already devastated by Hurricane Katrina, the Industrial Canal in New Orleans was again flooded by Hurricane Rita as the recently-and-hurriedly-repaired levees were breached once more. In south-central Vermilion Parish, storm surge reached all the way up to the communities of Abbeville, Gueydan, and Lake Arthur.

As rescue workers quickly began to engage in life saving measures through rescue boats and helicopters, they were not fully recovered from Katrina. The rescues were again dark, chilling and challenging. A rescue worker was surprised to see an elderly man just calmly sitting in a window of his upstairs. This time he was all alone. The rescue worker just happened to have known this man's beautiful wife, and the story of how she died. The man seemed very calm which was unusual considering the trauma and scare in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Nobody to hug, and nobody to embrace, he just sat there cool, calm, and collected. Could he have been reminiscing about prior storms? Could he have been daydreaming somehow about the wife he lost? He just continued to sit all alone.

The rescuers screamed for the man to come out of his house and get safely on a boat. The screams were to no avail. The man upstairs continued to sit quietly. One rescuer screamed out Sir, you need to evacuate or you may lose your life. They saw that the man was not responding. It was almost as if he was in a trance. If it had not been for the movement of his face and hands from time to time, they would have thought the elderly man was dead. One rescue worker quickly entered the home, and climbed the stairs that led to him. The rescuer began to explain the power of the storm and the urgency to evacuate. To the rescuer's surprise the elderly man said, I cannot leave from upstairs. This is where my wife died in my arms. The elderly man was feeble and weak but quickly said, this is the place that I lost her.

He stumbled at his words but finally the rescuer realized what he was saying. If I would have just listened to her warning. If I would have just evacuated. My love would still be with me. She died in my arms right here upstairs! It hasn't been the same since she's been gone. He looked at the rescuer and said, young man please leave me here alone. Please go ahead and leave. There are many people that you need to rescue. I cannot leave this place. I cannot go with you. If I would have just evacuated for Katrina, my wife would still be here with me. The old man began to weep bitterly saying, I am a prisoner upstairs. I am a prisoner upstairs. I have sat, slept, and looked out this window cursing myself for not heeding my wife's call. I am a prisoner upstairs. Life is no longer worth living. I have lost the will to live. I am a prisoner up these stairs.

Trying to move forward in life holding grudges against yourself is like walking through quicksand when there is a sidewalk right next to you. While it may take some

time to wrestle yourself from the quicksand, your journey will be made so much easier by walking on the sidewalk.

Forgiving yourself is one of the single most actions one can take to get out of their own way. The freedom in forgiving yourself is giving yourself back the power that is rightfully yours. With forgiving yourself comes freeing yourself of your judgment, from your past, and from being so hard on yourself to the point it's weighing you down.

Forgiving yourself is the epitome of self-love. Breaking free of the thoughts that hold you back is conditional love in action. Making forgiving yourself a habit in your life will be reciprocated by actual results. You will find yourself moving forward in ways in which you have not seen before. It is important for me to reference forgiveness as a journey because it is not something that happens overnight.

Forgiving yourself comes with facing ugly truths about yourself and dealing with hurt that has been lying dormant for a long time, but never addressed. The process will likely be painful, but even more gratifying in the end. Everyone's journey for forgiving themselves is different. For me, it began by writing, where I recalled events in my life that caused me pain which I still held on to. For you, it may begin by picking up the phone and having a tough conversation with someone.

Perhaps forgiving yourself is as simple as accepting what is already done and just moving on. Whatever it takes, I strongly encourage you to embark on this journey of forgiveness.

## **Guilt and Shame**

I have read some works that say I should not feel guilty. Personally, I see this as dangerous. Guilt is a real thing. It is a declaration that I have done wrong. When I am unable to feel guilt, I may lack a conscience. That is a scary position. In my clinical

work, I have met individuals who are diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (psychopathy). A lack of conscience is a scary thing. When I have done something wrong, I feel guilty. This is an objective fact. When compared to a standard, I did not measure up. While you are free to develop your own standards, I try to measure myself against my understanding of the Bible.

As an evangelist, now a pastor, the principles there define the boundaries of right and wrong in terms of my interactions with God, other people, and the world. I feel guilty when I do not measure up to the biblical standard.

This guilt is useful. It draws boundaries for my behavior and even for my thoughts (2 **Corinthians 10:5**). Shame is a destructive emotion and pattern of thinking. We experience shame because of hopelessness. If we do not forgive ourselves it becomes like the elderly man that was a prisoner upstairs!

Sometimes, shame is put upon us by others. There are many cases of abuse in which the perpetrator convinces the victim that the abuse is deserved. They blame victims. They justify their actions through manipulation; this is known as gaslighting. They coerce the victim's thinking into such a tangled mess that the victim feels shame for the things that have happened to them. This enduring feeling of shame is real. People may not understand it, but this feeling of shame does not go away with a few clichés or a favorite Bible verse. It requires a change in thinking that is first grounded in the truth.

Allow me a moment to say this directly. You are not responsible for someone else bringing harm to you. Someone choosing to be violent or otherwise abusive to you is their choice. This is always true. You are never responsible for someone else's behavior. You did not cause it. You did not ask for it. They choose to behave in an abusive manner.

I realize my words are no different than those you may have heard a thousand times before, but I do hope that today will be the day you start to believe. Psalm 44:15–16 says, “All day long my dishonor is before me and my humiliation has overwhelmed me, because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger”. These voices tell us to feel shame.

The enemy may be the devil, the person who harmed us, society, or even churchgoers! The writers of this Psalm, the Sons of Korah who were musicians in the tabernacle, talk about experiencing dishonor and humiliation all day long. This is a shame. Shame comes when we believe that we are not only guilty but that our guilt will never end.

Our sin becomes our identity. We become so identified by our wrongdoings that we assume we can never move past them. Fortunately, these musicians gave us hope at the end of this Psalm. In verse 26, they cry out to God, “Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.”

**John 1:8–9** sums this up well. It says, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB). Essentially, John affirms that we all have failed; all of us have done wrong. However, God does not shame us! Instead, He offers forgiveness. He paid the debt.

## **You are released from your obligation.**

Shame is taken away because we do not have to be identified by our wrongs. Instead, we are identified by the cross (Galatians 2:20).

If God, who knows you best, does not identify you by your wrongs, neither should you. This is freedom. When I understand and really believe that God’s grace is big

enough and the cross was the finishing work of forgiveness, I will rid myself of shame. Your past is just that—the past. Paul tells us that he was able to leave the past behind and that this gave him the freedom to reach for the future (Philippians 3:12–14).

Paul had both hurt others and been hurt, himself. Paul had to release himself from his own sins. He called himself the chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). He understood his own wrongdoings. Yet, he also understood that he could never repay his own debt. He accepted the forgiveness of the cross and changed his attitude and behavior.

Paul watched the coats of those stoning Stephen in Acts 7. I do not know the significance of his keeping the coats—maybe they could throw harder without a coat. Whatever the reason, Paul (then called Saul) approved of Stephen’s public execution. This same man understood he could not pay for his own sins and left his past in the past.

Take a look at your life. Acknowledge your wrongs.

Accept Jesus’ payment on the cross. Be done with it. Trying to pay for your past will keep you in misery. You are chasing something you can never catch. Jesus paid it. The debt is settled. You are released from it.

## **True Forgiveness is a Choice, Not a Feeling**

Forgiveness is the cure for anger, bitterness, resentment, and depression. For the healing catharsis to take effect, you must truly and sincerely forgive your offender. Mere lip service or repetition of the words of forgiveness like some sort of mantra does not help. It adds a layer of guilt and disappointment on top of your anger and bitterness. True forgiveness has little to do with words. Forgiveness is what is known as a “heart attitude”. Heart attitudes are internal attitudes that radiate outward to external

expressions. It is the attitude, not the expression of it, which heals a bitter and troubled soul.

Although many people feel a sense of closure in forgiving a person face-to-face, it is not always necessary or possible. While offering your forgiveness to the offender is usually ideal, you can truly forgive someone in your heart even if you never see or speak to them again. The other person's disposition or attitude toward you does not dictate your ability to forgive. It is your heart; it is your choice.

Though it may not happen at that moment, the change will come. The bitterness in your soul that stems from the hurt will go away. It will. Truly, it will not even take very long. Soon after you stop clinging to the anger, it will stop clinging to you. Remember that no one else can take your happiness away from you. It's like what I heard said in a sermon a few weeks ago. Nobody can drive you crazy unless you give them the keys. Nobody can take your happiness unless you allow them to do so. Remember, nobody can drive you crazy unless you give them the keys!

God is always with you. No matter how circumstances may buffet you, no matter what anyone else does to you, happiness, like forgiveness, is a choice.

## **When Forgiveness Can Bring Reconciliation?**

Reconciliation depends in large part on timing. We all mature and develop in our own time. You may be ready to forgive before the other person is ready to be forgiven or to forgive themselves. The time for you to forgive is now and the other person will accept it when he is ready. In the majority of cases, forgiveness does lead to reconciliation.

As we saw in previous chapters, the offender will frequently be contrite. In those instances, he will recognize his need to be forgiven and embrace your offer of



forgiveness. If you sincerely forgive and he genuinely accepts that act, reconciliation will begin immediately. As with bones, relationships that are broken and then restored are generally stronger than those that have never been broken.

## **When Forgiveness Cannot Bring Reconciliation?**

Unfortunately, it isn't always the case that we find the other person ready to receive our forgiveness. Sometimes you will have to deal with an unrepentant or unavailable offender. In the former case, he may be unwilling to reconcile your relationship. In the latter case, he is unable to. When the person is unrepentant, he is not yet ready to restore the relationship. He may need more time to accept the blame and therefore the consequences of his actions. When you forgive this type of person, you are beginning a process of reconciliation.

There is no guarantee that the process will ever come to fruition, but you are doing all you can to foster an environment that will allow the relationship to heal. What is guaranteed is that you stand a better chance of reconciliation if you do forgive than if you don't. If the person is unavailable, for whatever reason, the relationship simply cannot be restored in the traditional sense. You can, however, cleanse yourself of the bitterness that the severed relationship caused. While the actual relationship will never be restored, the memory can be untarnished; restoring in retrospect the merits of your past relationship and the joy that it brought you.

## **How Do We Reach the State of Forgiveness?**

Forgiveness is not something that can be achieved by simply wishing it. Merely saying that you forgive someone is far from actually doing it. Forgiveness is an art, a discipline, and an attitude. Since you are reading this book, you are obviously on the right path—you want to forgive. By embracing the precepts taught herein, you will

learn the art and achieve the discipline necessary to foster the proper attitude. With time and repetition, you can make forgiveness an innate part of your psychic makeup.

## **The 5 Steps to Forgiveness**

### **#1 – Acknowledge the Offense**

The first step in the process of forgiveness is recognizing that there is an offense that needs to be forgiven. As we will see in a later chapter, ignoring the problem will not make it go away. Resentment will linger if you pretend that the problem does not exist.

### **#2 – Recognize that You Need to Forgive**

It is tempting to focus on the other person's need to be forgiven. In truth, you need to forgive as much, if not more, than the other person needs your forgiveness. The anger that you are holding is hurting you more than it hurts anyone else.

### **#3 – Release the Negative**

When we refuse to forgive, we invite negative emotions into our lives. When you begin the cleansing process of forgiveness, you must release the negativity — the anger, the hurt, the resentment — that has attached itself to you. Letting go of the hurt and the emotions that go with it is a key element in moving toward happiness through forgiveness.

### **#4 – Stop the Blame Game**

Forgiveness must be without blame. You cannot reserve the right to blame the other person and still genuinely forgive. That sort of false forgiveness is an open door

to lingering resentment. A forgiving heart keeps no record of wrongs committed against it.

#### **#5 – Be Sincere**

Don't try to force forgiveness by going through the right motions and saying the right words. Simply repeating words of forgiveness without meaning doesn't make you forgive someone any more than playing Annie Oakley on stage makes you a sharpshooter. True forgiveness is genuine, sincere, and selfless.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



### **We're Moving On**

Once you have forgiven, don't look back. Do not linger on the hurt, do not relive the offense, and do not reconsider the blame. Let it go. That is when you have truly reached a state of forgiveness and opened the door to happiness.

Forgiveness is not a magic cure-all. There is discipline and a process of forgiving. As with most learned disciplines, people often ask, "Am I doing it right?" There is no obvious physical manifestation of forgiveness, at least not immediately. There are, however, certain key elements that indicate you have earnestly forgiven.

### **Restored Relationships**

Ideally, forgiveness is met with repentance and any damage to the relationship thereby is restored. If you can honestly look at the relationship that had once been broken and now say that the damage has been completely repaired and the relationship is now back in harmony, you can easily see that you have legitimately forgiven the other person. But a lack of restoration does not necessarily mean that you have not forgiven the person. Recall that sometimes the offender may be unrepentant or unavailable. It takes two people to restore a fractured relationship, but only one to forgive.

Your attitude is not bound by the attitude or actions of the other person. It is quite possible that, while you have forgiven and now seek restoration of the relationship, the other person is unwilling to restore things on his end.

Without forgiveness, we are stuck in the past with little hope for the future. Even worse, we are stuck with our own resentment and anger for an entire lifetime. There are many people that are, for whatever reason, not willing to forgive, and they take their blame to the grave. They never learned how to forgive, and so were powerless to deal with their resentment, anger, and blame towards themselves and others. The key to forgiveness is this: one must be willing to learn how to forgive in order to reap the benefits of its operation in one's life. It's the first step, and it is vital to the entire process.

We can choose our actions and by executing our choices, we change our own reality and that of others. But our choices may not always be in alignment with the choices of others. This simply leads to conflicts. It is part of human nature to experience these conflicts, otherwise we would never learn a thing and never grow up.

Maturity in this way comes from learning how to eliminate conflict within ourselves as we experience conflict with others. The conflict is canceled out, within and without, and the stage is set for true forgiveness. You can learn to forgive and you can learn why forgiveness is easier than you think.

When you come to understand how an incident in your life causes you to be resentful and angry, you can switch your behavior almost like a light switch. Instead of continuing to blame, you can start the forgiveness process.

## **The Test of Forgiveness**

There is a way to evaluate whether or not you have truly forgiven someone for an offense. Forgiveness means acting and feeling as if the offense had never even occurred. I realize that we cannot be like God and have the ability to forget, but if you find yourself continuing to dwell on the incident, or you are resentful or bitter toward the person, then the process of forgiveness is not complete. If you find yourself in this position, it

does not invalidate the steps that you have taken, it simply means that you have not yet arrived at your destination.

If you have dealt with the individual and offered your forgiveness, but still feel the pinch of resentment and bitterness, you may just need a little time to properly file away the negative emotions that you had been harboring. But do not make the mistake of thinking that they will fade away on their own if you do nothing. You must actively pursue forgiveness until you can honestly look upon the person as if the offense had never occurred. Remember forgiveness is an internally active process, not a passive one. Ultimately, this is how you can feel assured that you have forgiven someone.

Furthermore, you will find that you have free attention to devote elsewhere now that you are free from fixating on your emotional wounds. Lingering bitterness and anger will dissipate, improving your relationships with those around you. If you were holding on to resentment toward the person, that too should fade quickly away; allowing you to think of her with fondness, and interact harmoniously with her in as much as she will permit.

Regardless of external factors that can influence whether or not the relationship can be fully restored, your attitude toward the other person should reflect that you have honestly and completely forgiven. The hurtful things in our past can follow us around for years, even decades, haunting us like a ghost of pain past. It is extremely important to our overall state of happiness that we break free of the chains that bind us to past mistakes, failures, and injuries. If we dwell on the past, we do not have the free attention that we need to manifest our dreams for the future. There are three main types of hurt in our past: self-inflicted, conscious, and forgotten.

## **Self-inflicted Hurt**

Self-inflicted hurt is pain stemming from our own mistakes and failures in the past. It is not the mistakes or failures themselves that actually cause the pain, it is our inability to forgive ourselves for those mistakes and failures. If you are haunted by something that you did wrong in the past, whether intentionally or unintentionally, you need to forgive yourself.

You cannot change the past. What you did or did not do last year, last month, last week — it does not determine who you are now or what you can achieve in the future. Recognize that the past is beyond your control and let go of your self-loathing and anger

## **Conscious Hurt**

Conscious hurt refers to the pain that we carry around knowingly. A conscious hurt is right out on the surface, either due to its recentness or severity. Someone hurt you in the past and you are angry. It may be a decades-old grudge or a recent slight, but it is a consuming flame of bitterness.

These conscious hurts are the easiest to identify. In fact, they take up so much of your free attention that they often border on obsession. The solution, of course, is forgiveness. A single injury is multiplied a thousand times over if we dwell on it for years.

## **Forgotten Hurts**

Forgotten hurts are difficult to diagnose and remedy. Sometimes, an incident will profoundly impact you more than you consciously recognize. The incident itself may become lost in time, but the negative impact persists. This is particularly prevalent in

emotional injuries stemming from childhood trauma. An unfocused resentment or an undirected anger may be signs of a forgotten hurt.

In these cases, it is more difficult to forgive because we don't really understand what we are forgiving. We may not even entirely grasp who we are forgiving. When the hurt is forgotten, forgiveness can take the form of a more general release, letting go of the bitterness and embracing happiness.

Forgiveness is the cure for anger, bitterness, resentment, and depression. The key is that in order for the healing catharsis to take effect, you must truly and sincerely forgive your offender. Mere lip service, repeating the words of forgiveness like some sort of mantra will do nothing but add an additional layer of guilt and disappointment on top of your anger and bitterness.

True forgiveness has little to do with words. Forgiveness is what is known as a "heart attitude". Heart attitudes are internal attitudes that radiate outward to external expressions. It is the attitude, not the expression of it, which heals a bitter and troubled soul.

Although many people feel a sense of closure in forgiving a person face to face, it isn't always necessary or possible. While offering your forgiveness to the offender is usually the ideal, you could truly forgive someone in your heart even if you never saw or spoke to that person again. The other person's disposition or attitude toward you does not dictate your ability to forgive. It is your heart; it is your choice. There is no instant karma in this world. You cannot expect all ill feelings to flee your mind and an immediate sense of peace to wash over you upon forgiving someone. Though it may not happen in that moment, it will come.



The bitterness in your soul that stems from the hurt will go away. It will. Truly, it won't even take very long. Very soon after you stop clinging to the anger, it will stop clinging to you.

Remember that no one else can take your happiness away from you. No matter how circumstances may buffet you, no matter what anyone else does to you. My wife Dana has always said, happiness, like forgiveness, is a choice.

## CONCLUSION



### **The Bridge**

The fight began over a small misunderstanding, which can sometimes happen, but the dispute dragged on and became an angry exchange of words, followed by weeks of silence. One day, there was a knock on the older brother's door. When he opened it, he was facing an old, bearded carpenter, holding a toolbox. "I could sure use some work, sir," said the stranger. "Do you need any repairs on your farm?" "Yes", replied the brother. "I've got a job for you. Across the creek, there's a farm that happens to belong to my younger brother. Until recently, the whole area between our homes was green, but then he changed the creek's path, making it into a border between us. I'm sure he did that for spite, but I'll show him..." said the older brother. "You see those trees by the barn? I want you to turn them into a 10-foot-tall fence. I never want to see his face again."

The old carpenter thought quietly to himself for a few minutes and eventually said: "I see". The farmer helped the carpenter carry his tools and the wood and then drove off to the city on some errands. When he came back in the evening, the old carpenter had finished. Upon arriving at the creek, the older brother was stunned. His eyes were bulging out, and he couldn't utter a single word.

Where a fence should have been standing, a bridge now stood. A quaint and special bridge, truly a work of art, with an intricately carved banister. At the same time, the younger brother happened to come to the same spot. He rushed over the bridge and embraced his older brother, and said: "You're something special... building a bridge,

after all, I've said and done!" While both brothers were hugging, the old carpenter collected his tools and started walking away.

The brothers turned to him and said "Please, stay for a few more days – we have more things that need fixing." "I would have loved to stay, kind sirs," said the carpenter. "But I have many more bridges to build and things to fix in other places..."

We often let anger push us away from our loved ones and allow pride to come before our love. Don't let it happen to you. Learn to forgive and appreciate what you have. The past cannot be changed, but the future can be. No quarrel can spoil a true connection. Build your bridges when you have to, and always cross them with a smile.

If you want to experience true happiness in your life, look no further on the outside. Happiness is achieved internally, not externally. You can achieve true happiness by eliminating any stories you keep alive from the past that may haunt you. You can confront these ghosts directly and when you face them, they evaporate into nothing — they simply disappear and you will no longer be haunted by your past, you will be more fully present in the now. Wishing you the power to forgive and move on!