



The Incredible
Journey

Forgiveness:

FORGIVING *the*
UNFORGIVABLE

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FORGIVENESS: FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

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A related resource, the *Forgive Now Workshop*, is also available, comprising of eight DVD presentations by Dr. Darold Bigger and Dr. Barbara Hernandez and comes with a Coordinator Guide and access to free Participant Guides containing exercises and discussion questions for use by individuals or groups. More information is available here:

<https://www.adventistbookcenter.com/forgive-now-workshop-dvd-set-with-workbook.html>

FORGIVENESS: FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

The Biggers' Story

Monday, June 17, 1996, dawned sunny and full of promise. The previous day—Father's Day—my wife, Barbara, and I had been in Portland, Oregon, where I had officiated at the wedding of Marta and John Stone—two friends of our daughter Shannon. Unfortunately, Shannon hadn't been able to attend the ceremony. She was in Takoma Park, Maryland, finishing a one-year internship in the philanthropy department of Washington Adventist

Hospital. Two weeks away from moving back west, she'd had to settle for our descriptions of the wedding and the reception. She had commissioned Barbara to take lots of notes to capture every detail—every colour and fabric, every movement and word and song, every smile and gesture.

On that fateful Monday I was in my office in the department of religious studies on the campus of Walla Walla College, the college in south-eastern Washington state where I taught. I was packing a summer term's worth of books, notes, calendars, and office supplies. The dean of the School of Theology was going to direct an archaeological dig in Jordan that summer, and I had agreed to fill in for him on campus until he returned.

In the midst of my packing, John Cress, chaplain of the college, phoned. He got right to the point. "Would you come to my office please?" he said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"I'm just moving my things to the theology department for the summer," I replied. "Could I come over this afternoon?"

But John was insistent. "I have a personal matter of some urgency I really need to talk to you about right now," he said.

On my way to John's office I wondered what his "matter of some urgency" might be. When I got there, I found that Barbara, who managed the college store, had come too. She and John were waiting in silence when I walked in—John behind his desk and Barbara sitting in one of the chairs. When I had seated myself in another chair, John walked around his desk, looked at us, and said, "I have the worst possible news I could ever share with you. . . Shannon has been killed—murdered in her apartment."

That stunning announcement shattered our world. The look on John's face, the sag of his shoulders, the subdued tone of his voice all spoke to the seriousness of this message. It was no attempt at making a joke, no mistake.

All was quiet for an instant, and then everything burst into chaos. Barbara remembers feeling the blood drain from her head to her toes, as if her own life was ebbing away. I began to sob—wrenching, gut-forced protests to this horrific announcement—as if my body was attempting to rid itself of those unwelcome words.

I don't remember how long it was until the emotions subsided enough to allow us to talk. Then Barbara began asking questions and running through scenarios, trying to imagine how such a thing could have really happened.

John asked whether we would like to talk with the detectives in Maryland.

Shannon had actually been killed in Maryland, literally across the street from the District of Columbia.

I said, "Yes," so John dialed a number, and a detective who had been at the scene answered. John handed the phone to me, and I spoke to the detective, who sensitively gave me the simple facts. That morning Shannon had been found on her bed in her apartment. She'd been assaulted and then tied up and slashed and stabbed to death.

How Barbara and I wished that something else had brought us to John's office— perhaps something that had occurred on campus requiring our attention, that a student desperately needed our help, that Shannon was sick, or even that one of our daughters, still at home, was in trouble. But Shannon murdered? That was far beyond anything either of us could have imagined.

Triggers

Intense police work and some providence combined, Anthony Robinson was found, apprehended, charged, and locked up.

Through the summer and fall, my sadness was so overwhelming that it completely obscured any hints of anger. The initial legal proceedings focused on gathering information and preserving it, and on deciding what approach the prosecution would take. The state's attorney, Robert Dean, and his office's victim witness advocate, Paula Slan, kept us up to date on the decisions prosecutors were making.

Soon after Anthony's arrest, a preliminary hearing was held to take sworn testimony, particularly from the man driving the van on the day it was identified as the vehicle Anthony had used. Attorney Dean was anxious to preserve that testimony in case

something should happen to the witness or he should move or disappear (an anticipation that became reality not long afterwards). Our daughter, Hilary, flew to Washington to attend the hearing. She was determined to keep herself completely informed about the case. Other family members joined her there, where they saw Anthony for the first time and heard some of the evidence that had led the prosecutor to file the formal charges against him.

On March 28 - Good Friday - Anthony pleaded guilty to first-degree murder, to armed robbery, and to an Alford plea for attempted sexual offence in the first degree. In exchange for his guilty pleas, he was sentenced to life in prison without parole, plus twenty years. We watched him all through the court session, looking for some sign of remorse, hoping for some word or statement of regret. There wasn't any. Anthony looked and acted detached, either unaware of,

or disinterested, in the testimony given by law enforcement and mental health witnesses. Anthony's only reaction was a forceful obscene gesture that he made when the state's attorney concluded his presentation with a vigorous final statement.

Even before Anthony made that defiant gesture, I had given up hope of seeing or hearing anything positive from him. Now lingering questions, unfulfilled expectations, and the harsh reality and finality of it all seeped into me. My reaction was to feel more distance than animosity.

On April 21, a Monday, Paula Slan phoned, notifying us that Anthony had filed a request for permission to change his plea. She explained that in Maryland, this is the first step in the appeal process. She described it as a "leave to appeal" to the Court of Special Appeals. Because Anthony had pleaded guilty, he had to apply for permission

to appeal. His second appeal, filed at the same time as the first, was an application for review of his sentences.

Anger and Rage

Instantly I was furious. This man, who had admitted to stabbing and slashing our daughter to death, now wanted to get out of taking the consequences for what he had done! The anger that people had probably expected earlier had been overcome with grief. Now it rushed on me like a tidal wave and consumed me.

Before Shannon was murdered, I was healthy, my blood pressure was low, and I had no trouble relaxing or sleeping. Now, the knots in my stomach, the tension in my muscles, and the flashes of impatience alarmed me and made conversing with my students and preparing for the classes I was teaching very difficult. Over the next several weeks my reservoir of anger grew. I

realised that unless I found a way to deal with it, it would destroy me. So, I went to work.

For several years I had taught a stress management class, so I knew the techniques well—deep breathing, progressive body relaxation, physical exercise, mental imaging, distraction, attitude changes, soft music. I tried to use them to reduce my pent-up emotions, but they didn't work.

The spiritual exercises that I practiced regularly didn't do the job either. I read the Bible and prayed, but the anger remained. I added biblical meditation and pulled up memories of times when God had brought healing to me, but these didn't alleviate my agony. Even my belief that God exists and that He is interested in our daily lives—truths I had accepted long before—didn't settle me down.

Finding that my best efforts weren't

helpful was discouraging enough, but the failure of my spiritual resources made me wonder what good they were. Could they provide any relief, any encouragement, when I was feeling such desperate need? Could they offer me any hope or any miraculous power? I struggled for weeks, searching for some way to reduce the emotional turmoil that was making me miserable.

Then, on a Sabbath that followed an especially intense week soon after the anniversary of Shannon's murder, I went to church feeling like an anxious, angry failure. What I heard in church that day made me feel even worse.

John Cress, the pastor who had informed Barbara and I about Shannon's murder, preached the sermon that day. He had stayed in touch with us and had been very supportive, but I hadn't shared my spiritual crisis with him, so he had no idea that I would zero in on one of

the sub-points in his sermon, run off on a tangent, and be devastated by its impact.

John began by telling the story of Jesus' restoration of Peter after Peter had betrayed Him. Jesus asked Peter essentially the same question three times: "*Do you love Me?*" (see John 21:15–17). At that, my mind turned quickly to other things Jesus had said about love: "*This is my command: Love each other...*" (John 15:17). "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another*" (John 13:34). It was when John read the next verse, "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (verse 35), that I went on a mental detour. It was only a short step from those verses to others that pointed the finger directly at me:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (Matthew 5:43-47). But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." (Luke 6:27).

Oh no, I silently cried out, not that! I've tried and tried for days and weeks and months. I've done everything I know how to love Anthony, and I can't make it happen. I, the lifelong Christian, the professional Christian, the Christian pastor and teacher, cannot do this

one simple thing that You ask of me! My failure to love Anthony led me to conclude that I was spiritually bankrupt and hopelessly lost because I couldn't represent my God by loving a fellow human being. I was devastated.

I had failed at other times in my life, so I knew well what it meant to be embarrassed and deeply regretful. But this time the pain was much greater than it had ever been before. This wasn't just a minor matter—a hasty word or deed for which I was sorry. This time the failure came from deep within me. It involved the essence of who I am.

I knew Jesus wasn't calling me to forgive Anthony just one time. He was calling me to forgive Anthony at all times and for all time. My inability to do this revealed that I was faulty at my core. It meant that it wasn't just a matter of my needing to change my

actions. I needed to change who I was too. But my identity ensured my failure; I knew that, try as I might, I couldn't solve that problem. I couldn't change myself in that way. I was as much in need of God's transforming grace and as incapable of changing the reality of who I was as was Anthony in his prison cell in Maryland.

What a horrid thought that was—that spiritually, I was a peer of the man who murdered our daughter! That I was morally bankrupt and no better a representative of God than was a confessed murderer!

I felt crushed and farther from God than at any other time in my life. This was far from the first time I'd had regrets. But there was something new and disturbing about what I saw of myself this time. The emotions surging up from my inner self were not prompted by some superficial annoyance. They

weren't the result of a little slip, a small error on my part. They rose from the centre of my being—the core of who I am. That day I saw myself as an angry, resentful, vengeful, cynical, destructive person.

For weeks, the anger and resentment I felt toward Anthony had been growing. I was connected to him, tied up with him, consumed by him. The man who had taken Shannon's life now threatened to take mine too—by so occupying my mind that he was becoming all I could think about.

Then I turned my attention to myself—and there I saw another very ugly picture. I realised that I, too, was a destructive person—a man of such limited spirituality that I couldn't stir up any redemptive feelings toward myself, let alone toward Anthony. I was incapable of doing what I wanted to do—unable to act in love toward myself

or others. I was a wretched human failure, a man who needed God just as desperately as Anthony did. I was just as inhumane as he was, just as much a moral failure, just as incapable of being my best self. Both Anthony and I needed the same thing—the transformation that only God could give us. In that way I stood on a par with the man who had killed our daughter. What a humiliating discovery! While I was still in the church my mind screamed out the words of Paul in Romans 7:24, *"Oh wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"* (NKJV)

Relief

The feeling of desperation lasted only a few seconds, but that was long enough for it to strip all pretence from me for a lifetime. No longer can I hide behind a façade of propriety, pretending to be a self-sufficient, God-fearing, people-

loving person. I knew that on my own I couldn't do even the simplest moral good. I too am a sinner in desperate need of a loving, saving God.

Once I had captured that picture and saved it as the home page in my mind, another text in the book of Romans came to mind.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8 NIV).

Now that is good news! I'm a wretched man, but Christ loves me anyway! I'm a desperate failure who cannot cure himself, yet Christ died for me anyway. He didn't expect me to get things together and improve myself before He

would help me. That profound reality warmed me. Never before had I felt like such a contented and happy failure! As the promise of God's forgiveness settled on me, I could openly admit, without shame, that I was a sinner. When I realised this, feelings of relief filled me.

And then, suddenly, I noticed that the knot in my stomach was gone. I was no longer clenching my jaw, and I felt hungry and happy. Anthony was still on my mind, but resentment and anger no longer consumed me. That's why the symptoms of stress I'd been trying for weeks to jettison had disappeared in a matter of minutes.

The sermon over, we sang the closing hymn, received a benediction, and headed out of the church. As I walked up the aisle, I realised that I was no longer troubled with thoughts of Anthony.

That experience changed my perception of forgiveness. I've come to understand it to be a **gift, not a goal**. I believe that the deep, profound forgiveness we all need comes from God. It isn't something we can obtain through self-help exercises and self-discipline. Our efforts to rid ourselves of the burdens we carry are useful and may relieve some of the stress and pain we suffer. But they don't address the fundamental pain that lies at the core of human distress—estrangement from God and failure to live up to His plan for us.

When we do face that central need and acknowledge our guilt, God gives us His gift of forgiveness. That gift, profoundly experienced, transforms us. It relieves us of our burdens, diffuses our anger and resentment, and displaces our desire for revenge. It allows us to give God our hurts and failures, and it fills us with the peace of God that transcends human understanding (see Philippians

4:7). And those who experience it can't help but share it with others.

Why?

Our older daughter, Shannon, was murdered and the man who killed her was caught. At that event the subject of forgiveness ceased to be just a topic for conversation and became the focus of my attention. Let me explain why the subject of forgiveness is very important to you too. Even if you've not experienced a significant trauma in your life, you need to carefully attend to the importance of forgiving.

Forgiveness has become a major source of attention in research and a significant topic of interest particularly in the twenty-first century. One could easily have gotten the impression before, that forgiveness was the peculiar domain of the religious, and that it had to do with God's forgiving of disappointing human beings. In the western world, the

Judeo-Christian understanding of the relationship of an all-powerful creator God with disobedient and destructive creatures set the stage for understanding the concept of forgiveness. Throughout human history, God has been at times perceived as angry and bent on destroying offenders, and at times described as gracious, tolerant, and accepting. Set in the context of human relationship to God, forgiveness came to mean God's acceptance of errant humans, an act by a gracious God toward repentant subjects.

But this topic is no longer the private territory of spiritual persons concerned about securing their eternal future. The connections between forgiveness and non-religious people and non-spiritual aspects of life are now overwhelmingly apparent. Forgiveness not only points toward a life beyond this life, it enhances life in the present. Conversely, non-forgiveness not only predicts an

uncertain spiritual future, it points to deterioration in the quality of life in the present.

For example, multiple studies demonstrate the debilitating effect of non-forgiveness on physical and mental health.

Studies also verify the positive connections between spirituality and forgiveness. For example, religious people are better at forgiving than those with no religious connections. A study of Christians, Hindus, and Muslims showed that prayer increased their ability to forgive (*Toussaint, International Journal of Psychology, 2015*).

And our Walla Walla University study indicated that when a religious component is added to forgiveness training, participants benefit (*Hernandez, Vonderfecht, Smith, Cress, Davis, Bigger, Journal of Religion and*

Spirituality in Social Work, 2012).

It does not surprise us that forgiveness between people enhances relationships. Friends, families, and nations benefit when forgiveness becomes part of restoring connections that have been severed by misunderstanding, anger, resentment, jealousy, abuse or any of the many other disruptions between us. Intentional efforts to find a path to replacing animosity with forgiveness have paid off in places like Northern Ireland, South Africa, and in numerous other examples where some degree of peace emerges. The same is true for smaller groups, families and individuals. Scars may remain, but no lessening of hostility is possible without a serious attempt to let go, to release animosity, and journey toward restoration.

How?

That's the crux of our human dilemma with God too. We're alienated, separated

by a long history of hurts and betrayals. It began very early and has continued with every one of us.

We find ways to demonstrate our lack of confidence in God and end up submerged in our own morass, suffering the consequences of separation from God.

But God is unwilling to abandon us. Through the life of Jesus, God sent a powerful message of reaching out, of wanting to rebuild the relationship. Jesus' selfless love showed that God treasured humans, His victorious life reclaimed the moral territory humans had lost, His life of surrender to God became a model for us, His triumphant resurrection reaffirmed the promise of a God-human relationship restored for eternity. In Jesus, God took on Himself the consequences of our misdeeds and transformed our destiny. God forgave us!

Views about whether or not we humans deserved that act of grace or what we could do to ensure it have varied. Some have emphasised vigorous work by those who seek God's favour while others have said that forgiveness is all God's work and none of our own. That discussion continues. Are there things humans can do to help forgiveness happen or is it all up to God? Is forgiveness a human accomplishment or a Divine gift?

Let it be said that there are some things we humans can do to help ourselves, steps we can take to enhance the prospects of forgiveness. We can learn to let go of our hurt, anger, resentment and desire for revenge. We can do that by 1. adjusting our perception of the offending situation, 2. adjusting our response to the perpetrator, and 3. adjusting our attitude toward life in general. All three allow us to make choices and the choices we make can

change the impact the offence has on us. Doing so is not easy, but the effort pays big dividends.

Adjust Our Perceptions of the Offence

Much advice and many examples exist about how to adjust our perceptions. Seeing things from a different angle, through other eyes, other points of view, often expands or changes our initial understanding. For example, remember the story of the four blindfolded men, each of whom was taken to a different part of an elephant and asked to describe what they touched? One was taken to the tail, another to the trunk, another to a leg and another to the side of the elephant. Each had quite a different perception of this same animal!

Adjusting our perception of the offending situation begins with opening ourselves as much as possible to what happened. We must face reality. Particularly when

that reality is unpleasant, a number of defenses surge into action, but we can choose to face even the unpleasant truths. Doing so often alerts us to things we had missed.

Disappointments and failures become opportunities to try another approach. Losses link us with others who have had similar experiences. Hurts become invitations to accept comfort from sources we hadn't noticed or used before. Confrontations become occasions for us to learn more about ourselves and others.

Adjust Our Response to the Perpetrator

This careful and open viewing of the situation leads to the next adjustment, our response to the perpetrator. While instant emotional reactions are usually spontaneous and not intentional, we can reframe those early reactions and retrain ourselves to think of the

perpetrator in a different way. Current researchers describe forgiveness as including empathy and compassion. Both reflect an adjustment to our attitude toward the one who imposed the offence on us.

From a Christian point of view, this is implementing the “love the sinner but hate the sin” approach. We choose to recognise the worth of every person. Even when we disapprove of or confront their harmful behaviour, we can instill in our minds a conscious awareness of their humanity. And that includes an appreciation of their intrinsic value, even when they are offending. Jesus invited His followers to love not only those who are lovable but even our enemies.

Adjust Our General Attitude

Those who forgive develop a more positive general attitude. They are aware of pleasant things even when

surrounded by difficulties. Soon after our marriage, while visiting in Barbara's home town, she took me to meet a very special older woman. "Auntie" Hedges and Barbara weren't actually related, but like everyone else in that small rural community, Mrs. Hedges was known as "Auntie".

For years she had been bedridden, confined by a debilitating disease. In spite of that, she greeted visitors with a big smile, a cheery voice, and an engaging conversation well-seasoned with specific reasons for which she was so thankful: people who came to visit, an article someone read to her, the flowers someone shared, some piece of good news she had heard on the radio. I sang songs for her, feeling quite self-conscious doing so in the bedroom of her small house with three or four others standing nearby listening, but her kind, bubbly thanks put me at ease and I left being blessed by her. She epitomised

the good advice in Philippians 4:8:

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

What It Is and What It Isn't

While those three human choices are pivotal—adjusting our perceptions of the offence, our response to the perpetrator, and our general attitude—they do not require that we ignore reality, or condone a perpetrator's evil behaviour, or refuse to face the consequences of evil.

Forgiveness is often misunderstood and presumed to include things that would perpetuate the offences. Forgiveness does not mean we have to forget what happened. If that was true, no offender would be restrained, and evil people

would take over the world. Forgiveness does not mean we condone the evil. Evil deeds can be condemned without sacrificing the value of the person perpetrating them.

Forgiveness does not mean we excuse the perpetrator. To do so would be to take away responsibility for their choices, depriving them of the consequences of what they do. And forgiveness doesn't always produce reconciliation. Sometimes offences are so severe that victims and perpetrators must maintain distance from one another.

Forgiveness does require that we face reality, even when it is unpleasant. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa succeeded because it required absolute truth-telling, as painful as it was.

Forgiveness expects consequences. Perpetrators need to be restrained to

prevent further injuries. And some scars from former wounds never completely disappear, because some consequences are painful and long lasting.

Finally, forgiveness releases anger and resentment, ushering in the coveted blessing of peace. Finding a way to let go of anger and resentment was the hardest thing of all for me.

FORGIVENESS

70 x 7

The Bible teaches the great news of redemption, of salvation by faith and the promise of a new life in Jesus. But, sometimes, even after we have been forgiven, we mess up.

In 1890 author Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was about a man who has a full-length painting done by an artist friend. As time goes on, the painting ages, but the man does not.

That is, he goes about living a life of sin and degradation, partying hard, but year after year, he remains as fresh and young-looking as ever. The painting, on the other hand, ages progressively, marking every soul-corrupting evil on its canvas.

Of course, reality doesn't work that way. But just suppose it did. Suppose, every time you did something wrong, you got a speck of dirt on you that would not come off? What if this went on, speck after speck, year after year? What would you look like today? You'd be disgustingly filthy, wouldn't you? Pigs might not even let you in their pen.

Keeping this image in mind, let's turn our attention to God's plan of salvation. Do you know what it is? It's God's promise that, in an instant, everything is wiped clean. Yes, you are completely clean the moment you accept Jesus into your heart. Not because you deserve it. You don't. Your record is wiped clear solely because of God's grace and compassion toward you.

We have called God's promise "***Forgiveness 70 x 7***", after the Bible story where Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive "seventy times seven".

Using it, we are going to consider the hope Jesus offers to people like us—we who mess up, whether that's in a big or a small way.

William Styron was an American writer known mainly for one book, *Sophie's Choice*, which was made into a movie starring Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline.

In the early 1960s, William Styron got involved in the death penalty debate in America. What first spurred him on was the story of Benjamin Reid.

In 1957, nineteen-year-old Benjamin Reid beat a woman to death with a hammer in a parking lot. Reid was sentenced to die in the electric chair in Connecticut. His plight caught William Styron's interest, and he wrote an article in *Esquire* magazine advocating that this kid's life be spared.

The article caused a group of people to take up Reid's cause, including a young

Trinity College student named George Will. George Will later became one of America's most celebrated journalists and columnists.

Their advocacy worked. Benjamin Reid's life was spared, and he went on to become a model prisoner, and even finished high school while behind bars.

Styron said that, though having abandoned "the Presbyterian precepts of my childhood", he nevertheless saw, clearly, "how important to my argument against the death penalty was the Christian doctrine of redemption". That is, while not practising any faith, he saw synergies between what he had learned in Sunday school about redemption and his efforts to save Benjamin Reid's life.

He wrote:

"And how sweet it was to see this candidate for redemption come alive from his benighted dungeon in a way that would quicken the heart of any

Christian Salvationist . . . The simple fact is that Ben Reid—now that he was snatched from the electric chair and released into the general prison population—demonstrated qualities of character, of will, and above all, of intelligence that defied everyone's imagination. Reid, it turned out, was quite bright, in certain ways even brilliant, and the metamorphosis he underwent in prison was something to marvel at. He became a star baseball player, a leader among the inmates; he secured his high school equivalency diploma, began to take college work. A model prisoner he was—in every sense of that worn and risky description. A triumph of faith over adversity. Maybe someday a winner."

In 1970, William Styron got a phone call. Benjamin Reid was set to be released on parole. The plan was to enrol him as a special student in Trinity College that summer. Would William Styron be open

to letting Benjamin stay at his home for a few weeks while things were arranged for him at Trinity? Styron agreed.

“The idea of my studio in Roxbury becoming Ben Reid’s halfway house filled me with pleasure, and I understood the blessings of redemption.”

What a powerful line: **I understood the blessings of redemption.**

Unfortunately, a few weeks before “the magical date” of his parole, Benjamin Reid escaped from prison. He broke into a home where a 37-year-old woman was feeding her two children and the child of a friend.

Reid forced them all into her car and made her drive around the town. Later, he had her pull over and raped her. Before the day was out, he was caught, arrested, and sent back to prison.

That redemption didn’t work out quite as hoped, did it?

Not many years after this sad tale, Norman Mailer, one of the most famous writers in the world at the time, took up the case of Jack Abbott, who was in jail for robbery, forgery, and murder. In prison, Abbott wrote a book that would later be called *In the Belly of the Beast*. The book consists of letters he had written to Norman Mailer about his prison experience. Seeing Abbott's talent, Mailer and others worked hard to get Jack Abbott paroled, despite the arguments of prison officials that he was still dangerous and should not be let go.

Mailer prevailed. In 1981, Jack Abbott was out of jail. It was also the year that his book, *In the Belly of the Beast*, was published to great acclaim, including a rave review in the *New York Times*.

Imagine. One day, Jack Abbott was just another number in America's vast prison labyrinth. Shortly after, he

was not only free, but the author of a highly acclaimed book and the darling of New York's literary set, including one of the giants of that set — Norman Mailer.

What a great story of redemption!

Well ... not exactly.

The day before the review came out in the *New York Times*, and only six weeks after he was paroled, Jack Abbott was in a small café in Manhattan with two women. Abbott asked the waiter, a 22-year-old actor and playwright named Richard Adan, where the bathroom was. Adan explained that the bathroom could be reached only through the kitchen. But because the restaurant didn't have accident insurance, only employees could use it. Abbott got angry, and the discussion became heated.

They stepped outside the restaurant, and right there in public, Jack Abbott

stabbed the 22-year-old to death. Abbott fled, remaining on the run until arrested a few months later in Louisiana.

When asked about the tragedy, and if he felt complicit in Richard Adan's tragic demise, Norman Mailer uttered one of the most iconic lines of the 1980s, saying: "Culture is worth a little risk."

Jack Abbott was returned to prison and in 2002 hanged himself with a noose made of shoelaces and bed sheets.

You know, friend, these are two not-so-wonderful stories about the Bible's truly wonderful theme: redemption. Redemption is the idea of someone being saved, rescued, or reclaimed from a bad situation. I would not be overstating it to say that the Bible, from the first page to the last, is a book about redemption. It's the story of God's work of redeeming us, of saving us from the bad situations that we often find ourselves in.

Yet here, I have used these stories, failed stories of redemption, you might say. Why use them when I could have easily found many accounts of prisoners paroled, pardoned, given an undeserved break, who went on to live fine, productive lives?

I chose *these* two stories because they reveal what can often be the harsh reality of what it means to be redeemed in the fallen world we all inhabit.

I will explain.

Let's go to the life and teachings of Jesus. When Jesus was here, all He did, tirelessly, was seek to help, heal, and to redeem people. And He worked to teach His disciples to do the same; instructing them that they were to point others to the hope that He was offering.

One time, though, when Jesus had gone to a village of Samaritans, the people rejected Him. Jesus' disciples were so

angry they wanted fire to come down and destroy the village.

How did Jesus respond?

"But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them' ..." (Luke 9:55,56 NKJV).

Yes, Jesus was about salvation and redemption, not condemnation.

Another time, Jesus was talking to His followers about how to deal with someone in the church who does wrong. And here, too, Jesus was encouraging them to do all they could to redeem the person at fault.

It's in this context that Peter asks Jesus, *"...Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"* (Matthew 18:21 NKJV).

Up to seven times? Is that a lot or a little? I suppose that, if married, and you would forgive your spouse up to seven times only, then your marriage would be over pretty soon, right? Or, if not, it would certainly be a miserable existence.

But Peter was talking about a brother, a friend, an acquaintance, and he asked if up to seven times would be enough times to forgive. That's not too bad, is it? In fact, in rabbinical tradition, you were to forgive your brother not more than three times. So, for Peter to ask, "up to seven times" showed he was thinking generously, going the 'second mile' perhaps.

It may be that Peter's thinking was something like: Look, Jesus, I'm getting all this grace and redemption stuff down, aren't I? The rabbis say three – I say up to seven times!

How, then, did Jesus respond? Was He impressed?

"Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:22 NKJV).

What? Seventy times seven? Do the mathematics. That's 490 times. That's a lot of forgiveness, isn't it! The problem, however, is this: How could you keep track of that?

Maybe, today, you could get an app on your smartphone that keeps track of how many times your friends offend you and need your forgiveness. Let's see . . . Jack is at 236. Sally is at 198. But Frank is at 461 times. "Man, just 29 more times and then I can be done with this nasty jerk."

That is not what Jesus means. When He said 70 x 7, He was effectively saying, that no matter how many times a person does you wrong, you must keep forgiving.

“Why?” you ask. “What’s the logic, the reason, behind this?”

Before Peter had a chance to ask those same questions, Jesus told a story explaining what He meant. He told them about a man who owed a king “ten thousand talents”. We can only estimate how much that would be in today’s money. One source I consulted estimated around one hundred million dollars.

The point is that the man absolutely could not pay what he owed. The only way out was to have himself, his wife, and children sold into slavery. Thus, he would destroy himself and his family.

Jesus continued the story:

“Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt” (Matthew 18:27 NKJV).

As simply as that, a debt that he could not pay, that would have ruined him and his family forever, was forgiven. It was cancelled. Wiped away.

Here, in a very succinct manner, we have the entire plan of salvation and redemption, as taught in the Bible. People are freely given what they could not ever pay for themselves. That's what is known in the Bible as grace.

But the story did not end there. Jesus went on to tell how the man who had his debt forgiven went to someone who owed him some money. The amount was a fraction of what he had owed the king. But the person who owed him this small amount of money could not pay, and begged for time. So, how did he, who had just been shown so much grace and forgiveness, treat someone who needed the same grace and forgiveness from him?

"And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt" (Matthew 18:30 NKJV).

This man had been forgiven a far greater debt, but he was not willing to act in the same way towards the man who owed him a smaller debt. That is, he had been forgiven a whole lot more than what he himself was willing to forgive.

What happened? Well, if you read the parable yourself, in the book of Matthew, you can see what happened to him.

It was not good.

And Jesus ended the parable with the warning: *"So My Heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses"* (Matthew 18:35 NKJV).

What is the point of Jesus' parable, and what does it have to do with the

70 x 7 times we are supposed to forgive those who sin against us? What did Jesus mean by saying that no matter how often someone does the wrong thing by us, we are to forgive them? He was saying that, as a believer in Him, you have been forgiven by God for a far greater debt than you could ever pay. As a believer in Jesus, you have been forgiven for every wrong thing, every nasty, dirty, hateful thing you have done over your whole life. And if God does that for you, for everything you have ever done, how could you not forgive whatever has been done to you?

Imagine every time you did something wrong, say from the time you were twelve years old, you got a speck of dirt on you that would not come off. A speck of dirt for each nasty, and hurtful word you spoke to others. A speck of dirt for each time you ripped someone off. A speck of dirt for each lie. A speck of dirt for each time you treated someone

poorly. A speck of dirt each time you deep down felt good about someone else's misfortune. A speck of dirt for each time you trash-talked someone behind their back. And on it went, year after year.

But the gospel, and the promise of the plan of salvation, of redemption, is that it's all wiped clean. Yes, you are completely clean the moment you accept Jesus into your heart. Not because you deserve it. You don't. It's wiped clean only because of God's grace and compassion toward you, just like the king's great compassion for the man who owed what he could not pay. And the point of Jesus telling Peter that you need to forgive others 70 x 7 times was because God has done, and is doing, the same thing for you. It's that simple.

It is important to recognise that forgiving someone who does the

wrong thing by you doesn't necessarily mean going on as before. I know a man whose accountant, a friend from childhood, ripped off his entire savings. The accountant got away with it, too. Now, the victim was a Christian, and he forgave the accountant. But I also know, too, that he never worked with him again. Forgiveness doesn't mean restoring things to the way they were before. Forgiveness means freeing the person doing the forgiving from the bondage of harbouring enmity, and the physical and mental damage that can do. Forgiveness is as much for the sake of the one forgiving as it is for the one forgiven.

Let us return to the stories of Benjamin Reid and Jack Abbott. That's because, even if we are redeemed, even if we have accepted Christ, we still mess up. We still do wrong. We still sin. And, yet, God will still forgive us if we come to

him in repentance and sorrow for what we have done.

During an American presidential campaign, one of the candidates said that he didn't have to ask God for forgiveness because he was a good Christian. Well, he must have been an extraordinary Christian because every Christian I know has to ask God for forgiveness all the time.

That certainly applies to me. I know that God has passed the 70 x 7-mark for my forgiveness decades ago. And yet I still have peace and assurance that, despite my faults, God has accepted me in Jesus. *"My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"* (1 John 2:1 NKJV).

Yes, the Bible not only tells us not to sin, but it also promises us the power to

not sin. In Jesus, we can have a whole new life in which we are freed from the habits and practices of the past.

But people are people, and we still fall, we still do wrong. Benjamin Reid and Jack Abbott, in their own way, reflect a spiritual reality: even after we have been redeemed, we mess up.

Now, of course, I'm not talking about people specifically doing what these men did. However, if you read the story of King David in the Bible, you know that even as a man after God's own heart, he committed the terrible crime of murder. Certainly, he repented, and he was indeed forgiven. But just as surely, he had to live with the terrible consequences of his actions.

God would have done the same for Benjamin Reid and Jack Abbott had they asked for forgiveness, too, but that would not have prevented them

from living with the consequences of their actions.

We know from the Bible story, that when Jesus was on earth, He hung around with many so-called “losers”. People who were on the outer. Society’s “mess-ups”. And yet He changed them. He gave them new lives.

Did they still mess up afterwards? I’m sure they did. But He still loved them and accepted them, despite their shortcomings. The Bible tells us that every one of us is one of society’s “mess-ups”; that we have all sinned and that we all “come short of the glory of God”. In other words, we all royally mess up on a regular basis. We have all been given chances to do better, opportunities to live nearer to God’s ideal, and we always seem to get it wrong in one way or another. Perhaps you, like most people, hate yourself for your shortcomings. Perhaps you wish

you could take it all back and have another chance. Perhaps you feel that you have been doing things wrong for your entire life.

Friend, I have good news for you. Jesus is for "mess-ups", regardless of how many times they fail, and whether they go on failing after they accept His forgiveness. Jesus is there for all of us who need to be forgiven 70 x 7 times, and more. And He is not counting.

Jesus is the Lord of second chances, and third chances, and 70 x 7 chances, because if He were anything less, we would have no chance at all. I appeal to you to come, come to Jesus. He will accept you, mess ups-and all.

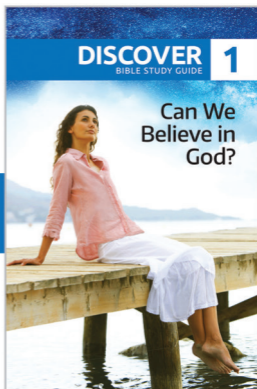
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Forgiveness does not mean we have to forget what happened. Forgiveness does not mean we condone the evil. Forgiveness does not mean we excuse the perpetrator. Forgiveness does require that we face reality, even when it is unpleasant.

Scars may remain, but no lessening of hostility is possible without a serious attempt to let go and to release animosity.



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