

# True Forgiveness ... as God Intended

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## **FORGIVENESS WITH A DIFFERENCE**

***Ephesians 4:32. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.***

Are there different kinds of forgiveness? In Ephesians 4:32, the Bible talks about a forgiveness that is done ***in Christ***. What happens if we forgive, but not ***in Christ***? Is there something unique about forgiving ***in Christ***?

Some time ago a fellow worker wrote a letter about my work and sent copies to our leaders and other co-workers. At first I did not know she had done this. She did not copy it to me. When someone else finally forwarded a copy to me, I felt bad. At least some of what she wrote just was not true. But I kept quiet. I did not slander her in return. After all, I knew I was supposed to forgive. And I thought not revenging was forgiving. But her sin was still inside me, eating me up, hurting me.

The evil one made sure that damaging rumors kept spreading. The one who had written the letter against me did not see anything wrong with what she had done. The rumors gathered power and momentum to influence more and more people.

As for myself, I thought I had forgiven her. But what I really meant by my forgiveness was that I was tired of the whole business and just wanted to go on with my life. Was that really forgiving her ***in Christ***?

I had not really thought about how my forgiveness of her should have the same powerful effect as God's forgiving me! I knew that God had started on the work of providing forgiveness for my sins even before I started confessing them. Romans 5 says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) I knew that if God had not put my sins on Jesus so that I could be free of their power, and then sent his Holy Spirit to help me, I probably would never have confessed my sins. I would still be bound in those sins.

But what I did not think of at that time was how Jesus had also died for the sin of slander that my co-worker had done against me. I was trying to forget her sin rather than join God my Father in putting it in on Jesus, the only one strong enough to overcome it.

Once I, from my heart, joined God my Father in putting her slander on Jesus, God showed me more of what it meant to forgive ***in Christ***. A teacher taught us in class, "Forgiveness is a process that is not complete until we can bless the person we are forgiving – with joy." I thought that one over. I knew that God enjoys blessing those he has forgiven! So I tried to bless my co-worker. The words came out of my mouth, but there was no joy in my heart.

Very, very frustrated, I went back to God and groaned, "I can't." Then it was if God smiled at me and said, "What made you think you could? I'm not expecting you to do this on your own." He reminded me of 2 Peter 1 where the Bible says that God wants to share his divine nature with us (2 Peter 1:4).

So I prayed, "God, please take out of me whatever is preventing me from blessing her with joy. Then fill me with your joy in blessing those you forgive." Suddenly, a surging power to bless rose from within me. I asked God to do one good thing after another for her. I blessed her husband. I blessed her children. I blessed her ministry. I was having so much fun, I

didn't want to stop! And I knew it was not just me, but God blessing her through me! I was finally doing the kind of forgiving that makes a difference.

Later I took note of the time Jesus first talked of Spirit-empowered forgiveness in the gospels. It's in John 20 starting with verse 21. It was on the evening after Jesus rose from the grave. Jesus had just appeared to his disciples in the room where they were hiding out for fear of the Jews. Jesus had greeted them and they were filled with joy.

Then Jesus talked to them about forgiveness, but forgiveness with a difference. "Peace be with you!" he said. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Now that was not so different. Jesus had sent them before – to preach and to heal, as he had. But this time he was referring to sending them to do something else, as the Father had sent him – something he had done just two days before. Jesus had forgiven those who had used slander to get him crucified. Was Jesus now sending his disciples out to forgive as he had forgiven?

It seems so. He talks to them next about a new dimension to forgiveness. He breathes on his disciples and invites them to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. He then encourages his disciples to forgive with Spirit-empowered forgiveness. He assures them that if they do so, those sins will be forgiven. Those sins will no longer be a barrier to the Holy Spirit doing his work in their lives. If, however, Jesus says, we do not forgive the sins people do against us, we do not remove a barrier against the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Those sins will grow and increase in power. The next time they hurt us, it may be even worse. The kingdom of God will not expand as it does when we forgive *in Christ*.

Only the forgiveness of the cross is powerful enough to overcome the power of sin. Any sin is too dangerous for us to hold on to – either our own, or a sin done against us. The more the sins of others have hurt us, the more we need to turn them over to Jesus, and say, "These sins are too much for me. Take them out of my life and destroy their power to hurt me. Heal me, and save me and the person who sinned against me from the power of these sins." Human forgiveness alone is not enough to stop the multiplication and devastation of sin.

Jesus realized that if his disciples were to do this kind of forgiveness with a difference, they would first need to receive the Holy Spirit. Then their forgiveness would be the Holy Spirit moving out of them into the lives of those they were forgiving (John 7:38-39). The Holy Spirit would destroy the works of the devil in other people's lives. Those they forgave would experience the blessings only the Holy Spirit makes possible!

Years ago I met someone who really understood this Easter brand of forgiveness. Ali was following up some new believers in a Muslim city. The police arrested him, took him to the police station, and beat him. Then they asked him, "Who are you working for? Who are you working with?" Ali answered, "I am working for Jesus the Messiah. I am working with Jesus the Messiah. The work he gave me to do is to forgive people. So I forgive you because you don't know what you are doing."

"What do you mean we don't know what we are doing?" the burly policemen shouted at him.

"Well, you were told to beat me. But were you told what crime I had committed?"

"No," they answered.

Ali added, "That is why I said you did not know what you were doing. But you can also tell those who told you to beat me that I forgive them too."

So they did. The authorities told the police to beat him again.

Now was that second beating more or less severe than the first one? Normally, the second beating would be more severe because they wanted to break him.

But Ali had forgiven his persecutors in the power of the Spirit of Jesus, the power of God himself. When the power of God comes upon someone, what happens to their ability to do evil? Is it strengthened, or weakened? Of course, the power of God is stronger than the power of evil. That's why the second beating was less severe, not because of the authorities or the police. It was because of the power of God restraining them.

After the second beating, the police asked Ali the same questions. "Who are you working for? Who are you working with?"

Ali gave the same answers, "I am working for Jesus the Messiah. I am working with Jesus the Messiah. The work he gave me to do is to forgive people. So I forgive you."

Again the police reported his answer to the authorities. The authorities said, "Beat him again."

What about the third beating? Was it more or less than the second? Of course it was less. God's power coming through Ali's forgiveness was overcoming the power of evil in their lives.

After the third beating, the police asked the same questions and Ali gave the same answers - again. But this time the authorities ordered that he be released - on one condition. He must promise never to come back to their city again.

Ali answered, "I told you. I am working for Jesus the Messiah. If he tells me to come back to this city because there are more sins to be forgiven, I will do so."

The police reported this answer to the authorities. The authorities told the police, "Let him go!"

As Ali left the police station, he asked the police men if he could pray for them. They agreed. "God Almighty," he prayed, "we have just had another change of government. At such times people often lose their jobs. But I pray for these men that you will keep their jobs for them so that they can feed their families."

The police station resounded with a loud, "Amen."

Ali continued. "God, I am leaving them now. But I ask that your Spirit will remain with them to lead them into all truth."

There was another loud "Amen."

Ali left them and made the five-hour trip back home. I went with a friend to visit him. He was lying sidewise on the couch because he was still healing from the beatings. But his face was shining! "I am a very beloved son of God," he said. "God would never allow anyone to beat me or hurt me in any way, any more than I would see someone bullying my five-year-old son and just watch - unless he had a reason. The only reason I can think of is that those people beating me needed to experience the power of God's forgiveness coming through a human being. And God chose me!" Then he added, "I know that the forgiveness God gave

me to pass on to them will not be in vain. At least one of them will come round later to find out more.”

Some months later, a tall well-dressed man came from that city to visit Ali. After some chit-chat, he confessed that he had been the judge who had ordered those beatings. But there was something inside him, he said, pushing him to come to Ali. After more discussion, Ali led that judge to confess all his sins to the God who forgives *in Christ*. The judge studied the Bible with Ali and experienced more and more of the Spirit of Jesus in his life. Eventually, the judge became a leader of a church in that Muslim city. He led many other Muslims into the Way of Jesus.

What if Ali had not forgiven his persecutors *in Christ*? Ali might still be in detention. He might have been beaten to death. The persecution from those authorities might have continued to get worse. The judge might never have known the power of forgiveness in Jesus' name. He and many others might have remained bound in sins that would have kept multiplying and getting worse.

Thank God Ali's forgiveness was forgiveness with a difference. That sin of the beatings was no longer available to Satan to use for his purposes. Ali had taken that sin and given it to Christ. He had forgiven *in Christ*. And that kind of persistent forgiveness weakens the power of sin in those we forgive. It opens them up to experience more of the grace of God.

Yes, there are different kinds of forgiveness. There is the forgiveness of the world which may keep us from revenging. But it may also make us doormats. It may even encourage others to sin against us again!

A Muslim wise man knew this. That is why he did not want Christianity to come to his country. Christianity, as he understood it, taught that if you sinned, Jesus died for it. Sin again? No problem. Jesus died for it. Shari'a law had a hard enough time getting people to behave, he reasoned, let alone this kind of license.

But this Muslim wise man did not know the Jesus brand of forgiveness. He did not understand that forgiveness *in Christ* cannot be separated from the working of the Holy Spirit. So we prepared a Bible study for him on what happens when the Holy Spirit comes into someone's life. The Holy Spirit washes the heart clean of sin and puts within a desire and power to do what pleases God.

As the Muslim wise man went through this Bible study, he asked with astonishment, “Do you mean there is a spirit that can do this? If this is true, that would be much more effective than Shari'a law!” Once this wise man experienced how forgiveness *in Christ* was linked with this powerful work of the Holy Spirit to clean hearts, he lost his objection to Christianity. He became an enthusiastic witness for Jesus. For the rest of his life he kept leading other Muslims to Jesus the Messiah whose Spirit could clean the evil out of people's hearts.

As the Muslim wise man knew, and as many others have experienced, human forgiveness does not have the power to stop, let alone to reverse, the power of evil. Only God's forgiveness *in Christ* can do that. Passing on that kind of forgiveness opens the way for the Holy Spirit to pour new life into those we forgive.

So if we are forgiving but not seeing any change, we need to ask ourselves. Are we forgiving *in Christ*? Do we see those sins of others that we are to forgive as sins that Jesus died for? Do we realize that only the Holy Spirit of Jesus can do the kind of forgiveness that will overcome the power of evil in our lives and in the lives of those we forgive? If not, we need

to learn how to forgive *in Christ*. We need to bring to the cross not only our own sins, but also the sins of others. If we find this difficult to do, we need to ask God for more of his Holy Spirit in our lives. Then God will empower us to do forgiveness with a difference!

Prayer: Lord, thank you for forgiving our sins *in Christ*. Help us to forgive *in Christ* the sins that others have done against us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Activity: Draw a simple cross on a piece of paper. Now write on that cross sins that other people have done against you. Then ask God to forgive those sins *in Christ*, not because they deserve it, but because Jesus died for the sins of the whole world.

## **FORGIVENESS AND UNFORGIVENESS AS FOOTHOLDS**

*Ephesians 4:26-27. In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*

*Romans 12:21. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Forgiveness *in Christ* is indeed forgiveness with a difference. Such forgiveness becomes a good foothold for the work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in the lives of those we forgive.

Think of the story of Stephen. The Bible says that Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit.” After he gave witness to the truth about Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Stephen looked up and described what he saw. “‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” (Acts 7:55-56) Imagine what it meant to Stephen to see Jesus standing up to encourage him! But the members of the Sanhedrin were furious. They dragged him out of the city and started stoning him. Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (59) But it was as if the Spirit of Jesus reminded him to do one more thing before he joined Jesus in glory. He wanted Stephen to do that Resurrection forgiveness with a difference. And Stephen did. He cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” The Bible is careful to tell us that it was only after Stephen forgave his killers that he went to join Jesus at the right hand of God. (60)

But did you notice the words that Stephen used when he forgave? “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” What a unique way to express forgiveness. If this sin of murder was not to be held against them, who would it be held against? Who would bear its punishment? Who would pay for it? Stephen knew the answer. It was Jesus! The Bible says in 1 John 2 that Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) Unthinkable as it is, both Jesus and Stephen wanted this sin of murder to be included in those sins Jesus died for. Neither of them wanted that sin to become a stronghold and multiply. Both of them realized that forgiveness would become a foothold for more work of the Holy Spirit.

And that is exactly what happened with Saul of Tarsus, who was involved in the murder of Stephen. After Stephen's death, Saul did continue to persecute the church – for a while. But then with blinding light Jesus stopped Saul on his way to persecute more Christians and said to him, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads, isn't it?” (Acts 26:14) What did Jesus

mean by “kicking against the goads”? It must mean that every time Saul set out to persecute Christians, the Holy Spirit was opposing him in ways that were becoming more and more painful. Stephen’s forgiveness had become a foothold for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to change the direction of Saul’s life. Eventually Saul became Paul the missionary whom God used to spread the gospel throughout the world of that day.

We have already looked at other cases of how forgiveness in Christ provided a foothold for more work of the Holy Spirit. After Ali forgave those who had beaten him, the beatings became less and less severe until they stopped altogether. Even after Ali went back home, the Holy Spirit continued to work in the life of the judge who had ordered the beatings. After some months, the judge came to visit Ali. Ali then worked with the Holy Spirit to bring that judge to salvation and new life in Christ. The judge in turn led others into the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church grew in that city.

Some years ago a close co-worker betrayed me. I pushed the disappointment down deep into my subconscious and moved on. But I found myself getting angry at others at times without even realizing why. Finally, during a prayer time God showed me that I had a broken heart, and he wanted to heal me. I cried through the night and gradually God restored peace to my soul.

But God wanted to do more than heal me of that pain. On Monday while I was having my devotions, God impressed on me, “I want you to pray for your co-worker for forty days. Every day I will give you a Scripture passage on which to base your prayers.” So I prayed Scripture promises into his life for forty days. At the end of the forty days, that co-worker came to me with a full confession, asking for forgiveness, ready to do restitution. Since then God has been blessing our partnership in the gospel more and more abundantly.

What would have happened if I had not cooperated with the Holy Spirit after God healed the pain in my heart? What would have happened if I had had an incomplete understanding of what forgiveness *in Christ* means? What would have happened if I had not taken advantage of that foothold for God’s grace that forgiveness provides? My co-worker could, of course, have taken that sin to the cross for forgiveness himself. But did he even want to? He might never have come to the point of repentance and restoration.

If we do not go on to bless those we have forgiven, we may even give a foothold to the devil again at a later time. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to forgive a fellow believer? We expect more of them. So Jesus knew we needed to be protected from the barbs of the evil one who tries to penetrate our minds with reasons to be offended with each other. That is the reason Jesus prayed for us the night before he died, saying, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11-12) What name had God given Jesus? At his baptism God called Jesus “My beloved Son.” When we receive Jesus, says John, and believe on his name, we are given the right and power to become children of God. (John 1:12) We need to remember who we are in Christ. We are sons and daughters of God. We don’t just tolerate each other. We are one in the family of God. The devil may try to make us enemies of each other. But even when we offend each other, as children of God we have divine power available to do the kind of forgiveness that becomes a foothold for more grace in our lives and in the lives of those we forgive.

Many Christians think that not revenging and leaving vengeance to God is all we are responsible for doing. They quote Romans 12:19: “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the

Lord.” But that is not the end of Romans 12. Paul continues, “On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (20-21) Forgiveness in Christ cannot be separated from doing good to the person we have forgiven – in prayer and in any other way the Holy Spirit nudges us to do so.

Some years ago one of my students came to me with a problem. He said that he could not concentrate on his studies. I spoke out what the Holy Spirit had put in my mind. “How many women have you slept with?”

He looked at me as if to say, “What does that have to do with it?”

So I explained. “Every time you slept with a woman, what happened was more than just physical. Your soul extended into hers and got welded. Likewise, part of her soul extended into yours and got welded. Some call this a soul tie. The Bible calls it “becoming one.” This happens in marriage for a good purpose. Even if a husband and wife are kilometers apart, they can often just sense when something is happening to the other, whether good or bad. But even outside of marriage, the Bible in 1 Corinthians 6 says that sexual union creates “oneness.” (1 Cor 6:16) This oneness means that what former sex partners are feeling now can still affect you. If, for example, one of them is feeling depressed, her feeling of depression may come into you. If another is angry, you may feel her anger, or fear, or sadness, or whatever. If a demon within that woman is harassing her, that demon now has access to you as well! Have you asked for forgiveness for those sexual sins?”

“Yes, many times,” he answered.

“Then God forgave you the first time you asked,” I assured him. “But since you became one with these women, they need God’s forgiveness too. The Holy Spirit wants to make forgiveness a foothold for good in the lives of those women as well as in your own. But we need to work with the Holy Spirit in doing this. You need to ask the Holy Spirit to help you to do restitution. What did you take from these women that needs to be restored?”

He thought a bit. “If what you said is true, I took a part of their souls into myself.”

“Yes, you did. And you had no right to do this unless you had married them first and promised to protect and care for them for the rest of your lives together. But, unfortunately for you, those unions you made through sex are until death do you part, whether in or outside of marriage. At any time what those women are experiencing and how they are feeling can affect you deeply because you have become one with them, soul to soul.”

I will never forget the woebegone look on his face. But then I added, “You need to ask God for a miracle. When God forgives you, he also wants to equip you to retribute and experience freedom. So, first write down all the names of the women you have had sex with. Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to help you to remember their names.”

He wrote them down, one by one. After the first ten, he looked up and said, “The rest I do not know the names of.”

“Well, then write ‘the one at \_\_\_\_\_,’” I suggested.

“Sometimes there were more than one,” he said.

“Then write ‘the ones at \_\_\_\_\_.’”



So he kept writing until there were over twenty in the list.

When he finished, we agreed that he would deal with one woman at a time, saying something like this, “Lord, I ask you to take out of me any part of Mary’s soul that came into me through sex. Cleanse out anything sinful and unclean that has come through that union. I put that all on the cross of Jesus who died for this sin. May any unclean spirits involved be sent to the feet of Jesus. Cleanse thoroughly that part of Mary’s soul and take it back to her.”

“Then stop,” I added. “Ask the Holy Spirit for another blessing to pray for Mary before you go on to the next woman.”

The student started. He asked God to take what was of Mary out of his soul and to send all uncleanness to the feet of Jesus. Then he asked God for a blessing to pray into Mary’s life. After a short pause, sheer joy came into his voice and he prayed confidently, “O Holy Spirit, don’t send angels to take that part of her soul back to her. Please take it back to her yourself, and then remain with her until she gets born again and thoroughly cleansed in spirit and soul and body.” (1 Thes 5:23)

He then went on to the second name, the third, and so on, asking God for cleansing and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in each of their lives. As I watched and listened, I saw his face shine brighter and brighter. I could sense the joy and the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through him in increasing measure. I could only imagine what those women would be experiencing in answer to those Holy-Spirit-empowered prayers.

When he had finished praying for all the women on the list, we debriefed. We were both filled with wonder at how God had taken something that had started with sin and turned it into an opportunity to do restitution plus blessing in the power of the Holy Spirit. I added, “Probably some of these women, including the prostitutes, have never before had anyone bless them in the name of Jesus - until today.”

Then we asked God to take out from those women all the extensions of his soul that had entered into them through sex. We asked God to cleanse anything unclean that might have had access to him because of those connections. We asked that all that uncleanness, including wicked spirits, be taken to the feet of Jesus. Then we asked God to bring back all those scattered parts of himself and make his soul whole. We asked the Holy Spirit to fill his mind with the ways that Jesus thought about women.

After some minutes, another memory came back. “When I was five years old,” the student said, “an older neighbor man molested me.”

Suddenly God’s compassion surged through me. That sinister encounter had most likely twisted his sexual development. But I did not have to advise him what to do next. He was directly connected to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit moved him first to forgive the man. Then he asked God to take out from him the extension of that man’s soul and whatever evil had come into him because of that molesting. He also asked for what of his soul was in the man to be brought back to him – cleansed.

Later the student told me that when he had prayed in this way, something huge and black had left his head – most likely a wicked demon that had been twisting and tempting him his whole life. After the demon left to go to the feet of Jesus, the student saw a large hole inside him. Then God himself came in and filled that hole! What joy! What victory! What glory to God!

From that day on, the student could concentrate in his studies and did well at school. When he became a senior, he proved so responsible that the school authorities gave him an influential position of leadership. Later he became a missionary.

What if this student had never forgiven and blessed the man who had molested him when he was a little boy? That big black thing inside of him might have continued to influence him for the rest of his life. Any sin against us that we have not forgiven takes root in our own lives. Over time a foothold may become a stronghold of temptation. That man's molestation of a boy over time became a stronghold of sin in that young man's life. As he grew older, he in turn went more and more into sexual sin.

But Spirit-empowered forgiveness destroyed that stronghold. Once such a root sin and all the uncleanness associated with it is forgiven and removed by God, that same place can become a foothold for the cleansing and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. That place becomes a home for God to live in. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, such a place becomes a fountain of living water which keeps us clean forever (John 4:14). That living water can overflow from us into the person we have forgiven, and to everyone else in our lives.

Months later one of the women who had tempted him to sex came up to him. "There's something different about you," she said. "Your face is shining, and you have a peace about you."

"Yes," he replied. "I do. I now feel clean on the inside. God is pleased with me, and I am pleased with God and what he has done for me. You can feel clean too and have this peace that comes from God in Christ Jesus. Let me take you to my pastor's wife, and she can show you how women can have this peace too."

Yes, it makes a great difference what we do with the sins others have done against us, or with us. This includes all the ways others have offended us or hurt us or tempted us. Our refusal to forgive in Christ gives the devil a foothold in our lives and in the lives of those we do not forgive. The devil continues his work of turning footholds into strongholds of evil.

Forgiving *in Christ*, however, gives the Holy Spirit a foothold for his ongoing work of cleansing. As we cooperate with him, these footholds of grace become strongholds of victory and joy in our own lives. God also works changes in the lives of those we forgive. Stephen suffered stoning. But his forgiveness of his persecutors led to his reception by Jesus at the right hand of God. His forgiveness *in Christ* also gave the Holy Spirit a foothold in Saul's life that over time led to Saul's conversion and total transformation. Ali's forgiveness of the judge led to the growth of the church in a Muslim city. My forgiveness of my co-worker gave me an opportunity to pray Scripture into his life that in turn led to our reconciliation and ongoing partnership in the advance of the gospel. My student did more than receive and give forgiveness in Christ for sexual sin. He worked with the Holy Spirit to make what had started in sin, even being molested, to become an opportunity for restoration and blessing for many.

We have all suffered from the sins of others. But what we doing with those sins? To whom have we given a foothold?

Prayer: Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. Take anger and hurt and unforgiveness out of our lives so that we do not give a foothold to Satan. We choose to forgive *in Christ*. We choose to give a foothold to the Holy Spirit to do his cleansing and empowering work. We ask for the Holy Spirit to help us do the kind of good that overcomes evil in our own lives and in the lives of those we forgive. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Activity: Now think of the people you have forgiven. For each one of them, ask the Holy Spirit to show you what blessing you can pray into their lives. Then write out that prayer of blessing. When you are finished, thank God for empowering us to work with him to overcome evil with good.

## **BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE**

***Luke 6:27-28. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.***

Some years ago I was sick with five different diseases, taking medicines for all five, but getting better of none. I did not understand what was happening to me, but some of the young people I was teaching did. “Don’t you know the sorcerers in that city are cursing you?” At that time I did not know what it meant to curse or to be cursed, but I was certainly feeling the effects of those curses. In addition to the five diseases the doctors had diagnosed, I had chest pains that doctors could find no cause for. At times there would be like a heavy weight on me, so much so that I could hardly get out of bed. But I knew that the Bible spoke of curses and evil spirits, so I prayed for God to teach me what to do.

God brought to my mind what Jesus said: “Bless those who curse you.” (Luke 6:28) But what did it mean to bless? What did it mean to curse? Gradually God taught me more about cursing and blessing, first from the Bible, then from others more experienced than myself.

I learned that there are people called sorcerers who deliberately work with evil spirits. Goliath, for example, cursed David by his gods. (1 Samuel 17:43) Later I learned what it meant to curse people by gods, or demons. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, the gods pagan sorcerers worship are really demons, or evil spirits. (1 Cor 10:20-21) Sorcerers literally make contact with evil spirits and tell them what evil they want the spirits to go and do to other human beings. The evil spirits then tell the sorcerers what to do to make the curse work. This may be chanting or sacrifices or whatever. Some sorcerers have books of formulas for making bad things happen to other people. We read in Acts of such sorcerers in Ephesus who had sorcery books worth 50,000 days’ wages! (Acts 19:19) People who have grudges or envy or fear can pay sorcerers to curse others on their behalf. In my case, the sorcerers in that city wanted to stop me from evangelizing the young people of their town. That is why they had sent evil spirits to harm me.

Eventually I learned how to counteract curses by blessing those who were cursing me. But what does it mean to bless? To bless is to make contact with the Holy Spirit, not an evil spirit. If we are followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit already lives within us. We simply pray and ask the Holy Spirit to go and do something good in that person’s life – a good thing that we know the Holy Spirit wants to do. I learned that one of the best ways to bless is to pray Psalm 51 for those who are cursing us. Instead of saying, “Cleanse me from my sin,” we can pray, “Cleanse them from their sin.” So I prayed Psalm 51 for those sorcerers and asked others to join me.

“Cleanse those sorcerers from their sin,” we prayed. “Teach them wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse them and they will be whiter than snow. Create in them a pure

heart. Then take not your Holy Spirit from them. Give to them the joy of your salvation. Then they will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.” (adapted from Psalm 51)

Is there anything in Psalm 51 that God would not want to do for anyone who has sinned? In 1 Timothy 2, the Bible says that God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4 ). In 2 Peter 3, the Bible says that God does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 2:9). So there is nothing in Psalm 51 that the Holy Spirit would not want to do. That is why the young people I was teaching and myself could bless even those sorcerers.

What happened in the spiritual realms when we blessed those sorcerers who were trying to harm me? The Holy Spirit flowed out of us toward them to do them good. (John 7:38-39) Now when the evil spirits were coming toward us, and the Holy Spirit was moving out from us toward the sorcerers, what happened when those spirits collided? Who swallowed whom? Of course, the Holy Spirit is infinitely stronger than those evil spirits. He overcame them and went on to bless the sorcerers. He went to forgive their sins of cursing me, to teach them wisdom in their inmost souls, even through dreams and visions, and to cleanse them. Best of all he went to create within them a pure heart and to help them to understand the Way of Jesus.

Some weeks later one of those sorcerers named Baba was surprised that his curses were no longer working. In answer to our prayers of blessing, Baba kept having dreams of two angels taking him by the hand and inviting him to come to Jesus. One day Baba came to visit me. I answered his questions and showed him the Jesus film. He later became a zealous follower of Jesus and repented of his sorceries, just as had those sorcerers in Acts 19 who burned their sorcery books. (Acts 19:19) As Baba confessed his sins, the Spirit of Jesus cleansed him of the evil spirits that had infested and empowered him. Baba became a fearless evangelist for Jesus. He went from town to town, calling others to follow Jesus with him.

One day Baba’s wife sent me a letter telling me that Baba had been kidnapped. We prayed day and night. Weeks later, Baba returned, hatless. He explained that his tormentors had shaved his head with a broken bottle and stoned him. He was still very sore. During the torture, he had seen re-runs of the Jesus film in his mind and had felt the Presence of Jesus. Then he started crying, “Please, help me pray for these people. They do not know Jesus. I used to be like them.” Amazed at his love for his tormentors, I joined him in prayer for God to forgive them and work within them new life. Then Baba went back to his wife and family.

Two weeks later Baba was back again, his hat back on his head and his face shining. Those who had tormented him had asked him to come back to them, he said.

“Are you going?” I asked.

He looked at me as if to ask what kind of a Christian I was. “Of course I am,” he said. “We prayed to God for them, didn’t we? Two weeks is certainly enough time for God to change them.” So we prayed together and he left.

A few weeks later, he came back to tell us what had happened. His former tormentors had welcomed him. “When you left us,” they said, “we did not intend for you to reach home alive. We did the kind of cursing that should have caused whatever car you got in to have an accident. But instead the oil tanker of the rich man who paid for the cursing had an accident.

Every night we have been getting visions of you being in heaven, but no Muslims we know were there. Now we are ready to hear from you.”

So Baba told them how all their sins could be forgiven in Christ and how they could begin a new life in the Way of Jesus, and many believed. He told us how he took some of the new believers with him to the next town where others joined in following Jesus.

We had blessed Baba when he cursed us! And now through this same Baba, Satan was losing even more of his workers. They were now joining Baba to work with Jesus for the expansion of his Kingdom.

Gradually I learned why I had been so vulnerable to the curses of those sorcerers. I learned why I had suffered unnecessarily. First of all, I was ignorant. No one had taught me how to fulfill Jesus’ command to bless those who curse us. Secondly, I had incomplete forgiveness in my own life. There was someone whom I had not forgiven to the point of blessing with joy. That incomplete forgiveness had been a “foothold” for the cursing spirits to enter into me. But God in his mercy taught me how to go to him for the power to forgive with joy and to bless those who curse. Once I joined the Holy Spirit in forgiving and blessing, I was healed of all five diseases and no longer suffered from chest pains. I was no longer a defeated Christian and could go on to victory in the ministry God had given me.

Not all curses are done intentionally by sorcerers. Some curses are done unintentionally. Even Christians can curse other Christians, not knowing what they are really doing. Whenever someone speaks harmful words against another, there is always the possibility that an evil spirit may hear those hurtful words and work to make those words come true. If a parent says to a child, “You will never amount to anything,” that parent has given demons permission to work to make that statement come true, whether the parent realizes it or not. Words can hurt. Words that demons use can be doubly hurtful or tempting.

Whenever we fear or accept something hurtful that others say to or about us, we are making ourselves vulnerable to cursing spirits. If we have allowed curses to enter us and affect our thinking, we need to reject them. We need to ask God to replace them with his blessing. For example, if someone has told us we will never amount to anything, we need to reject that and accept God’s blessing instead. God says in Jeremiah 29, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11) We must also agree to do what Jesus told us to do. We must bless those who curse us so that our blessing them will cancel their cursing us. If we find that hard to do, we can ask the Holy Spirit to make it possible for us to do so. He will help us.

If we do not bless those who curse us, those curses may enter us and give a foothold to the devil’s work in our lives. If we desire to revenge, we are making ourselves vulnerable to being used by the devil to do his work. Jesus himself identified cursed ones as those who join the devil in his work and destiny. On the Judgment Day, King Jesus will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41) It is the devil who works for evil to happen to people. Therefore, the devil is cursed. Those who identify with the devil’s attitudes and his ways are cursed with him.

Satan tempted Adam and Eve to their first sin. Evil spirits encourage disobedient people to become even more evil. They encourage cursed people to curse others so that evil spirits can work destruction in the lives of those who are in any way disobedient to God.

Evil spirits are clever. Sometimes they turn teaching on how to chant or curse into a game or some form of entertainment. Jesus warned us about taking our words seriously, even in a game. “But I tell you,” said Jesus, “that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:36-37) In all of our words, we are siding either with the One who blesses or the one who curses.

The Spirit of God encourages God’s people to bless and to work for good in other people’s lives. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” (Ephesians 4:29) All of our words should be blessing words, words that the Holy Spirit would love to empower and use for good in other people’s lives.

Some years ago, God gave us a vivid mental picture of what happens when we bless those who curse us. This time some of the most powerful sorcerers in the continent had targeted us. One of us had turned traitor and given our names to those who had bribed him. Sorcerers were paid to fast for forty days before sending powerful demons against us. I learned that they were going to target me from a distant country the next Saturday. On the Tuesday night before that Saturday, during a prayer meeting, a pastor said to me, “I have a picture in my mind of a black cord attached to your back. It stretches out a long ways, and I cannot see the end of it.”

We all knew what that picture meant. The sorcerers were targeting me with a death curse. Some of those in the prayer meeting wanted to cut the black cord and send it back to the senders. But I objected! “Wait! Those sorcerers have established a connection with us. They are waiting to see what will happen. Let’s pray in such a way that they will experience something they have never experienced before.”

So we prayed Psalm 51 for those sorcerers. We prayed for God to forgive them. We prayed for their curses to be changed into blessings, for us and for them. We asked God to teach them wisdom and create in them new hearts. While we were praying, the picture of the cord in the pastor’s mind started changing. Starting from our end, it was changing into an umbilical cord. Life from us was surging through the cord to overcome death! It was as if God was making us pregnant with those sorcerers so that they would have an opportunity to be born again.

Some months later some of those sorcerers came to the country where we were living. Perhaps they thought that their curses would work better close up. In the middle of the night one of them was chanting curses. Suddenly he saw a cross coming toward him. The closer the cross came, the weaker he felt, until he went to sleep under the spiritual anesthetic of the Holy Spirit. While asleep, he had a dream. In that dream he saw three men. But between him and the three men was a cross. Then he felt someone brand him on his forehead with the sign of the cross. When he woke up, he could not see the men or the cross, but he could still feel the branding.

Curious, he asked to see a Jesus follower whom he had never met, but one whose name he had been hired to curse. When he saw that believer, he cried out in recognition. It was one of the three men in his dream! When the two men were alone, the sorcerer told the Jesus follower his dream. He explained how the cross had prevented the curses from getting through. The sorcerer explained how he himself had been branded by the sign of a cross.

The believer knew his prayers for forgiveness had been answered. He said to the sorcerer, “God has favored you! He has put on your forehead the sign of forgiveness. Now take that forgiveness from your forehead into your heart.” Then the believer explained to him how God had sent Jesus to die for our sins and rise from the dead to give us new life through his Holy Spirit. He led the sorcerer in a prayer of repentance and went on to teach him more about the Way of Jesus. Eventually this converted sorcerer went back to his country and led other sorcerers into the Kingdom of Jesus.

Yes, Jesus knew why he told us to bless those who curse us. We ourselves will be protected by the Presence of the Holy Spirit flowing out of our lives. Those we bless will be given a special opportunity to be forgiven and repent unto eternal life. Through our prayers of forgiveness, the Kingdom of Jesus will invade the kingdom of Satan, destroying the works of the devil and empowering many new believers for good works.

When other people curse us, God can turn their curses into blessings. That’s what God did when Balaam tried to curse the Israelites. According to Nehemiah, God turned the curse into a blessing. (Nehemiah 13:2)

Paul lived out the teaching of Jesus to bless those who curse us. He wrote, “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly.” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13) As a result, Paul saw the sorcerers at Ephesus repent and burn their sorcery books. God used Paul’s blessings, endurance and kind words to take these sorcerers from Satan and change them. God can use our blessings to pray life-producing grace into the lives of sorcerers so that they can stop cursing and instead learn how to join us in blessing others. He can use our blessings to put his grace into all those who have hurt us with their words. If they receive that grace into their hearts, the devil loses them. We will spend eternity together with them as friends of Jesus and of each other. And Jesus will get the reward he deserves for going to the cross to cancel curses with one blessing after another!

Prayer: Lord, take out of us any arrows of hurtful words that have wounded us. Speak your healing into our hearts and fill those places with your Spirit’s presence. Take out of us any cursing spirits that may have gotten a foothold into our lives. Empower us to forgive and bless everyone who has hurt us with their words. We bless those who curse us, those we know and those we do not know. You know them all. Forgive them and create in them pure hearts. We pray this in the name of Jesus whose Spirit changes curses into blessings. Amen.

Activity: Think about someone who has cursed you, your family, your church, or your country. Write out a blessing powerful enough for God to use to cancel that curse and work toward the salvation of those who have cursed you. (Psalm 51 will give you some ideas!)

## **Forgiving Persecution and Terrorism?**

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

To repay evil with blessing – this, the Bible says, is a calling for all Christians. To pray for evil people will bring great blessing to us. (1 Peter 3:9)

One day Ali was coming back home when three hired thugs attacked him shouting, “Kill the infidel! Kill the infidel!” The thugs stabbed him three times, once in the head, once in the lower back, and once in his left wrist. One of their knives fell to the ground. Ali bent to pick it up, but he heard God’s voice within him, “Not that way.” When other people came round, the thugs took off.

Ali was taken to the nearest clinic where the medics cleaned out the wounds and stitched them up - without anesthetic. Ali went home to heal. The police caught the three thugs and detained them. The thugs confessed that someone named Yusufu had hired them to kill Ali.

A few days later I came to visit Ali. He showed me his clothes, all full of blood as if a goat had been slaughtered. His face was still racked with pain and his heart was sore. His wife called me into the kitchen and begged me, “Help my husband to forgive, or all his suffering will be for nothing.”

But how was I to help him to forgive? He had taught me much about forgiveness, and he already knew how, didn’t he? Wasn’t he the one who had forgiven those who had beaten him three times? But I could tell by the tension in his face, he had not yet forgiven the ones who had stabbed him this time. So his wife and I prayed for God to give him wisdom and the power to forgive – again!

After his wife and I went back and sat with him in the living room, I reminded Ali that Jesus forgave those who beat him up. “But I am not Jesus,” Ali protested.

“Was it easy for Jesus to forgive?” I asked.

“Of course,” Ali answered, “he was God.”

“But did that mean it was easy for him to forgive? Let’s go to Gethsemane. When God the Father showed Jesus what he was going to suffer, Jesus in his humanness protested, ‘If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.’ Jesus so much dreaded going through the suffering that he prayed for the suffering to be lifted off him three times. It was difficult, even for Jesus, to see suffering as an opportunity to forgive. But Jesus also prayed three times, ‘Not my will, but yours be done.’ (Matthew 26:36-44)

“It was not easy for Jesus to forgive. But once he was sure that it was his heavenly Father’s will, he submitted. It was after he agreed to God’s will that he experienced the strength from the Holy Spirit to go through the suffering and the forgiving on the cross.”

But Ali’s face was still troubled. So we agreed to pray together and listen for God to speak to us in our hearts. Ali’s wife and myself heard nothing new as we waited, but Ali heard something that did not please him. He heard God saying, “I have compassion on Yusufu,” and “Not my will but yours be done.” But why did God have compassion on Yusufu? Was it not he, Ali, the one whom God should have compassion on?

All of us retired for the night, agreeing to pray individually and come back together the next morning. The next morning Ali told us that every time he tried to pray, he heard the same words. “I have compassion on Yusufu,” and “Not my will but yours be done.”

Later in the day, the police came to take Ali to the police station. They showed Ali the three hired killers and asked him to write up a report for charges against them. They promised to do to the three men whatever Ali wanted done. That could mean interrogation with torture or whatever.



To their surprise, Ali said, "I have no case against these my brothers."

The police protested, "These people tried to kill you, and you call them brothers? You have no case?"

"I have a case," Ali replied, "but not with these men. Yusufu, the one who hired them used to be my friend. Someone came between us. That one who came between us is Satan, and he is the one I have a case against. I am going to deal with Satan by forgiving these three men. Then I can take them away from him."

Astonished, the police let the three men go. Two weeks later, the three men came back to Ali and asked for his forgiveness. He, in turn, led them to the one who could give forgive all their sins and give them new life for eternity. Sometime later even Yusufu accepted forgiveness not only from Ali but also from Jesus the Messiah. Ali and Yusufu became friends again, even brothers in Christ. But what if Ali had not agreed for the forgiveness of Christ to flow through him to Yusufu? As Jesus said on the night after he rose from the dead, "If you forgive anybody's sins, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:23)

If someone who has suffered persecution or terrorism does not forgive, Jesus says that those sins of persecution or terrorism will not be forgiven. Sins that are not forgiven become tools for the devil to use to work more damage. The terrorism may be worse the next time. We can keep praying for peace, but if we do not do the forgiveness that Jesus commands us to do, we ourselves are living in disobedience and will be vulnerable to more attacks of the evil one. Instead of experiencing the power of God coming on them through our forgiveness, those persecuting or terrorizing us may experience more and more empowerment by the evil one to do more and more evil against us.

This type of forgiveness is not something we do only once in our lives. There are still many people that need to experience the forgiveness of Jesus coming through us. That is one reason why God allows us to be hurt by different people. God even allows us to be persecuted. Those persecuting us need to experience God's forgiveness coming through us so that they can have an opportunity to be cleansed.

One day in the temple Jesus himself stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit," John wrote, "whom those who believed in him were later to receive." (John 7:38-39) The Holy Spirit who flows through us when we pray forgiveness into others has the power to bring conviction and cleansing into the lives of those we forgive.

Someone may object that God himself gave laws for an eye for an eye, a life for a life. Yes, God has always been against evil and for justice. In Old Testament times there was no way to stop evil from spreading except to kill those who had made themselves one with evil and were luring others into their evil ways. Again and again God told the Israelites that they must purge evil from among them. Wicked people must die. Here are some examples among many of those whom God says must die.

Someone who has worshiped other gods must be stoned to death. (Deut 17:3-5)

In cases of adultery both the man and the woman must die. (Deut 22:22)

A kidnapper must die. (Deut 24:7)

Someone who deliberately lies in wait and kills his neighbor must be shown no pity.

He must die. (Deut 19:11-12)

The government still has the responsibility to punish evil. Romans 13 says that “rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.” In the news we keep hearing stories of evil and terrorism exploding all over the world, even in countries where terrorism has not been heard of before. Government authorities try to arrest and punish those responsible. That is their job. Romans 13 says that government authorities are “God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4) But even though governments are trying to suppress terrorism, it seems that terrorism keeps popping up in unexpected places.

Jesus came with a new approach for dealing with evil. He came with the New Covenant. He took evil upon himself so that its power would be defeated and sinful people could be forgiven. Then he sent the Holy Spirit to work this forgiveness into their hearts and give them a new power to repent and change for the good. Jesus has empowered his church to do something that the government cannot do. That is what Paul was referring to in Romans 1: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes....For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last....” (Romans 1:16-17)

When terrorists experience and receive the forgiveness of God coming through us, they can also receive this righteousness of God for a changed life. Former terrorists can become useful citizens. Even the government will see that Jesus people can do more than suppress evil. They have the secret of eradicating evil out of people’s lives and replacing that evil with goodness. Jesus’ followers who forgive persistently over time will see persecutors stop persecution and join them in the Way of Jesus.

There are many stories of how God reduced persecution with the cooperation of the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let me tell one more. One day Ali and other Jesus followers came from different towns for a festival. They celebrated baptism and the Lord’s Supper together. Suddenly some jihadists armed with swords and knives and guns fell on them and started killing them. In a short time twenty-three believers were dead and others wounded. Among those dead was a woman with a baby tied to her back. The leader of the believers, Ali, was wounded in the head and unconscious.

Far away in another country, a pastor heard what had happened. God showed him that Ali was hemorrhaging in his brain. The pastor prayed for healing, and before long Ali became conscious. But when I talked to Ali on the phone, I could tell that he was very discouraged and angry at those who had killed some of his best friends.

I asked prayer partners to pray for Ali and others. One prayer partner told me that God had given her a mental picture as she prayed. She saw water flowing out from the throne of God into Ali’s heart. God was making Ali’s heart bigger and bigger so that more water could flow through it to others. When I talked on the phone again to Ali, I told him about the picture. Ali retorted, “That may be what God wants, but it is not the way I feel now.”

I asked, “Shall we pray for that vision to become true for you?”

“If you want,” Ali replied grudgingly.

So we prayed for the Holy Spirit to make that picture come true in Ali’s life. We prayed for the Holy Spirit to cleanse his heart of pain and bitterness so that he could forgive those killers as Jesus and Stephen had forgiven their killers.

Four days later Ali called me on the phone. Joy was back in his voice. “Last night,” he said excitedly, “God brought the pictures of the killers to me one by one. He empowered me to forgive and bless each one!”

The next day Ali called together the surviving leaders of the Jesus followers. Together they asked God not to lay the sins of these killers to their charge – but rather to the charge of Jesus who died on the cross for them too. Then they wrote letters of forgiveness. They took these letters to the police station and gave them to some attackers who had been detained there. They asked the officials to release these men. The officials did so. Some of these released men immediately joined up with the Jesus followers. Those men overcome by forgiveness never attacked again. The Jesus followers who forgave and repaid evil with blessing did indeed inherit a blessing from God.

Over time the power of that forgiveness and blessing went up the chain of command all the way to the top man – the one who had given the order to go and kill the believers. Six years later Ali entered a commercial airplane and took his seat. Seated next to him by the window was someone he recognized – a well-known terrorist leader and trainer. In the spirit, Ali noticed that surrounding this terrorist were evil spirits of murder. Ali went into the restroom of the plane, used the authority Jesus gives his followers, and commanded those murdering spirits to leave the plane. (Mark 16:17) When he came back to his seat, the murdering spirits were gone. During the flight, the terrorist leader started boasting about his exploits, assuming that Ali was in the same business. He even boasted that six years before he had heard of some who were leaving Islam to become Jesus followers. He boasted how his jihadists had really dealt a severe blow to this group of believers by slaughtering twenty-three of them. The remaining believers, he went on to say, were so subdued and afraid that they did not even pursue justice in the courts.

Shocked to the core, Ali realized that of all the terrorists in the world, he was sitting right next to the one who had personally ordered that attack six years before, that attack that had killed some of his best friends and severely wounded himself. But, with the help of the Holy Spirit, Ali realized who had arranged for him to sit next to this man. It was Jesus the Messiah who did not want even this terrorist leader to perish, but to come to repentance and everlasting life. (2 Peter 3:9)

Ali prayed for wisdom. As the conversation continued, Ali told the terrorist that he had been a victim of that brutal attack six years before, but already back then he and other Jesus followers had forgiven and blessed their attackers. Yes, it was true that they had not pursued justice in the courts, but it was not because they were subdued or fearful. Quite the contrary. “I have heard of you,” said Ali. “I know that you yourself are upset by the corruption of our leaders. But the way you are trying to solve the problem is only escalating a vicious cycle of revenge. There is a better way to stop evil and bring about good for our people. That is why I am a follower of the Prophet Jesus. Jesus teaches us to forgive and pray for our enemies. He teaches us to overcome evil with good. His Spirit can clean evil out of people’s hearts and fill them with the power to change and become good-living people. Already six years ago we forgave you. This forgiveness that I now offer you is from God. God wants you to receive his forgiveness and his love. He wants to help you to bring about peace and justice in the Way of Jesus the Messiah.”

The terrorist leader was startled. How had this man known what plane he was on? How had he made this seating arrangement? This man said he forgave him, but could he trust him? This man certainly had plenty of reason for revenge. Was this a set-up? Neither the terrorist

leader nor his bodyguard had been able to come on the plane with the usual knife strapped to their leg to defend themselves. Who was this man who had caught him so off-guard? What was waiting for him when they landed?

But Ali persisted in explaining the Way of Jesus, the way of forgiveness and righteousness from God. Finally just before they were to land, the terrorist leader asked Ali if he would come home and eat with him. Ali had been away from home for a month and wanted to go directly to his own family first, but the terrorist said, “If you do not come home with me, how will I know if you have really forgiven me?”

So, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, Ali followed the terrorist home and ate with him. He put in writing that God offered forgiveness and so did he. At that point, tears started flowing from behind the terrorist’s dark glasses. The love of God pouring through Ali was melting his heart.

That meeting started a relationship between that leader and Ali that over the years matured into their becoming co-workers in the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Certainly the blessing that Paul celebrated in Ephesians 3 is coming true: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Prayer: Lord, we are amazed at your love for us, even though we have sinned against you. Thank you for forgiving our sins in Christ and giving us your righteousness. We know that you do not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance. Strengthen us to say, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Help us to work with you to do the type of forgiveness and blessing that brings cleansing and creation of new hearts into the lives of even terrorists and persecutors. Help us to work with you for peace – in your way, in the power of the Spirit of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Activity: From your experience or from the news, find an example of some persecution or terrorism that is going on right now. Pray not only for those suffering, but also for the persecutors or terrorists. Ask someone else to join you in prayer. Make sure that your prayers are something that the Holy Spirit would want to make happen.

## **Rewards of Kingdom Forgiveness**

***Romans 8:17. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.***

The rewards of forgiving others are tremendous. Think of the rewards for Jesus himself. Even after evil people had tortured and killed him and he was buried, God raised him from the dead with a glorified body! 40 days later, when he ascended into heaven, he was seated “at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” (Ephesians 1:20-21) According to this passage in Ephesians 1, upon his ascension,

Jesus was crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. The sufferings and shame that Jesus had endured on the cross gave way to supreme honor and majesty. Daily, those whom Jesus died to forgive, one by one, are joining him in glory. It was with great joy, as we have seen, that Jesus stood up to receive Stephen at the right hand of God after Stephen had forgiven those stoning him. Stephen shared in the sufferings of Jesus, but also became a co-heir of glory.

But not all martyrs have immediately forgiven those who killed them and gone straight to join Jesus at the right hand of God in glory. In Revelation 6 we read: “When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’” (Revelation 6:10) Why were those martyrs calling for vengeance instead of forgiving those who had killed them, as Jesus had? Those souls were not yet reigning victoriously at the right hand of God. The Bible says they were still under the altar, not on a throne. The altar is an Old Testament image. It was a place where payment for sin was taken out on an animal instead of on the repentant sinner.

But this system of payment for sin foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus’ sacrifice did much more than the death of an animal could ever do. Not only did the sacrifice of Jesus pay for our sin once and for all, but it also made resurrection to new life possible for us and others, even those who have sinned the most.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, took those martyrs out from under the altar for animal sacrifice and gave them the white robes that his sacrifice on the cross had made available for them. (Revelation 6:11) One of the elders tells John that those with white robes are those “who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7: 14), the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) In the next chapter of Revelation we see those with white robes “standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9)

Those martyrs taken out from under the altar and others of the redeemed are no longer crying out for vengeance. Instead they are crying out in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:10)

But now back to Revelation 6. After each of those martyrs had been taken out from under the altar and given their white robes, they were told something they did not at all expect. They were told “to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.” (Revelation 6:11) That was not what they wanted to hear. Why would God allow more to be killed when he could stop it? Why had God allowed Jesus to be tortured and killed on the cross? Those martyrs had to learn that God allowed Jesus to suffer from the sins of others so that his forgiveness would give those sinners an opportunity to be saved from the guilt and power of those sins. Such forgiveness would open a way for the Holy Spirit to work within them the righteousness of God. Those martyrs with an Old Testament mentality had to learn that it is through undeserved grace, through forgiveness, through the blood of the New Covenant, that the Kingdom of God advances today.

After Jesus, Stephen was one of the first to suffer and die and forgive the way Jesus did. Stephen did not die under the altar, asking for vengeance. He died in the way of the cross, forgiven and forgiving. Stephen went directly to meet Jesus at the right hand of God.

And what was Stephen's reward? Certainly one reward was being welcomed by Jesus standing to receive him into glory. He must have heard Jesus say, "'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'" (Matthew 25:23)

It was not only Stephen who felt rewarded that day. Jesus himself must have rejoiced that there was someone who was willing to suffer and forgive in order that his Kingdom might come on earth. Think of how the heart of Jesus swells when he sees his disciples do the kind of forgiveness that frees those entrapped in sin and evil.

The Holy Spirit must have rejoiced that Stephen had allowed himself to be empowered to administer God's grace through forgiveness. The Father must have rejoiced that Jesus was being joined by another son willing to do what it took to extend his love to the world.

Years later both Jesus and Stephen shared still another reward. What a joy it must have been for both of them to welcome into glory someone that they had snatched from the devil through their willingness to forgive and bless. That man was the very man who had supervised the stoning of Stephen. He was one who had been affected by Stephen's prayer before he died: "Lay not this sin to their charge." That man was Saul of Tarsus. The same Holy Spirit who empowered Stephen to forgive worked in Saul's life to change his heart and make him one of the most influential Christians of all times. The Holy Spirit empowered Saul to become Paul the missionary. Paul worked as an ambassador of Christ to preach, to do miracles, and to write letters that the Holy Spirit used to bring many into the Kingdom of Christ. Paul's letters in the Bible are still being used by God today to train millions of Christians all over the world in the Way of Jesus. Yes, Stephen did share with Jesus suffering evil from others, but look at the way he died – the same way Jesus died – forgiving his enemies. Look at the glorious reward of that forgiveness – the forgiveness and transformation of Saul and millions more!

What will be our reward when we come before Jesus to have our works judged? Have we taken the forgiveness Jesus earned for us and invested it in others? Will we hear Jesus say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant"? (Matthew 25:23) Will we be co-heirs of his glory?

Let's look at some of the stories we have shared from the perspective of kingdom rewards. In Lesson 1, I shared with you the story of how the Holy Spirit helped me to forgive a coworker who had slandered me. Some months later I went to visit that same coworker. She said to me, "I want to tell you something I did today. It was not easy for me when I married my husband and became a stepmother to his teenage children. Sometimes I felt they resented me, and my husband did not always back me up when I tried to discipline them. But today I took out three pieces of paper and wrote down all the ways my husband and my stepchildren have offended me. I put these three pieces of paper in three clay pots and took them out behind the house. I dug three holes and buried those three pots." That was her way of forgiving the painful things they had done to her. I could tell a great burden had been lifted from her. From that point on she was free to joyfully love her husband and stepchildren.

God graciously allowed me to see a reward for my forgiveness even before the final judgment day. God specially planned for me to see that the forgiveness that the Holy Spirit and I had sown into her life had taken root and grown so that she, in turn, was empowered to forgive her husband and stepchildren! Years later, she called me by phone and thanked God for the ministry I was doing, the same work that she had so criticized before. God rewarded me with a blessing through the mouth of the same person who had before slandered me.

In Lesson 4 I told you about the vision of how the black cord of death the sorcerers sent to us to kill us became a life-giving umbilical cord. I told you how in a dream God branded one of those sorcerers on his forehead with a cross. The next day one of the men whom that branded sorcerer had been trying to curse helped him take that forgiveness from his forehead into his heart. Later that branded and forgiven sorcerer led other sorcerers to Christ.

Eventually, a top sorcerer, the one most respected in that cult, came to visit a leading Jesus follower. Even though our blessings had stopped this top sorcerer's curses from working, he was still resistant to the gospel. He went to a Jesus follower's home to poison him. The Jesus follower welcomed him warmly. But something about that Jesus follower made the sorcerer think again. The face of the Jesus follower was shining. As a Muslim, this leader knew that according to his Holy Book, on the Judgment Day some people will have shining faces. The Qur'an says, "But those whose faces will be (lit with) white, - they will be in (the light of) Allah's mercy: therein to dwell (for ever)." (Qur'an 3:107) But this Jesus follower's face was shining even before the final Judgment Day. So the sorcerer put his poison aside, and decided to learn from this Jesus follower the secret of his shining face. On learning that it was through Jesus the Messiah that one receives the mercy of God, this top sorcerer came to Jesus for the forgiveness of all his sins. This leader had taught others many rituals meant to gain the favor of God, but now he realized that all these rituals were worthless. He led others to Christ.

One of his friends later exclaimed, "Do you mean that this mercy that we have spent all our lives trying to attain is really God's free gift in Christ Jesus?" God was using the umbilical cord of our forgiveness and ongoing blessings to bring life to more and more sorcerers who previously had persecuted anyone who tried to become a Christian. Through sorcerers transformed by the Spirit of Jesus, our forgiveness and blessing were multiplying into the lives of thousands we had never met in countries we had never been to. What a glorious reward! We will spend eternity rejoicing in the presence of Jesus with those people who were snatched from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of shining light.

Even Isaiah in the Old Testament spoke of the choice we have when we are hurt by evil people. He prophesied during a time when the enemies of Israel were warring against them and taking them captive into foreign lands. Isaiah compared this time to a woman in labor pains. "As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, Lord." (Isaiah 26:17) But what did Israel give birth to? Isaiah continues, "We were with child, we writhed in labor, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth, and the people of the world have not come to life." (Isaiah 26:18) In times when others hurt us, we have a choice. We can complain to God, whine, and ask God to revenge. In so doing, we give birth to wind, making the world more dirty and stinky than it was before. Or we can forgive and bless, sharing the perfume of God's grace and working with God to get wicked people forgiven and born again!

In Lesson 5 we learned of how a group of Jesus followers forgave terrorists who in one attack had killed 23 of them and injured others. We learned how that forgiveness done in the name of Jesus went up the ranks of terrorists to affect a top terrorist leader. The Jesus follower whom that terrorist almost killed was the same one who six years later disciplined him in the Way of Jesus. In the past year this former terrorist and his wife have been leading one young terrorist after another out of terrorism into the Way of Jesus. This former terrorist leader has taken some of them to the police and soldiers to turn in their arms. This is happening in an area where young Muslims in Qur'anic schools are being actively recruited for terrorism.

Even some of the Muslim parents are now saying that they would rather have their sons become Christians than terrorists.

Remember the Muslim wise man in Lesson 1 who was afraid that the forgiveness of Christianity would just give his people license to sin more? If Jesus died for sins, then people would not fear the punishment of Muslim law. So they would sin even more. But when he learned that the Spirit of Jesus does more than wash sins away, he was amazed! Any spirit that could work inside people to make them want to keep God's laws would be much more effective than fear of punishment! From the testimonies of Jesus followers who were former Muslims, he learned that this Spirit of God not only created in people's hearts a desire to do good, but also gave them the power to do good! They gave him testimony after testimony of how by faith in Jesus they had received not only salvation from sin, but also the empowering to become righteous people before God and before men.

When this wise man went back to North Africa to teach this better way, many started joining him in following the Way of Jesus. Others from the northern part of his country heard that he was leading people out of Islam. They arrested him, bulldozed his house, and took him up north. They threatened him with death. But he replied, "You may kill me, but I'm warning you. My blood is already mixed with the blood of the Messiah. If this mixed blood spills into this land, everyone in this land will hear that Jesus is Savior and Lord." Angry at his refusal to give in to them, they did kill him, but years later the church the Holy Spirit started through him in North Africa is still growing.

In the Bible Paul talked about eternal rewards as crowns. Several times he talked about the people he had led to Christ as being his crown. Among those people were certainly former persecutors whom he had forgiven. "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes?" asks Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2. "Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy." (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20) One of Stephen's crowns will be Paul the missionary. The crown of those who forgave those terrorists who martyred their friends and relatives will include that top terrorist, who in turn led more converted terrorists into heaven.

Of course, the time to receive God's forgiveness in Christ, including Christ's forgiveness coming through us, will come to an end. At the final judgment, those who have not received God's forgiveness through Christ will join Satan in hell.

But some living today have never experienced the forgiveness of Christ coming through a Christian, let alone refused it. May there be no one who has offended us in any way who does not have an opportunity to experience God's forgiveness through us. May we never hinder the work of the Holy Spirit by damming up the waters of forgiveness he has flowed into us. May we never grieve the Holy Spirit by refusing to forgive, but rather bring him joy by continually flowing cleansing waters of forgiveness into others. May we never be unjust to Jesus by trying to hoard his forgiveness for ourselves and refusing to share it.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul talks of what we can do to bring God the Father great joy. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:17-20) One important step in this ministry of reconciliation we have been given by God is to not count people's sins against them, but



rather to forgive in the hope of what people can become through the new creation referred to in this ministry of reconciliation. We can forgive people with God's forgiveness so that they can repent. If God the Father throws a party in heaven for one sinner who repents, what more of thousands and millions! In fact, that party will continue for all eternity.

God has prepared glorious and eternal rewards for those who work with him in this glorious ministry of reconciliation. How about you? Are you taking the forgiveness God gives you in Christ and investing it in the lives of others? Will you receive multiple rewards when Jesus returns? Will you have any crowns on that day? Will you spend eternity in heaven with those you worked with the Holy Spirit to forgive?

Prayer: Father, thank you for forgiving us in Christ. Jesus, thank you for setting us an example on how to forgive. Holy Spirit, thank you for empowering us to forgive. We look forward to sharing with you the glory of many saved by grace for eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Activity: Write down what you feel is the greatest reward that forgiveness *in Christ* brings – for you, for Jesus, for others.

## **HELPING OTHER CHRISTIANS TO FORGIVE**

***Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.***

In the New Testament book of Philemon, we have a fascinating story of how one Christian helped another Christian to forgive.

Philemon was a well-off businessman in Colosse. One day he realized that one of his slaves had stolen something from him and had run away. No one could trace where he had gone. That would be today like an employee stealing something from his employer and crossing the borders with it! You can imagine how disappointed and angry Philemon must have been.

Far away from Colosse, that slave, named Onesimus, somehow met Paul and became a Christian through Paul's ministry while Paul was in chains. After his conversion, Onesimus was a great help to Paul in his ministry. When Paul learned that Onesimus had once been a slave of Philemon, he convinced Onesimus that going back to his master was the right thing to do.

But Paul also realized the giftedness of Onesimus and his potential as a free man and co-worker in the Kingdom. If possible, it would be great for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and release him for whatever work God had for him. But for this to happen, Paul knew that God would have to do a unique work in Philemon's heart. Roman law and custom said that any slave that ran away, especially after stealing from his master, should be sentenced to death.

Paul must have thought a lot about this situation. If Philemon had been an unbeliever, Paul could never have asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus. But Philemon was a Christian, someone who wanted to please God. Paul's co-workers had spoken well of him. After his

conversion, Philemon had opened up his home for the church in Colosse for holding their meetings. Philemon was very generous, and had refreshed the hearts of many believers. Paul, therefore, had hopes that the Holy Spirit would help Philemon to do the unthinkable – to forgive and bless a slave who had stolen from him.

But Paul also knew that Philemon needed help. This kind of forgiveness with a difference was not normal in Roman culture any more than it is in our culture today. So Paul wrote Philemon a letter, a letter that became part of the Bible. First, Paul greeted Philemon as a dear friend and coworker. Then Paul wrote out a prayer of blessing: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul knew that God would have to give Philemon grace and peace to receive what he was going to say later in this letter.

Paul next thanked God and commended Philemon for his generous hospitality that had encouraged so many believers. Again he wrote out for Philemon what he was praying for him: “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (Philemon 6) What an interesting prayer! What good things in Christ do we come to understand through sharing our faith? We will come back to how appropriate this prayer was later.

After commending Philemon, Paul appeals to him on behalf of his son, someone who had become his spiritual son-in-the-Lord through Paul’s ministry in chains. We can only wonder what Philemon must have thought when he read the name of that son – Onesimus, his slave, a son to Paul? Did Paul know what Onesimus had done? But in the very next sentence Paul showed he knew how useless Onesimus had been, how much he had offended Philemon and hurt him. But Paul quickly went on to say that Onesimus had changed to become a useful person. He was ministering to Paul in his imprisonment.

Paul went even further to write that he would have liked to have kept Onesimus near him to help him while he was in chains. In fact, he wrote that Onesimus and he had become one in heart, so much so that it was difficult for Paul to let him go.

But Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon because he did not want to force Philemon to do him a favor. He even wrote that perhaps the reason that Philemon and Onesimus had been separated for a while was so that Onesimus could come back to Philemon not as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.

What in the world gave Paul the hope that Philemon would even consider such a thing – accepting a runaway slave back as a brother? Remember Paul’s prayer earlier in this letter? “I pray that you, Philemon, may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (Philemon 6) One of the good things that happens when we share our faith is that we give the person a seed that the Holy Spirit can cause to grow until the person is completely transformed. This can happen even with people who have deeply offended us. Paul wanted to help Philemon to consider what a great change the Holy Spirit had made in the life of Onesimus. He appealed to Philemon to consider Onesimus even dearer to himself than Paul did, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord!

Knowing how shocking this would sound to Philemon, Paul wrote that if Philemon still considered himself Paul’s partner, he would welcome Onesimus just as he would welcome Paul himself.

We can almost see Philemon sputtering when he read that letter. “But, but...didn’t Paul know what Onesimus had done to him? How could Paul see such a man as ‘beloved’ and, of all things, his brother? Paul had really put Philemon in a fix. But what about justice? Onesimus had stolen from him.

Paul wrote about that too. Paul acknowledged that he knew how Onesimus had cheated Philemon. But then he wrote something surprising. “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back.”

And then Paul added, “Not to mention that you owe me your very self.” What did Paul mean by “not to mention”? Paul might have led Philemon to salvation in Christ, or perhaps one of Paul’s co-workers had. Or perhaps Philemon had been healed through Paul’s ministry from a life-threatening illness. We don’t know the details. But whatever Paul had done had saved Philemon’s life. What was Philemon’s life compared to whatever Onesimus had stolen from him?

So Paul asked Philemon to do him a favor and cheer his heart – in Christ. Paul went on to write that he was confident of Philemon’s “obedience.” Obedience to whom? Certainly Philemon knew by now that Paul was speaking on behalf of Christ. It was the Lord Jesus himself who said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.... if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back....Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:27, 30, 35-36)

Paul dared to ask Philemon to do this forgiveness in Christ because he knew it was the will of God. He knew that what he was asking of Philemon was what the Holy Spirit within him could empower him to do. In fact, he wrote that he had the confidence that the Holy Spirit would help Philemon to do even more than he was asking. He did not specify what that might be. He left that to the Holy Spirit to suggest to Philemon’s heart. Many times what the Holy Spirit does in the lives of those we appeal to is much more than we could ever imagine!

As he was about to round up his letter, Paul asked Philemon for one more thing: “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.” (Philemon 22) He knew that this request would be an extra motivation for Philemon to do what he had asked. Philemon would not want to explain to Paul, to whom he owed his very life, why he could not give life and freedom to someone dear to Paul. And Paul was sure that once Philemon agreed to obey, the Holy Spirit within him would make it possible for him to do that forgiveness with joy. That joy in obedience would be as much a surprise to Philemon as to Onesimus! Such an ability to forgive would show that he was indeed born again, with Christ in him, the hope of glory. (Col 1:27)

To make doubly sure that Philemon would receive that miraculous power to forgive, Paul ended his letter with a blessing: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” (Philemon 25) And it is interesting that the “your” here is plural. Paul expected Philemon to share this letter with the whole church in Colosse. Since the church met in Philemon’s house, they knew about how Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and run away. Onesimus had been hearing the gospel with the rest of them, but he had chosen not to believe. The whole church needed to know that sharing the Word of God with Onesimus had not been in vain. Even later in far distant Rome, God had used Paul to ripen a seed that the church had planted. And now Onesimus was coming back not as a criminal, but as a fellow brother in Christ.

This story is a remarkable example of how Paul helped one Christian to be reconciled with another. He did not take sides, one against the other. He rather encouraged both sides in Christ. On the one hand, he encouraged Onesimus that his sins were forgiven and that Paul himself was willing to help him repay what he had stolen, if necessary. On the other hand, he reminded Philemon that the debt that Onesimus owed him was little compared to the debt of being ransomed from hell unto eternal life!

By doing this, Paul also taught a new perspective on justice. As we read in 1 John 1, “If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and *just* and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) If we confess our sins, God is being just to whom? Certainly he is not being just to us. Justice to us would mean eternal death to a relationship with God, hell itself. So who is God being just to? Who has paid for those sins? Who has made atonement for them on the cross? It is Jesus! When we confess our sins, it is because of Jesus that God forgives us. He is being just to Jesus who died and atoned for those sins.

Sometimes we think we can forgive the sin someone has done against us, but justice still demands that they pay us for it. What if that was the way God forgave us? We have learned that we are to forgive each other as God *in Christ* has forgiven us.

There is something more important than that *we* get “justice.” As we have learned, our forgiveness in Christ will give a foothold for the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the one we are forgiving. As in the case of Philemon, his forgiveness would set Onesimus free to become a useful person in the Kingdom of Christ. Definitely, his forgiveness would encourage Onesimus to take the good news of the forgiveness of Christ coming through Philemon to others. The whole church at Colosse would give glory to God for his work in Onesimus’ life and be encouraged to do more forgiveness *in Christ* themselves.

If we do not forgive sins that anyone has done against us, we are being unjust to Jesus. It is as if we are saying, “Jesus, I know you died for all the sins of the world, but not for what they did to me. You hear?” Can you imagine saying that to Jesus face-to-face? But that in effect is what we are saying when we refuse to forgive the sins anyone has done to us. We are being unjust to Jesus. Jesus himself taught us a parable about someone who was forgiven much but refused to forgive his fellow servant. For such injustice, the judge turned him over to the torturers. Jesus concluded that parable by saying, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18:33) Jesus gave us this warning more than once. Right after Jesus taught his disciples what we call “The Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus warned us, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15)

This kind of forgiveness is the kind of forgiveness that the father gave the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable in Luke 15. The son had wasted the inheritance that his father had given him. But when he came back to his father, the father ran out to meet him, saying to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:22-24)

That was the kind of forgiveness that Paul would rejoice to see Philemon doing! After reading the letter, it would be great for Philemon to say to his household, “Quick! Let’s give Onesimus a new set of clothes. Someone go to the market and get some steaks to grill. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. Onesimus was dead and is alive again. He was lost and Paul the

Apostle and the Spirit of Jesus found him. He is now not just my slave come back, but also a beloved brother in Christ!”

It must have been these teachings of Jesus that Philemon remembered when he read Paul’s letter. But how considerate it was of Paul to write in the beginning of his letter to Philemon, “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love.” (8-9) Paul, in love, wrote and did all he could to help Philemon to forgive.

It seems Philemon did forgive Onesimus and perhaps even set him free for the work Jesus wanted Onesimus to do in his Kingdom. Some scholars believe this Onesimus later became Onesimus the bishop of the church of Ephesus. (from *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Helping others forgive is a recurring theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament in 1 Samuel 25 we have the story of how Abigail helped David to forgive. (1 Samuel 25:1-35) There was a time when David was so angry with someone who had insulted him that he took off with 400 armed men to kill that man. He even swore. “May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!” Anger had so blinded David that he went berserk with rage!

But then God sent a woman named Abigail to cool him down. Wisely, she sent food ahead of her. But she knew that food would not be enough. She went to meet David personally, courageously. She did not give in to the fear of what he was planning to do. He was coming to ruin the ranch that she was mistress of and to kill not only her husband, Nabal, but also all the ranch hands. Abigail knew that in his heart of hearts, David was a man of God. But at this point anger had drowned out the voice of the Holy Spirit in his life.

So the beautiful Abigail came to David humbly and graciously. Just as Paul had acknowledged the theft of Onesimus, Abigail acknowledged that her husband Nabal had done David wrong. She bowed down to David and asked for pardon and permission to speak. (24)

Then she spoke the words God had given her with full confidence in what the Spirit of God could do in David’s heart. Listen to her words: “Please forgive your servant’s presumption. The Lord your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the Lord’s battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live....When the Lord has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself.” (28, 30-31)

God did do his work in David’s heart. David said to Abigail, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands.” (32-33) Then David accepted from her hand the food she had brought him and blessed her, “Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request.” (35)

Thank God for the Abigails and the Pauls who help other believers to forgive. They do what Hebrews 12:15 urges all of us to do: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” We all have the privilege and responsibility to make sure no one misses out on the grace of God to forgive. Pointing out Bible verses that command forgiveness is not enough. Both Paul and Abigail did not come arrogantly, saying, “God commands you to forgive.” Rather, they came gently, winsomely,

persuasively, working with the Holy Spirit to encourage others to do the right thing. We, like Paul, need to pray for God to give others the grace to forgive. We need to appeal to them and trust the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts - empowering them to forgive in Christ.

Prayer: Lord, when we find it difficult to obey your command to forgive, bring to us friends like Abigail and Paul to help us to do so. Help us to listen to them. And help us to graciously, in the Spirit of Jesus, help others to forgive as well. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Activity: Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind the name of another Christian who needs help to forgive. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom on how to help him or her to get the understanding of God's will and the power to forgive whoever has wronged them. Then go and do what the Holy Spirit puts in your heart to do.