

Forgiveness



*Experiencing
Real
Freedom*

HOW TO FORGIVE AND GET ON WITH LIFE

More than a century ago, in a frontier town, one of the residents captured a beautiful, majestic bald eagle. He put the eagle in chains and displayed it in the window of his store to attract the attention of potential customers. Before long his eagle became a star attraction in the area as people came considerable distances to view the great creature. And, of course, the man's business flourished.

One day, a trapper made his once-a-year trip into town to exchange furs for food, ammunition and other supplies to take back to his cabin deep in the woods. He saw the eagle confined to the window and promptly announced that he wanted to purchase the bird from the store owner.

"How much for the eagle?" he asked.

The storekeeper really didn't want to sell the eagle so he quoted a ridiculously high price of eight hundred dollars. It was the trapper's total year's income. Without hesitation, the trapper agreed and paid the price. Immediately, he took the eagle to the edge of town, removed the chains and set the magnificent creature free. The great bird soared up into the sky, dipped its wings a couple of times as if in salute, and then flew off to the high mountains.

When asked why he paid the exorbitant amount only to free the bird, the old trapper

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simply replied: “That eagle was not meant to be chained. God made it to soar in freedom.”

What is true of the eagle is true for us as well. *God created us to soar in freedom—freedom from the chains of hatred, bitterness, anger, animosity, hostility, antagonism and discord.* Forgiveness breaks our chains of negative emotions. Forgiveness is the path which leads us to a new attitude, new hope, new feeling, new direction, new destiny and new creativity.

*“Forgiveness is not an
occasional act;
it is a permanent attitude.”*

—*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

The poet Edwin Markham is a good example. As he approached his retirement years he discovered that the man to whom he had entrusted his financial portfolio had squandered all the money. Markham’s dream of a comfortable retirement vanished. He began to brood over the injustice and the loss. His anger deepened.

Over time, Markham’s bitterness grew by leaps and bounds. One day while sitting at his table Markham found himself drawing circles as he tried to soothe the turmoil he felt within. Finally, he concluded: “I must forgive him, and I will forgive him.” Looking again at the circles he had drawn on the paper before him, Markham wrote these lines:

*He drew a circle to shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle to take him in.*

Although Markham wrote hundreds of poems contained in many book volumes, the words he wrote while forgiving are his most popular and memorable. As he forgave, a tremendous act of creativity was released within Markham. Author and minister, Charles Filmore recommended: “There is a mental treatment

guaranteed to cure every ill that flesh is heir to: sit for half an hour every night and forgive everyone against whom you have any ill will or antipathy.”

Jesus urged us to forgive constantly and consistently. “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him” (Mark 11:25). On one occasion a disciple asked Jesus: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:21-22).

Likewise, Paul commanded: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). And in another place, he writes: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Although the Bible commands us to forgive and counselors recommend that we forgive those who have hurt us, many people find forgiveness difficult to offer. It is not easy to forgive...

- when a marital partner has been unfaithful;
- when a colleague has betrayed us;
- when a friend humiliates us through gossip or hurtful remarks;
- when someone has abused us physically or emotionally;
- when we have been the victim of a criminal act.

So, together, let’s think about forgiveness and explore some ways that we can forgive and get on with life—ways that will help us experience real freedom.

• **EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT FORGIVENESS.** “Forgive,” according to *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, means: “to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; pardon; to overlook an offense; to cancel a debt.” Thus, the goal of forgiveness is to let go of a hurt and move ahead with life. Visit a library and research books or magazine articles on forgiveness so that you are better informed. Study passages in the Bible

THE PROCESS OF FORGIVENESS

1. Don't deny feelings of hurt, anger or shame. Rather, acknowledge these feelings and commit yourself to doing something about them.
2. Don't just focus on the person who has harmed you, but identify the specific offensive behavior.
3. Make a conscious decision not to seek revenge or nurse a grudge and decide instead to forgive. This conversion of the heart is a critical stage toward forgiveness.
4. Accept the pain you've experienced without passing it on to others, including the offender.
5. Choose to extend goodwill and mercy toward the other; wish for the well-being of that person.
6. Think about how it feels to be released from a burden or grudge. Be open to emotional relief. Seek meaning in the suffering you experienced.
7. Realize the paradox of forgiveness: as you let go and forgive the offender, you are experiencing release and healing.

(Adapted from *Emerging Field of Forgiveness Studies Explores How We Let Go of Grudges*, by Robert D. Enright. Chronicle of Higher Education, July 17, 1998.)

that provide examples of forgiveness. Try to gain an understanding of the difference between healthy and unhealthy forgiveness. Robert Enright, Ph.D., an educational psychologist at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, stresses that true forgiveness is not necessarily the same as:

Forgetting. If the hurt wounded you enough to require forgiveness, you may always have a memory of it. Deep hurts can rarely be wiped out of one's awareness.

Excusing or condoning. The wrong should not be denied, minimized or justified.

Reconciling. You can forgive the offender and still choose not to reestablish the relationship. Reconciliation takes two people, but an injured party can forgive an offender without reconciliation. An example is that of a wife physically abused by her husband. She can forgive him but choose not to be reconciled and live with him.

Dismissing. Forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.

Pardoning. A pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of an action, such as a penalty. Forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense.

Weakness. You do not become a doormat or oblivious to cruelty. Forgiveness is not a passive act. Rather it is an active response to hurt. It is the conscious and willful act of refusing to return evil for evil.

According to Enright, forgiveness is "giving up the resentment to which you are entitled and offering to the persons who hurt you friendlier attitudes to which they are not entitled." Those who refuse to forgive carry the 'ghost' of the hurtful person as well as their word or actions and become 'haunted' by the wrong done. Resentments build, anger increases, peace of mind is shattered. In many vital ways nonforgivers are unable to move forward with their lives. And, nonforgivers pay a heavy price in terms of their physical and mental health.

“Holding a grudge takes mental, emotional and physical energy. It makes you obsessive, angry and depressed,” observes Barry Lubetkin, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Institute for Behavior Therapy in New York City. “There’s a strong connection between anger and a wide spectrum of health miseries—chronic stomach upset, heart problems and skin conditions among them. Without question, the more anger we experience within, the more stress we’re under.”

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*“Forgiveness ought to be like
 a canceled note—torn in two
 and burned up so that it never
 can be shown against one.”*

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—Henry Ward Beecher

Consider the work of Dr. Fred Luskin with the Stanford University Center for Research in Disease Prevention. He has studied forgivers and nonforgivers. People who are unable to go through the forgiveness process experience not just emotional difficulties and interpersonal problems, but also impaired cardiological, neurological and immune systems, he concludes.

“When we get hurt, we get hurt not just in our minds, but also in our bodies,” he says. The more readily we experience anger, the more our bodies secrete “stress chemicals” that, over time, take a toll. But worst of all, Luskin adds, the inability to forgive can distract people from the positive aspects of their lives. “If we have too many things that disturb us or that make us feel tense or uncomfortable, what it really does is rob us of our joy,” he says.

The conclusions of this kind of academic research is reinforced in human experience. The reality is that *forgiveness is a gift you give yourself*. A former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp was visiting a friend who shared the ordeal with him.

“Have you forgiven the Nazis?” he asked his friend.

“Yes.”

“Well, I haven’t. I’m still consumed with hatred for them,” the other man declared.

“In that case,” said his friend gently, “they still have you in prison.”

Ultimately, forgiveness is a gift you give yourself. Bitterness and anger imprison you emotionally. Forgiveness sets you free.

• **FORGIVE THE LITTLE THINGS.** Life is sprinkled with annoyances, snubs and nuisances—a rude clerk, a driver who cuts you off in traffic, a doctor who keeps you waiting and waiting, a shopper who is checking out twenty items in the eight-item express lane, a friend who never returns the ten dollars she/he “borrowed,” etc. While these small events are sometimes not deep enough to raise the issue of forgiveness, they can become ideal practice ground for offering forgiveness. Use those events as practice time to prepare you for the tougher task of forgiving major hurts.

A good time to “forgive the little things” is in the evening before drifting off to sleep. Go back over the day and recall the encounters which transpired. Whenever you feel even the smallest hurt or anxiety over any event, extend forgiveness to each and every person. In this way you pave the way to deal with larger issues and deeper pains which will come when you are hurt, for example, by betrayal and deception.

• **CHALLENGE THE “SHOULD” IN YOUR THINKING.** Forgiveness is much easier when you give up irrational beliefs which fuel frustration and hostility—ergo, expectation that other people will always act in the way you want. Beware of the *shoulds* in your thinking and speaking:

He *shouldn’t* have done this to me.

She *shouldn’t* act this way.

My daughter *should* have known better.

My son *should* be more attentive to me.

I’ve worked hard so I *should* have been rewarded.

Whenever you find the word *should* in your mind and conversation, challenge yourself. Realize that it is unrealistic to expect that people will always act decently and respectfully toward you. Remind yourself everyone is fallible and capable of making a mistake.

Dr. William Barclay, a biblical scholar says that forgiveness is easier to extend when we try to understand the person who has offended us. In his book, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, he writes:

“We must learn to understand. There is always a reason why a person does something. If he is boorish and impolite and cross-tempered, maybe he is worried or in pain. If he treats us with suspicion and dislike, maybe he has misunderstood, or has been misinformed about something we have said or done. Maybe the man is the victim of his own environment or his own heredity. Maybe his temperament is such that life is difficult and human relations are a problem for him. Forgiveness would be very much easier for us if we tried to understand before we allowed ourselves to condemn.”

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*“He that demands mercy,
and shows none, ruins the
bridge over which he himself is
to pass.”*

—Thomas Adams

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• WORK TO SEE THE BIG PICTURE.

Writer Thomas Fleming recalls his first important lesson in forgiveness, coming via the example of his father. As a boy, he remembered his father talking with great frustration about working in a sweatshop run by the wealthiest family in their town. It was the Depression, and there were more workers than work. Often the foreman selecting the daily work crew would ask, ‘Protestant or Catholic?’ Those who said ‘Protestant’ were picked first and generally filled the

quota of workers needed. The elder Fleming, a Catholic, would often deny his religion in order to earn the fifty cents the family needed.

However, as the Depression years wore on, the wealthy family that owned the sweatshop went bankrupt while his father rose to power in local politics. Ironically, a member of the formerly rich family appeared in the Fleming living room one day seeking help to find a job. The son recalls, “My father treated him with consummate politeness, and within a week got him a job in a shipping company.” When he asked his father why he did not seize the opportunity to get even, his father replied: “What happened in those days wasn’t his fault. Maybe it wasn’t anyone’s.” Trying to understand a person’s behavior against the backdrop of a larger scene can soften our attitudes and help us forgive.

This may be the very way a German officer was able to forgive a British pilot during World War II. As it turned out, an Englishman and a German were together at a spiritual retreat center in Switzerland in the early 1950s. They were attending an international conference. At one meeting they shared memories of past events from their respective countries. Both men realized they had been in military service during World War II.

The Englishman, who had been a Royal Air Force bomber pilot, said his most horrible memory was of directly hitting a hospital in Dresden, Germany. He could remember flying low and seeing the white cross painted on the roof of the building before dropping the bombs. The event was not an accident; his orders specifically read that he was to bomb the hospital. He said he continued to feel tormented with guilt, remembering the destruction and death that day which he had personally wrought upon innocent civilians.

The German stood motionless and looked stunned. He knew well the day and the event. “My wife was giving birth to our first child that night,” he said, “and they were both killed.”

With a look of terror on his face, the Englishman reached out to embrace the German.

“Oh, please forgive me! Please forgive me!” he pleaded.

“I already have,” the German replied, “long ago.”

- **REMEMBER: LACK OF FORGIVENESS IS GIVING OTHERS POWER OVER YOU.** Withholding forgiveness and nursing resentment simply allows another person to have control over your well-being. It is always a mistake to allow such negative emotions to influence your living. Forgive, and you will be able to direct your life in positive thoughts and actions. An excellent example is that of educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). He was an emancipated slave who started out living in abject poverty. He had to work from the age of nine to help support his family. Instead of becoming bitter about the hardship he faced and viewing himself as a victim, Washington worked hard to improve his situation. He first became a janitor in a school to obtain his education. Then he went on to teach at Hampton Institute, one of the first African-American colleges in the U.S. Later he organized and became president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. “I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him,” was Washington’s lifelong motto.

- **RECOGNIZE THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF HARBORING A GRUDGE.** When you can’t forgive someone there can be a ripple effect that negatively impacts your family and friends. Writing to advice columnist Dear Abby, a woman says: “I have something to say to the millions of families whose lives are affected by divorce. An unforgiving and bitter person who has not let go of animosities can poison an entire family. I know. I was that person.”

The writer, who signs herself ‘Free in Vermont,’ explains that she could not forgive her former husband and his new wife, and her children suffered for her ensuing bitterness. “One day after a particularly harsh outburst, I understood the pained reaction on my children’s faces. I prayed for the strength to change my ways so

I could stop hurting those I love most in the world.” Although it was difficult for ‘Free in Vermont’ to extend forgiveness she did so and says: “I have peace in my heart, and my children are happy. They are free to enjoy both homes.”

- **BURY THE GRUDGE—LITERALLY.** Write a letter to the person who hurt you, but don’t mail it. Express fully, clearly, honestly how you feel and why that person’s act hurt you and made you angry. Conclude with the bold declaration that you have forgiven him or her. Then, bury the letter in a potted plant or somewhere in your yard, or burn the letter in your fireplace. This is a powerful symbolic exercise which many people have found to be extremely therapeutic.

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“Life lived without forgiveness becomes a prison.”

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—William Arthur Ward

- **TRY INSTANT FORGIVENESS.** Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Forgive and Forget: Healing The Hurts We Don’t Deserve*, tells his rage toward a police officer who brutalized his young son, John. The officer was a large 250-pound lawman who assaulted his 140-pound son and then charged him with resisting an officer. Although the charge was quickly dismissed, Smedes’ rage and hostility were not so readily appeased. Realizing that his intense feelings toward the police officer were creating a personal emotional crisis, Smedes knew he had to find a way of forgiving.

“I tried a technique that everything in my temperament resisted,” he writes. “I thought about how a priest gives instant absolution to a penitent, right off the bat, in the confessional booth. And I decided to give this cop absolution. ‘In the name of God I hereby forgive you—go in peace,’ I said out loud, at least six times. It worked enough to get me going. I felt myself pried a couple of inches off my hate. And, I was on my way.”

- **READ ABOUT OTHER FORGIVERS.** Do a little research on other people who have extended forgiveness. Many of those written about in the media have suffered terribly at the hands of others but have been able to offer forgiveness, experience peace of mind and get on with their lives. Reading about their experiences will both inspire you and generate a clearer perspective on your own hurts. Consider these forgivers:

- Nelson Mandela, who spent 20 years in a South African jail but refused to take vengeance on those who imprisoned him.

- Everett Worthington Jr., a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and co-author of *To Forgive Is Human: How To Put Your Past in the Past*. His attitudes about the importance of forgiveness were put to the test shortly after his book was published—he learned his 78-year-old mother was bludgeoned to death by an intruder at her home in Knoxville, Tennessee.

“I got so angry,” he says. “I looked at a baseball bat and said, ‘I wish I could have that guy here. I’d beat his brains out.’ Then I thought, ‘Whose heart is darker?’” Today Worthington says he no longer harbors hate toward his mother’s killer.

- Valerie Fortney, a Canadian writer whose sister was killed by a drunk driver. “For one agonizing year following Shelley’s death, my only solace was in vengeful fantasies, bitter rage and an obsessive longing to ‘right a wrong,’” she says. “I could never have imagined that one day I would be able to forgive the man who took my sister’s life and devastated my own.” Yet she did forgive.

Today she says: “I feel no stabs of that old bitterness. I’ve seen firsthand the folly of holding on to such destructive emotions: over time, the anger took its toll on my physical health, strained my closest relationships and nearly cost me my sanity. And I know that it wasn’t until I learned to forgive that I could begin to heal and get on with my life.”

- Sydna Masse, whose close friend and neighbor was brutally murdered. In 1990 her friend, a young mother of three, pleaded for her life after being confronted by an assailant wearing combat fatigues. “Please don’t shoot me,” she whimpered. The murderer cold-heartedly fired anyway, killing the woman. The killer, a woman, was arrested within twenty-four hours. Also arrested was the victim’s husband after police determined he and the murderer had been engaged in an affair.

When Sydna Masse first learned about the tragedy she responded with hate and rage. “I had a dead friend, and now the world had three more motherless kids. I felt I had every right to hate the murderer who caused this,” she recalls. The life sentence handed down to the killer did little to soften Sydna.

Shortly after the trial, Sydna began attending a Bible study which included a session on forgiveness. When Sydna prayed about whom she needed to forgive, the image of the murderer came clearly to her mind. “No way can I forgive her,” was Sydna’s first response.

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“When you forgive you in no way change the past, but you sure do change the future.”

—Bernard Meltzer

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In spite of her reluctance, Sydna finally acquiesced and wrote a carefully worded letter to the woman expressing her forgiveness. She was caught by surprise at what happened inside her. As soon as Sydna dropped the letter into the mail, “a weight lifted. I felt like I was losing 20 pounds. That’s when I learned that anger, bitterness and unforgiveness keeps you from experiencing the depths of joy,” she says.

Another stunning surprise to Sydna was a letter from the murderer who wrote: “I’m sorry for killing your friend.” When Sydna read that

sentence, “It hit me like a thunderbolt. I didn’t realize I needed to hear that.”

- Lawrence Martin Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest who was kidnapped by Muslim extremists in Lebanon. During the 19 months he spent as a hostage, he was beaten, kept blindfolded and chained. He endured terrifying, painful rides strapped beneath a truck while being moved to new hideouts. Yet, Reverend Jenco, finally released in July 1986, said he forgave his captors even as they treated him brutally. As a result of his gentle and generous attitude toward them, his captors began to inquire about his God and his faith. A violent guard, whose blows caused hearing loss in Reverend Jenco, was eventually transformed. After months of cruelty, he asked Jenco for his forgiveness.

- UTILIZE THIS ACRONYM: R-E-A-C-H. This approach is recommended by Dr. Everett Worthington Jr., who uses it to teach people how to forgive. He suggests people follow five basic steps using the acronym REACH.

R is for recall the hurt, relive the pain and remember the offense committed against you.

E stands for empathizing with the person who hurt you by trying to understand his/her motivations.

A is for altruism. You give the gift of forgiveness.

C stands for a deep commitment to forgiveness.

H means holding on to forgiveness. “Forgiving my mother’s killer didn’t take away missing her, the sorrow, the loss at such a tragedy. But it took away a lot of the anger, a lot of the hatred,” he says.

- REMIND YOURSELF FORGIVENESS IS A PROCESS. Do not become discouraged at your efforts to forgive if, after extending forgiveness, you find yourself still thinking angry, hurt or even hostile thoughts about the one you have extended forgiveness toward. Some forgiving may take a longer time to take hold in your mind and spirit. You may forgive intellectually, but

the heart may still harbor hurt and resentment. It takes a while for forgiveness to make the 18-inch journey from the mind to the heart.

- ASK GOD FOR THE STRENGTH TO FORGIVE. For a moment, travel back in time to the year 1947. It is Munich, Germany, where the defeated German nation is struggling with guilt and despair. There, a woman named Corrie Ten Boom has just completed giving a talk about forgiveness—that of God’s forgiveness as well as the importance of our extending forgiveness.

This was not a detached, intellectual exercise for Corrie Ten Boom. She and her family, who lived in Holland, were victims of Adolph Hitler’s campaign to destroy Jewish people. When the Nazis invaded Holland, they quickly began rounding up Jewish families. The Ten Booms, a devout Christian family, were mortified by what was happening. At great personal risk, they began to shelter Jewish men and women and their children. Before long the Ten Boom family activity was reported. They were all arrested by the Gestapo, split up and sent off to various concentration camps. Corrie’s beloved father and sister both died in those camps.

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“As we practice the work of forgiveness we discover more and more that forgiveness and healing are one.”

—Agnes Sanford

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After the horrors of the war and her concentration camp experience, Corrie Ten Boom engaged in a personal mission of preaching peace, forgiveness and reconciliation among the German people. Driven by a deep sense of God’s love and compassion, especially for the nation of Germany, Corrie Ten Boom was in Munich that evening delivering her message of hope when she saw a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat. She recognized him as a guard from

Ravensbruck concentration camp—“One of the most cruel guards,” she recalled.

It seemed that her message about God’s forgiveness had made an impact on the man—he was making his way toward her. Standing in front of Corrie Ten Boom, he thrust his hand out, telling her that she gave a fine message that God forgives and that, therefore, people must also forgive.

“Untold pain is brought about in the world by people’s unwillingness to forgive and the corresponding passion to get even. All you have to do is look at Yugoslavia today and you know that’s true.”

—*Lewis B. Smedes*

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he explained. “I was a guard there, but since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.” Again his hand went out as he asked: “Will you forgive me?”

With the former concentration camp guard standing before her, Corrie Ten Boom’s mind flashed back to the Nazi prison where her father died and where her sister Betsy died a slow terrible death before her very eyes. “It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do,” she remembers.

In a split second several thoughts rapidly rushed through her mind. First of all, she knew that she was obligated as a Christian to forgive. “The message that God forgives has a prior condition—that we forgive those who have injured us,” she remembered. That thought was backed up by these words from Jesus: “If you forgive

men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

Secondly, Corrie Ten Boom not only knew forgiveness was commanded by Jesus, but she saw the psychological and spiritual benefit of forgiveness daily. “Since the end of the war I had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality,” she explained. “Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.”

Yet, she still stood before the man with coldness clutching her heart. Intellectually she knew the Bible teaching about forgiveness and agreed with it, but her heart was unprepared to do it. Quietly she prayed, “Jesus help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so quite woodenly and mechanically she thrust her hand into the one stretched out to her. “As I did, an incredible thing took place,” she says. “A current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm and sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.”

“I forgive you, brother!” she cried. “With all my heart.”

That dramatic story demonstrates that the same God who asks us to forgive gives us the strength to forgive. It also demonstrates that people can forgive each other even when the hurts committed are horrendous and even atrocious. God can change us and our attitudes if we ask.

We can turn to Jesus Christ. Bitterness, revenge and malice can be removed and replaced with peace, joy and happiness. We must always remember that Jesus knows all about forgiveness for it was he who said: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

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Our Mission...

- To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ through the mass media.
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- To encourage nominal Christians to come to saving faith in their Lord and Savior.
- To provide Christian instruction and resources that will inspire, edify and uplift.

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