

When a Woman Chooses to Forgive

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Names and certain details have been changed to protect the privacy of the men and women featured in the personal stories.

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Introduction

The Life-Changing Choice

What a wonderful gift forgiveness is when it covers my failures, mistakes, and sins. I am so thankful for the many years I've lived and walked in God's grace. When I think of how God has forgiven all of my deepest failures and lapses in judgment, I want to tell the world about the power of forgiveness.

But do I want to share actual forgiveness with others?

That is a different story. And I will admit that it is so much easier for me to receive forgiveness than to dispense it to others. Can you relate?

Like many other Christians I know, I struggled for years with the concept and process of forgiving others. At times I was afraid to forgive. My first response was to be self-protective and slow to extend grace. I honestly thought that if I forgave the person who offended me, that same person would gain an advantage over me. Other times, I dug in my heels and held on to my pride and simply did not want to forgive. I didn't feel like the person who hurt me deserved my forgiveness.

On those days when I strived to follow God's example, I would resolve to forgive a person and then some thought of mine or action by them would send me back to a place of hurt and resistance. Believe me, I was never pleased with this inability to forgive. How I hated the obsessive thoughts that accompanied these times of falling

short of God's best for me. I despised my own attitudes and irritability. It is a terrible thing to want to do better, to *be* better in an area of obedience to God, and then to witness yourself repeating the same mistakes and misbehaviors over and over.

I remember turning to Matthew 6:14-15 during one such struggle. Jesus's words struck me in a new way as I read: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Honestly, I had always read this like a veiled threat. It had seemed to me as if Jesus was saying, "You'd better forgive others or else!" Suddenly it came to me. Jesus was not threatening me—He was encouraging me. He was saying to me, "Cheryl, if you want to feel the blessed assurance that your own failures, mistakes, and sins are forgiven, *forgive*."

At this juncture, forgiveness took on a whole new look. I realized that forgiveness is something that I do for my own well-being. It is in my best interest to forgive. Before that I believed forgiveness was for the other person's benefit. Forgiveness had felt like a burden rather than a blessing.

From that moment on, I began to choose forgiveness. The choice was not always easy. Sometimes, I had to make that choice again and again in a single conversation. However, some wonderful changes began to take place in my own life as I forgave. I started to experience a new freedom in my walk with Jesus. My friendships with others improved tremendously. I felt God's grace in a palpable way. Not only that, but I was able to grow deeper in my relationship with Jesus.

During the season of growth, I was able to look back with greater clarity on my years of resenting people and actions that offended me. I had held some flat-out wrong perceptions about what forgiveness is and what it entails. The more I explored the Bible and the true meaning of forgiveness, the more empowered I became to release those false concepts.

It's been a few years now of walking in forgiveness. Following through with forgiveness doesn't always come easily, but I am more spiritually prepared to be faithful in this area of life. I can now examine my times of anger, blame, and hurt and look for the sources and triggers. So often there is an underlying issue related to forgiveness. When I choose to forgive, God ratifies that choice and blesses me in the process. Who doesn't want that?

Are you struggling to forgive? Chances are you picked up this book because you're recognizing, like I did, that you aren't experiencing the fullness of God's gift of forgiveness. I don't want in any way to diminish the hurt you feel. No! However, I would love to see you set free from that hurt. I would love for you to be able to have a renewed sense of how much God has already forgiven you. I would love for you to feel the grace of God upon your life in a very real way. I would love for your personal relationship with God to go to a deeper, more intimate, and fulfilling level. I know that all that is possible when, with God's help, you make the choice to forgive.

I invite you to join me on this journey of healing, biblical insight, and true transformation within your heart and, likely, in your relationships. The burden of unforgiveness is too great a weight for you to carry. It is hurting you more than anyone else. It is time for you to be set free!

You are not alone. In the journey ahead, I will share many powerful and encouraging stories of people I know who made the choice to forgive. You will gather hope and strength for your own life's needs as you immerse yourself in stories that could have ended in tragedy, but instead became testimonies of victory all because of one factor—the choice to forgive.

Your victory awaits, my friend.

Chapter 1

God's Great Offer

God has made an amazing offer to mankind—to forgive any man or woman their wrongdoings, sins, and past. God has paid the penalty. Our sins cost the life and death of His only Son. Now, anyone who will accept and believe that Jesus, God's Son, died on the cross for his or her sins will be forgiven by God.

The offer is real and comes with dynamic benefits to all who accept it. The person who receives Jesus also receives all the promises of God that are in Christ Jesus. That means anyone who believes in Jesus can lay claim to a new identity, heaven, God's strength, divine help, and so much more. The Bible describes it like this: "As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:3-4).

God, in His great compassion and goodness, is extending this offer to you, to me, and to anyone who will simply receive it. It doesn't matter what your past holds or what you have done. God is willing to forgive you if you will allow Him to have the reins of your life.

Have you accepted this great offer? Have you had your sins

forgiven by God? Along with the freedom that comes with forgiving others is understanding the greatness of the forgiveness God is willing to grant to you.

God wants each of us to experience the gift of His forgiveness and the joy of extending grace to others (and to ourselves). The more we explore the fullness of God's grace, the more we'll want to live our lives immersed in it and transformed by it.

Those who accept God's gift discover all He has promised is true!

The Invitation to Transformation

Anna couldn't believe what she was hearing. The pastor at the front of the small church was offering her a brand-new life. He announced that anyone who would walk down to the front of the church and pray would become a new creation and be forgiven of all their past wrongs.

Anna couldn't remember the last time she had been inside a church. Since she was thirteen her life had consisted of drugs, alcohol, and parties. Raised by an alcoholic grandmother in the isolated hills of Santa Inez, Anna had been left mostly alone. She had supported her burgeoning drug addiction by stealing. Over the years she had made promises to try to change to anyone who reached out to her. However, the power of the substances always drew her back into the path of destruction. Friends, family, and well-meaners had given up on the beautiful, petite blonde.

By the time Anna was in her twenties she was living on the streets. One day a friend from high school offered to pay her way to a drug rehabilitation facility. Anna was desperate and accepted his offer.

Anna cooperated fully in the program. She wanted to remain sober, but she feared the cravings that loomed in her soul. While in rehab, she had come to realize the damage and hurt she had inflicted on so many people because of her addiction. The condemnation was overwhelming. When the time for her release came, Anna didn't want to leave.

Throughout the program, her counselors had urged Anna to reach out beyond herself to a higher power to overcome her cravings. Someone had also suggested that she find a church to attend. So the first Sunday after her release, Anna was sitting in the back of the first church she found.

It was in this church that she heard the most beguiling invitation she had ever been offered—a whole new start in life. The pastor said, “Today can be the first day of the rest of your life.” That was it! Anna jumped from her seat and rushed down the middle aisle. She wanted that new life. Anna wanted to have her sins and past wiped clean. She wanted to start over with no marks against her. She had no idea if such an offer would ever be given to her again, and she didn’t want to miss it.

Anna stood alone at the front only for a moment. The pastor stepped down from the pulpit and put his hand on Anna’s shoulder. Soon the whole church gathered around her. They were all crying. The pastor led Anna in a simple prayer asking Jesus to forgive her of all her sins, come and live in her heart, and make her a new creation. From that day forward Anna was a new person.

Today Anna serves in our women’s ministry. No one could ever imagine that Anna had such a past. The bright, beautiful blonde with the engaging smile radiates the love and warmth of Jesus. She still tears up when she recalls the invitation that transformed her life.

Anna received a brand-new start in life. You can too. The Bible declares, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Are you aware of your own need to be forgiven? Do you want a new start? It’s only a prayer away.

Too Good to Be True

For some, the offer of God’s total forgiveness sounds too incredible. After all, God has promised to wipe away every sin as though it never happened. I had a friend who struggled for some time with

this concept. She was frequently haunted at night with memories of the sinful things she had done in her past. One day she prayed, “Lord, if You have wiped out my past and don’t remember it anymore, why do I still have such stark reminders?”

Her heart then heard the quiet voice of God speaking: “I have buried your sin in the deepest sea, and I will remember it no more. But I allow you to remember the pain and injury of your sin so that you won’t ever return to it.”

It’s true that God has buried our sins as He promised in Micah 7:18-19, “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

Corrie ten Boom used to say that God not only buried our sins in the deepest sea, but He also placed a sign over it saying, “No fishing!”

First John 1:9 promises, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God is faithful to forgive. God will not renege on His offer. He will not fail. What we confess in repentance, He will cancel, wipe out, take out of the way. Not only does God propose to forgive us but to cleanse us as well. God promises to remove the unrighteous origin of the sin that we have confessed.

Think of it like this. Have you ever dealt with mold in your house? Ugh, right? When you deal with mold, it is important to not only clean the places affected by the mold with bleach, but also to get at the source of what is causing the mold. You must deal with the leaky faucet, the dampness, or water problem that produces the mold. Only by taking measures against both the mold and the source of the mold will you effectively deal with the problem. That is what God does when He forgives us. God not only cleans the effects of sin from our lives, but He goes right to the source in our heart that is drawn to the offending behavior.

Jesus dealt with the sin of man on the cross at Calvary. Colossians 2:13-14 describes the accomplishment of Jesus in this way: "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven all your trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

Those who believe in Jesus are forgiven by God of all their trespasses and sins. God sees those past offenses nailed on the cross with Jesus. There is a hymn by Elvina Hall I learned as a child that says, "Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow." This is exactly what God has done through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Accepting Forgiveness

Mary was getting discouraged. Though she had come to Jesus, her husband Gary did not see his need for forgiveness. Gary was willing to listen to Mary as she shared with him about all the changes that God was bringing into her heart. He even volunteered to listen to the sermon tapes she brought home from church.

For over a year Gary listened to sermons on his way to work and on his commute home. However, Gary seemed totally unmoved by anything he heard. He continued to be emotionally detached from Mary. He drank and partied hard on his boat with his friends every weekend.

Then one morning Gary woke up to the realization that he was a sinner who was well on his way to hell. This realization terrified him. He got in his car to make his commute to work, but was sure he would never make it. Every car seemed to be gunning for him, and Gary was convinced that if he died he would go to hell. Every sin that Gary committed throughout his lifetime, things he never felt bad about before, now served as the prosecuting attorneys against him.

After Gary arrived at work he made a beeline to the telephone in his office. He called the church his wife was attending and made an appointment to see a pastor. He left his office and warily drove to the church, barely surviving the ordeal.

Once at church he spoke to a young pastor there. "I don't want to go to hell and I deserve to go there after all the bad things I have done."

The pastor looked sympathetically at Gary and then opened his Bible to John 3. He explained to Gary that he needed to be born again. Gary agreed, not quite understanding what the pastor meant. The pastor explained to Gary that he could be forgiven by God of every sin he committed if he would ask Jesus to forgive him. Gary nodded. That was exactly what he wanted. Gary wanted God to forgive his sins. Though Gary was only in his early thirties, he wanted the assurance that if he died he would go to heaven. The pastor led Gary in a simple prayer: "Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner. I ask You to forgive me of my sins and come and live in my heart. Amen."

It was so simple, yet Gary felt so free. He left the church and walked out into the bright sunlight of the parking lot feeling a great burden had been rolled off of him. His drive home was exhilarating. The dread was gone.

Until that morning, Gary had never thought of himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness. In fact, he would have scoffed at the term. However, the realization of all the injury that he had caused others hit him that fateful morning. It laid the heavy burden of his own sins upon his shoulders and Gary knew that he was guilty before God. The blessed release had come so easily. He only needed to acknowledge his guilt before God and ask for the accomplishment of Jesus on the cross to be applied to his sin and he was liberated. Gary's life was forever changed.

Admitting You're a Sinner

Most people, like Gary, are unaware of the injury they have

caused to others and their culpability before God. The whole concept of admitting that you are a sinner is really distasteful. However, it is only when we are willing to admit that we owe a debt to God because of our sin that we are ready to want and receive the forgiveness that God offers.

I met Pauline after church on a Sunday morning in London, England. She told me that she was drawn into the church because I smiled at her. Pauline was a beautiful, upper-class woman who just happened to be walking by the school where we held our Sunday morning services.

Pauline asked me who the people gathered at the school were and what we were doing. I explained that we were part of a church that met there. She raised her eyebrows. "My sister is born again. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, I do." I answered. She asked me to explain it to her. I began by telling her that every person is a sinner according to what the Bible says in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." At this point Pauline laughed. "No, surely not me. I am not a sinner."

Looking at the beautiful woman, I asked the Lord to give me a clear way to clarify this notion to Pauline. "Well, think of it this way. Suppose you parked your car in London so that you could go shopping. Let's say that you were unaware that the spot you chose was not authorized for parking. When you returned to your car you found a great big clamp attached to it and a notice to appear before the magistrate. Then you went down to the council office and were told that you would need to pay a great deal of money to release your car. You told the authorities that you didn't have enough money. Suppose you had a brother..."

At this point Pauline stopped me. "I do have a brother!" she said.

I nodded and continued with my illustration. "All right, then. Your brother finds out that you owe a debt you can't pay so he comes down and pays your debt and frees your car. Now you and your car

are free. You don't owe anything to the council but you do owe your brother a great deal. That's the way it is with God. We have done things, many that we are unaware of, that have violated God's rules and ordinances. We do not have the funds or the ability to pay the debt that we owe. So Jesus came and paid the debt we owe to God."

Pauline was thoughtful for a moment. "I see. You are right. I am a sinner then. I want Jesus to pay my debt."

I think that Pauline's problem was a misunderstanding of the term *sinner*. The Greek word used in the New Testament to denote sin is an archery term that literally means, "to miss the mark." In New Testament times when someone was shooting an arrow at a target, unless he hit the dead center of the bull's-eye, he was considered a sinner—he had missed the mark. It didn't matter how far he was from the bull's-eye or how close he came. Any missing of the very center of the target labeled him a sinner.

So when it comes to mankind, God has a certain standard of righteousness. Any missing of that standard of righteousness marks you as a sinner. It doesn't matter if you've committed terrible atrocities or only minor mistakes. You have still missed the mark and need forgiveness for your sin.

Overlooking Our Own Sin

Most of us can more easily recognize the offenses of others than our own. We are very gifted at self-justification and covering and denying our own culpability while pointing the accusatory finger at others. We see our own sins as minor and excusable while others' are major and inexcusable.

That was exactly the way Simon saw it. When we read Luke 7:36-50 we discover that Simon had invited Jesus into his house for a meal. Though the common courtesy of Simon's day was to wash your guest's feet, anoint them with the signature oil of the house, and greet your guests with a kiss, Simon had not shown any of these courtesies to Jesus. Rather, Simon had virtually ignored Jesus. We

are not told whether Simon omitted the basic courtesies purposely or he simply forgot.

A woman of bad reputation arrived while Jesus was in Simon's house. This woman immediately made her way to Jesus. She fell down before Him and poured oil from an alabaster flask onto His feet. Then she began to wash His feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair.

Simon was disgusted at this display and reasoned in his heart, "This Man (Jesus), if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."

Jesus, knowing what was going through Simon's mind, said, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

Simon replied, "Teacher, say it."

Jesus shared a parable with Simon. The parable had to do with two men who owed a great debt. The first man owed thousands of dollars while the other man owed only a few. The creditor agreed to cancel both men's debts. "Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

Jesus then looked at the woman. "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

The woman was conscious of her own sinful condition. She knew she had missed the mark and needed forgiveness. In acknowledging her sin and need of Jesus, the woman had received the divine forgiveness of Christ. The woman, because of her love and gratitude for Jesus, had afforded Him all the courtesies that Simon had neglected. She had washed Jesus's feet. She had anointed them with fragrant oil. She had kissed His feet again and again.

Simon had missed the mark. Priding himself in his own righteousness, he had neglected to show due diligence to Jesus. His neglect was sinful and placed him in the same category as the woman with the bad reputation.

All Have Sinned

Isaiah 53:6 proclaims, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” There is not one person living on the earth who has not sinned. Every person has missed the mark that God requires. Every man and woman has gone astray and turned to his or her own way. God has allowed Jesus to pay the penalty for those sins that we have committed. Now to receive that glorious forgiveness of sin God offers we only need to admit that we have indeed sinned and need the atoning death of Jesus to pay the penalty we have incurred.

The process of acceptance of forgiveness by God is so simple. We need only pray, acknowledging that we have sinned, and ask God to forgive us for our sins because of what Jesus has done on the cross.

God wants to forgive your sins. God wants you to experience the wondrous sense of emancipation that comes from God cancelling your sins and burying them in the deepest sea. The Psalmist describes it this way in Psalm 103:11-12, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

Questions for Study and Personal Reflection

1. Read Luke 7:36-50. What ministers to you most about this story?
2. Who do you relate to most—Simon or the woman who was a known sinner?

3. What sins do you need to acknowledge before God?
4. How will you claim 1 John 1:9 over those sins you just acknowledged?
5. Use Isaiah 53:4-6 to briefly explain how Jesus paid the penalty for your sin.
6. Examine Micah 7:19: "He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." List any sins that you need to reckon as being "cast into the depths of the sea" by God. Remember, "No fishing!"

Prayer

Dear Lord,

You so readily cover me with Your grace. You take my sins and cast them into the sea where I cannot retrieve them and try to hold on to them once again. Today, I ask for forgiveness of all of my sins.

I accept the invitation to be transformed by Your forgiveness. I long to fully understand and embrace my identity as a saved child of God.

Give me a heart that is willing and eager to extend forgiveness to others. Each time I hand one of my sins over to Your grace, remind me that there is someone in my life who also needs to experience this great gift. In Jesus's name, amen.