



Forgiven

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Preface

Too few people today know the joy and freedom forgiveness can bring. This small volume may make a big change for the better because it just might be one of the most practical books on the subject. That's because of the author—not because of his style of writing—but because of his style of living.

He lives what he believes and believes what he sees in the Bible and in the real world of experience. As a young man he made a phenomenal success in the unforgiving world of commercial construction. At the height of his financial success he left it all when God miraculously called him into the Gospel Ministry. In the corporate world he would be called a “turn-around-specialist,” but that also proved true with churches. By God's grace and Randy's work ethic dying churches became thriving centers, and many pastors invited him to bring that same spirit of revival and evangelism to their churches. In the process Randy learned to share the joy that filled his own need—how to receive and give forgiveness. This little book may help you find that same freedom and joy.

Glenn Aufderhar

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Forgiven

The pleasures of sin last only for a moment, then sin becomes agony. To carry a load of guilt that one has not dealt with is agony. To be forgiven, on the other hand, is to have peace.

Peter had no sooner voiced his betrayal, than the rooster shot its fiery dart deep into his heart. In agony and despair he bolted from the judgment hall, and didn't stop running until he was far into the night. Many people can only guess at how he felt. A few of us understand. That very same evening Judas cast the blood money at Caiaphas' feet. With the same agony and despair that Peter felt, he too charged into the night. But Judas didn't stop where Peter stopped. In his despair he found a rope and ended his life.

History is hard on Judas, much harder than on Peter. Did you ever wonder why? They both committed exactly the same sin. They both betrayed Jesus, and they both felt the same agony. The difference is that Peter's despair drove him to his knees, while Judas' drove him to suicide.

In case you haven't discovered it yet, the devil is not your friend. He will try to manipulate and twist circumstances in your life in an attempt to get you to deny the Lord. And then once you've fallen, he will heap on the guilt and despair hoping that you will take Judas' way out rather than Peter's.

Forgiveness is sweet. It's like a cool breeze on a hot day. It's like rain on parched ground. It's like the fragrance of orange blossoms in Escondido.

Sin is no stranger to any of us. Romans 3:23 says, "*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*" We are all in the same boat, only some of us haven't figured that out yet. We are all struggling with the same problems. None of us need to pretend that we are better than another. We are all on the same journey. We are all in need of the same forgiveness.

This book is about God's forgiveness. In it I will endeavor to share some of my own thoughts and struggles and concerns, as well as ideas from other Christian writers, in the hope that it will help some fellow sinner on the road to the kingdom. My desire is that each reader develop a new understanding and appreciation for God, as well as empathy for his fellow man.

Misconceptions concerning God

Probably our greatest misconception concerning God is the unconscious feeling we get that His forgiveness towards us is like our own human forgiveness for one another. Now it's true that He cannot forgive us if we refuse to forgive one another, but the notion that He forgives us in the same human way that we forgive each other is fictitious (thank goodness). Where do we get the idea that God's forgiveness is like human forgiveness? We have all struggled with this at one time or another. Many people go through their whole life never really able to hold their heads up because they struggle with feelings of failure. They constantly live with the feeling that they've really blown it; that God can't forgive them anymore; that they've gone too far. Where do we get this idea? I'm convinced that we develop this picture of God from our own inability to truly forgive ourselves (as well as one another). We think that God is like us. Because we struggle with forgiveness, we feel that God must struggle with forgiveness. But not only does this concept of God come from our own inability to forgive, it was also developed by watching our parents and other authority figures struggle with forgiveness while we were growing up.

1 John 4:8 tells us that God is love. God loves us in a way that few of us understand. We love conditionally. When someone disappoints us we withdraw our love. God, on the other hand, loves unconditionally. There's nothing that we can possibly do to make Him stop loving us. But because God is not here in tangible form, and because we do not experience His love face to face, we often credit Him with our own frail, human feelings. Thus when

we sin we begin to act and feel as if He is going to strike us dead at any moment. We behave as though He is going to treat us like we treat one another.

To express His love for us God could have turned up the volume on His heavenly stereo and played the tape over and over again that says, "I love you! I love you! I love you!" He could have, but that would have left things intangible. It was not enough for God to shout the words at us. The only way He could convince us was to send the Word (John 1) in tangible form to become one of us. If we want to understand God's love for us, we must look for evidence of that love in His Word. And remember, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

What is God really like?

God told us what He is really like in Luke 15. The Pharisees were murmuring because Jesus was eating with sinners, so Jesus turned to them and told them a parable about God's love for the sinner. Starting with verse 4 He said, *"What man of you having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it in his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost! I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance."*

Wow, what a story! Do you grasp the significance of what the Word (who cannot lie) has told us? He just told us that God and the angels celebrate every time a sinner repents. That's what God is really like! The shepherd (God) was happy to have ninety-nine church members who didn't need to repent. But He wasn't satisfied until He searched out and found that one disobedient, wayward member who couldn't find his way back. And when He found him all heaven rejoiced. Did you notice that it is God who takes the active role in salvation? Yes, it's God who searches us

out, rather than the other way around. We sin and then imagine that God turns His back on us. That He plays hide and seek with us (He hides and we seek). That he won't have anything to do with us until we resolve our own sin problem. But the truth is that we, like that lost sheep, are found by a searching God who celebrates when He finds us. That's a different view of God than most of us have grown up with, isn't it?

Jesus continues His description of God in verse 8, *“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost! Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* Once again we see that it is God who takes the initiative in searching for the sinner, represented in this case by the coin. And once He has found that sinner, He and the angels rejoice. You see no indication of anger or wrath associated with God's response toward our sinfulness.

Jesus continues His portrait of God in verse 11, *“A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me. So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living (some versions say “riotous living”). But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in the land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against*

heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.”

One might get the idea that these are three separate parables, when in reality it is one parable with three parts. Jesus pictured the sinner in three real life situations with God taking the initiative to look for him. In each story the one searching is God. In the first part of the parable, the sheep is lost and knows it is lost, but does not know its way home. Many today live under the burden of feeling they are lost, but not knowing what to do about it. God is actively working in their behalf. In the second part, the coin is lost but does not know it is lost (coins cannot think). Countless millions today are lost and never even think about it. God is actively seeking their attention. In the last part of the parable, the son knows he is lost, he knows he is sinning, and he knows his way home. In other words, this rascal was living in conscious rebellion. Now admit it, your first impulse is to throw this guy overboard (mine use to be). To one who is not able to empathize, this is a disgusting situation. But Jesus is telling us here in Luke 15 that even though the sinner lives in known sin, God (the boy's father) is waiting and watching with open arms to welcome him back home. And then once He has found him, *“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God...”*

Satan is the only one who benefits by our having a distorted view of God. He has spent eons perfecting his hideous picture of an angry, vengeful, unforgiving God and he has millions of people hating God because of it. I have had moments when I've listened to Satan and expected God to consume me. That's exactly what Satan wants me to believe. But the truth is that he (Satan) is the only one who wants to hurl lightning bolts my direction. Luke 15 gives us the picture of God that God Himself wants us to have. Friend, do not accept Satan's distortion of God. He's a liar (John 8:44). Look to Jesus' picture of God, and keep telling yourself that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

God cares for you

Many have wondered whether God cares for them, or if He even knows that they exist. Satan feeds these doubts in us in an attempt to give us low self esteem. Is there evidence that God cares for each and every one of us personally? Jesus painted another picture of God for us in Matthew 10:29, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will.”* Both Matthew and Luke emphasize the fact that not one of these little birds is forgotten by God. Think of it, there are trillions of little birds in the world, yet God is aware of each and every one of them.

Verse 30 continues, *“But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”* I have never met anyone who took so great an interest in himself as to count the number of hairs on his own head (or anyone else’s head for that matter). That is a number that changes each day for all of us, yet Jesus brought this up to illustrate just how intimate God wants to be with us.

Jesus continues in verse 31, *“Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”* Jesus is saying, “Do not be afraid! Don’t start feeling that I don’t care for you. If I know and care for each little bird, I surely notice and care for you, for you are more important to Me than all the sparrows in the world.”

I have two wonderful boys, and it has never crossed my mind to do something mean to them that would hurt them. Using this example of parental love, Jesus further emphasized God’s loving care for us in Matthew 7:9-11, *“What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him.”* 1 John 3:1 says, *“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God...”* Verse 2 says, *“Beloved, now we are children of God...”* That is God’s statement of who we are. Can our own opinion of who we are be more reliable than His?

Dick Winn wrote, “It is a principle that is so very obvious on the human plane; why do we obscure it on the divine plane? Read any book on family relationships and check what it says about how children become loving, confident, secure, patient people. Virtually all authors would agree. They must be loved securely, wisely, unconditionally, by their parents. Any parent who uses emotional distance as a form of punishment, who shatters the parent-child bond in the interest of the child’s present behavior, will only compound the problem. Ask a child to tell you the opposite of forgiveness; his answer in essence will be ‘condemnation.’ And condemnation stifles human growth.” Winn continues, “Is God less than man? Would He use methods to restore and mature us that are less effective than those used by a wise parent? Oh, that we could recognize how intensely we are loved. How powerfully that would make us whole again.” (Dick Winn, *His Healing Love*, page 43).

“God is fully aware of our humanness. He knows how weak we are—creatures of the dust. Compared to His great might, we are utterly weak and vulnerable. And the marvel of this contrast is that God is concerned about our every need. He stoops with compassion to treat us with gentle care. He knows how easily we crumble under pressure.” (William M. Fletcher, *The Second Greatest Commandment*, page 85).

In 1772, William Cowper learned just how much God cares for each and every one of us. Overcome with discouragement and despair, he put on his coat and walked out the door of his flat into the London night. The fog had settled in so heavily that he had to feel his way in the darkness for the iron horse’s head of the hitching post in front of his house. Then guided by the curb, he made his way to the corner where he knew a horse-drawn cab would be waiting. Entering the cab he ordered the driver to the Thames. In his despair there seemed no other way out but to jump from the bridge.

It should have taken only fifteen minutes to reach the bridge, but after an hour and a half of negotiating those dark, foggy streets, they both realized they were lost. In desperation William decided

he could find the bridge easier himself. But as he started walking, his arm struck a familiar object. It was the iron horse's head of the hitching post in front of his own home. He was so impressed with God's providence and care, that he climbed the stairs and knelt to ask forgiveness for what he had thought to do, and that night he wrote the words to a hymn we often sing in church—

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

William Cowper learned that night the wonders of God's care for a man in need. But thousands of others have learned it too. In 1931 a district in central China was reduced to famine. One Christian told the inhabitants of that area that God is a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God. He suggested that all of the people assemble daily to pray for rain. On the fourth day of intercession someone noticed dark rain clouds on the horizon. They watched as the clouds crossed their district and rained heavily. But it was not an ordinary rain. What was falling from the sky were little black seeds, and they were so abundant that they could be shoveled up. The seeds proved to be edible, and the supply was so great that it provided food for all of the people until the following harvest. It was found later that a tornado, originating in Mongolia, had wrecked the silos where these seeds

were stored. The seeds were carried aloft on the storm for fifteen hundred miles and dropped exactly on the very district where prayer needed to be answered.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

It is surprising the number of Christians who are caught in an inner struggle between what they think about God and what they feel about God. If you have the feeling that God does not care for you, it's because you've been listening to Satan's lie. Don't listen to him (that's easier said than done), and don't go by feelings. Satan can manipulate your feelings too easily. Go by the fact of the Word of God. God has told you that He cares for you. Accept Him at His word. Remember the bumper sticker that says, "God said it... I believe it... And that settles it!"

Committing religious murder

We just read God's description of what He is really like in Luke 15. Now if that is truly what God is like, why do so many of us perceive Him as angry, unforgiving, and uncaring? Our concept of God was first formed during our childhood years by our interaction with other people. It was formed by interacting with the authority figures in our lives. Now if we developed a misunderstanding of what God is really like from other people, is it possible that other people are still reinforcing those misconceptions today? Is it possible that we view God as harsh and unforgiving because of the way we are treated by other people when we do wrong? Sadly I believe this is the case. God is always ready and eager to forgive, and He wants us to have complete assurance of His forgiving love and acceptance. But there are things that we humans do to each other that inhibits that sense of forgiveness and well-being. I feel

that I must talk about some of the those things right now. It is frightening to think that our actions can actually short circuit someone else's ability to feel forgiven and accepted by God.

Dick Winn tells the story of a young man who had fallen into sin. He had been lovingly disciplined by his pastor and rebaptized. Many years passed and he transferred to another congregation, but in this new church there were members who remembered what he had done many years before. They took the attitude that sin must be taken seriously, they disciplined him again, and no one has seen or heard from him since. And situations like this beg the question, "Is it possible for one person to know the heart condition, or the level of repentance, of another person?" God is the only One who can read the heart, and yet we often marginalize someone for something that may have happened decades ago. These members felt that to lovingly accept this man was to condone his failure from years before. To be effective, discipline must be redemptive. Redemptive nurture should be the aim of every church body. Sadly, this congregation did not realize just how serious their responsibility to this man was. Pastor Jerry Cook, in his book *Love, Acceptance, and Forgiveness*, page 98, wrote, "Nothing can tear up a fellowship quicker than a spreading spirit of criticism. And nothing is more antipathetic to love, acceptance and forgiveness. The two attitudes cannot coexist."

A very inspirational writer once wrote, "The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature." (*Steps to Christ*, page 64). It only stands to reason that the one guilty of committing religious murder is not drawing closer to Jesus. Oh, if we could only see ourselves as we really are, and then see God as He really is, it would humble us and we would never be involved in religious murder again.

Catherine Marshall wrote, "Forgiveness is releasing another from your own personal judgment." Jesus said in Matthew 7:1, "*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it*

will be measured back to you.” Romans 2:1 says, “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.” Romans 14:13 says, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in your brother’s way.” John 5:22 tells us that the Father has committed all judgment to the Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we judge another, whether it be his motives or his past track record, we put ourselves in the place of Christ. That is the exact same thing for which Lucifer was thrown out of heaven.

There are times when confrontation is necessary. But unless we can confront sin without destroying the sinner’s self-respect, it would be better if we held our peace. You do not have to tell someone who is covered with hives that they are going to itch. They already know that. Likewise, you do not have to go to someone who is struggling under remorse and guilt and remind them of their failures. After all, Satan reminds them of those same failures every day. Confrontation for the purpose of personal gain is wrong. Confrontation for the purpose of manipulating the outcome is criminal. Confrontation for the purpose of embarrassment is Satanic! David Augsburg, in his book *Caring Enough To Confront*, page 75, wrote, “Confrontation which places blame contains within itself the source of its own dysfunction... Confrontation which probes for shame possesses within itself the guarantee of its own defeat.” When confrontation is necessary, one had better read Matthew 18:15 very carefully before proceeding, and then pray earnestly that not the slightest trace of hypocrisy or condescension be detected by the erring party. If one cannot do this he had better go back to his knees and stay there until he can. Lloyd John Ogilvie, in his book, *God’s Best For My Life*, wrote, “Whenever our judgment depreciates another human being, it is wrong... The sin of negative judgment, in God’s eyes, is larger than the sin in the person we criticize.”

“Most pitiable is the condition of him who is suffering under remorse; he is stunned, staggering, sinking into the dust. He can see nothing clearly. The mind is beclouded, he knows not what

step to take. Many a poor soul is misunderstood, unappreciated, full of distress and agony, a lost straying sheep. He cannot find God, yet he has an intense longing for pardon and peace. O, let no word be spoken to cause deeper pain." (*The Ministry of Healing*, page 168). When we hear of someone else's failures, we need to take those failures to the foot of the cross and bury them there. Bury them in the blood-soaked ground at Jesus' feet and never speak of them to another person. By sorting through the details of another person's life, we only deepen their pain. Jesus' way was to heal the pain, never to prolong it.

When someone has gone through a painful experience, they need a safe place where they can begin to heal. That safety zone must include the church. It has often been said that the church is a hospital for sinners. A hospital is a place where sick or injured people go to get well. For the sinner to be attacked in church is equivalent to an injured person being shot by the hospital staff as he enters the emergency room for help. If the wounded person cannot find safety in the church, you can bet he will look for it somewhere else.

Put the fire out

It is almost impossible to be part of a church family without rubbing shoulders with the church gossips. These are people who thrive on knowing everything about everyone. And there is nothing sacred or private to a gossip. A secret is something they tell only one person at a time. Gossip probably does more than anything else to cause the victim to feel unforgiven and unaccepted by God.

Just think of the mental energy that is wasted in trying to keep up with everyone else's problems. Just think of the trouble that is caused when that information is passed on to those who have no business knowing it. Just think of the good that could be done if all that energy were directed toward something positive and up-lifting. I have no desire to ever know the bad things about another person. I have enough stress worrying about my own

problems. Just think for a moment how it must hurt God to watch one sinner passing judgment on another sinner.

We have “all been gossips” at some point in our lives. We have all said things to other people that we should not have said. We have all passed on information (and most of it was probably incorrect) that we should have kept to ourselves. God has some good counsel for us all in Proverbs 26:20. It reads, “*Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.*”

A few years ago I had the privilege of attending a Christian Leadership Conference. One exercise our group participated in showed us just how much a story can change when it is passed from person to person. Ten people were taken from the large group and isolated in a small room. Then a two paragraph story was read aloud to the large group. One person from the large group was picked at random and asked to meet one person from the isolated group in the hall, and repeat the story from memory. The person from the isolated group, who had just heard the story for the first time in the hall, then returned to the large group and repeated in front of everyone what he had just heard in the hallway. He was then ushered back out to the hall to repeat the story again to a second person from the isolated group. This second person then told what he had just heard to the large group, and so on. This was repeated until the story had passed through all ten people. It was amazing how much that story changed in the hallway as it was passed from one person to another. By the third person the story was not even recognizable anymore. By the tenth person everyone was holding their sides with laughter.

It was funny to see that story change in that seminar, but in real life, it's not funny at all. Many people have been damaged for life by gossip passing from one person to another. When we gossip about someone, we become directly responsible for what we pass on. In Matthew 12:36 Jesus said, “*I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” Theodore Epp said, “Not only is it wrong to murder a

person, but it is just as wrong to murder the character of a person. How the Lord must be grieved that so much of this is done, even by Christians.”

Catherine Marshall, in her book *A Closer Walk*, wrote, “When we rejoice over, or look for, or repeat with relish negative news, then we have placed ourselves on the side of evil. It is possible to take this negative stance so often with regard to situations and persons that this becomes a way of life. Negative thinking is really a weapon of Satan.” Dr. Theodore Rubin says that gossip is the means by which the gossipier “vents his or her own pent-up anger.” He says it enables the emotionally dysfunctional person to “feel powerful and superior.”

The power of suggestion is so very, very strong. I remember a ridiculous story that went around about one of the girls when I was in grade school. It was a stupid, senseless, story that started as a prank. I remember that most of our sixth grade class took pleasure in repeating this story and teasing this person whenever she was around. The thing that stands out most in my mind today is that everyone in school knew that this story was a joke, and that it was not true. Years later we all graduated from high school and went our separate ways. Recently I bumped into this girl at a church campmeeting, and what do you think my first thought was when I saw her? You’re right! It was that stupid story from many years before. The power of suggestion works the same way with gossip. When you become aware of someone else’s failures, either past or present, do not yield to the temptation of suggesting those failures to another single person. After all, the details of what you heard may not even be true, and when you pass it on it is registered in that person’s brain forever, and the cycle of damage is perpetuated every time they repeat it. When you hear of scandal, nip it in the bud by keeping it to yourself (and tell the person who talked to you to do the same).

When gossip occurs, one of the ingredients that most often seems to be present is anger or disgust toward the person being talked about. Anger over someone else’s failures indicates that the person exhibiting the anger has never come to terms with his or

her own sinfulness. Mike Wallace told the story on *60 Minutes* about Yehiel Dinur, a Jewish man who had been confined to a death camp during World War II. Dinur appeared in an Israeli courtroom to testify against his captor, the Nazi Leader Adolf Eichmann, who was accused of being a Nazi butcher. Over the years Dinur had built up such hatred for Eichmann that he was completely obsessed with revenge. But when he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, Dinur began to cry and fell to the floor. It was not his hatred or his fear of Eichmann that overcame him, but rather it was his sudden realization that Eichmann was an ordinary man just like himself. Dinur said, "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am exactly like he!" He realized that his own anger made him exactly like Eichmann. Mike Wallace summed up the story by saying, "Eichmann is in all of us."

"If we are ever going to experience true repentance, we must all recognize that the potential exists within each and every one of us to commit the most terrible sins possible. We are *all* capable of the very same sins that we criticize in others. We are *all* only a heartbeat or a breath away from the same fallen condition that we condemn in another person. True repentance will lead us to humble ourselves before God and admit that we too have the same carnal nature that we condemn in someone else. The admission before God that there is a power within us that drives us on to sin and rebellion against Him will lead us to deal more kindly and redemptively with our brothers and sisters. When one of them sins, we will realize that the potential exists within us to do the very same thing, for we too are children of Adam." (Neal C. Wilson, *Ministry Magazine*, July, 1990, page 13).

I have had church members in the past who talk about all the latest church gossip at the kitchen table in front of their children. It reminds me of a story I read recently about an Israeli Brigadier General stationed in the Gaza Strip. He said, "I was walking down a street and I saw this little boy—I think he was a boy—he wasn't much more than one year old. He had just learned to walk. He had a stone in his hand. He could barely hold on to it, but he was walking around with a stone to throw at someone. I looked at him

and he looked at me, and I smiled and he dropped the stone...” Reflecting on this incident, the General continued, “For that little kid, anger is a part of his life, a part of growing up—as much as talking or eating... He knew he was supposed to throw a stone at someone.” (Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, page 374). Is it any wonder that the Bible says the sins of the parents will be on the children to the third and fourth generation. Wouldn't it be nice if all of us sinners could break that chain of destruction right now? Wouldn't it be nice if we could all put the fire of gossip out by not throwing any more wood on the pile?

Proverbs 26:22 says, “*The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.*” When you are tempted to gossip, or to listen to gossip, put yourself in the shoes of the victim. Try to feel their feelings, think their thoughts, experience their pain. Try to remember that you could be contributing to their inability to feel forgiven by God. If you do this, chances are you will not say what you were going to say. Proverbs 11:13 says, “*A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.*” Gossip is not the unpardonable sin. It can be forgiven by God just like any other sin when it is confessed and forsaken.

How Jesus treated the sinner

“All of us are damaged by our passage through this life. Some are devastated. Only very tangible evidence of God's love can bring these wounded souls back from despair. But God has a plan to do just this. It includes all of us who have come to know and trust Him. Jesus showed us how. He lived God's life in very real and reachable ways right in the middle of a very damaged people. He cared, He listened, and He touched them. He cried, and I believe He laughed, warm, genuine laughter of someone who enjoys another person and delights in him. He was honest and straight forward about the problems of life. People were always more important than their current decisions. Hearts were warmed, hopes renewed. Some even dared to believe that

their past life need not hinder them in their future successes and acceptance.” (Dick Winn, *His Healing Love*, page 14).

The apostle John tells a story that shows us how Jesus deals with those who fall into sin. John 8:3 says, *“The scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say? This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first. And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you? She said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said to her, Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”*

Try and visualize this situation with me. This woman was caught in the very act. In awful humiliation she was dragged down the public street (the same thing we do when we gossip) and tossed in the dust at Jesus’ feet. Many people live under the false assumption that the only way that God can relate to deliberate sin is through rejection. This false assumption assumes that God’s rejection of the sinner is His way of punishing their sin (so we reject them as well); that if God did not reject the sinner, He would not be dealing adequately with sin. God knows better than anyone that condemnation inhibits growth. If we could only realize that God is not in the condemning business, our struggle would be over.

We can communicate the fact that sin is wrong without a harsh, angry look on our face. If as Christians we could learn to deal with sin compassionately, we would be able to help the offender feel hope in a restored relationship with both Jesus and the church. But most often we leave them feeling that it’s not only

the church who doesn't want them, but God as well. This woman became one of Jesus' most trusted followers after this incident took place. Why do you think that was? Was it because He showed stern, harsh, firmness when He addressed her? No, because He did none of those things. She became His disciple because there was nothing in His voice or body language that even hinted of rejection. Jesus was the only one in that group who was without sin. He was the only one who had a right to throw a stone. But He also knows that throwing stones at people will only drive them away. His purpose in coming to this world was to restore our relationship with Him, not to destroy it.

This adulterous woman is probably the best example we have of how Jesus deals with those in need of forgiveness. But this is not the only example we have. We also have the example of how He treated Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7, the woman at the well in John 4, Zacchaeus in Luke 19, and Peter in John 21. Never did He condemn them for their sins, but lovingly brought them to repentance by His kindness. Never did He expose them to the ridicule of the world. Never did He make them feel small or worthless, but rather He gave them something to live for. He gave them new meaning and direction to their lives. And I can just hear Him say to us today, "Go thou and do likewise."

The more I study these stories, the more impressed I am with Jesus' method of dealing with the sinner. Let's consider the woman at the well for a moment. Jesus, a male Jew, speaks to a woman who was a Samaritan. This was unheard of in His day, and within minutes He began revealing to her all the sordid details of her checkered life. A Pharisee would cringe at her track record. She had had five husbands and was currently working on her sixth. We often get the idea that she ran to town and called all of her friends to come and listen to Jesus because He revealed all the details of her life. Wrong! It's not just that He knew those details that impressed her, but rather it is what He did with those details that touched her heart and made her want to follow Him. It was the forgiveness, acceptance, and lack of condemnation in His voice and body language that drew her to Him. If that approach worked

back then, it's only reasonable to believe that it will work today.

Pause right here for a moment and do a little self inventory. Think back to how you have thought about, or treated someone in a similar circumstance. Was your reaction like that of Jesus, or did the inner pharisee in you rise to the surface? I must be honest and say that I have miserably failed on many occasions. I have done Satan's work for him many times. My cry today is, God help me in the future!

Creating an atmosphere for healing

Our concept of God is made up of composite mental pictures which come to us in various ways. Chief among those things which contribute to our concept of God are interpersonal relationships and life experiences. Children who are treated badly by parents and peers often develop a poor concept of their relationship with God. Likewise, if the sinner is rejected and scorned by us, he can feel that he is rejected and scorned by God. This often leads to a vicious cycle of trying to please an "unpleasable" God.

David A. Seaman's, in his book, *Healing of Memories*, page 56 says, "Most of the fears and anxieties which keep people from opening up are caused by pain from unhealthy interpersonal relationships... The memories of these relationships go far back in their lives, perhaps even before birth. These people learned a whole language of harmful relationships even before they learned to speak. It is essential that they now learn a new language of helpful relationships. But to learn it, they must first hear it spoken by us. That is why the people who make up the church play such an important part in the healing process. Supportive Christians need to surround struggling and suffering persons with an atmosphere of understanding and love."

Such gentle caring is the responsibility of every Christian. William M. Fletcher, in his book *The Second Greatest Commandment*, page 85, wrote, "Paul issues this challenge to the Church. In Galatians 6:1 he says, '*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you*

who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering your own self, lest you also be tempted.' Paul wrote this to an entire church, not just to pastors. It suggests that a church should be comprised of people who are sensitive to each other's needs and ready to offer support." Fletcher continues, "Superior attitudes do not belong here, for each is subject to the same temptations. Therefore, Paul writes, we are to *'bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.'*"

Paul Welter, professor of counseling at Kearney State College likens the fallen sinner to an accident victim. He carries this medical analogy further by saying that the church needs to be ready to respond to the "scene of the accident" and administer "first aid." He says we need to learn to "get out of ourselves and get genuinely involved and interested in others." When we as Christians begin to understand our role here on earth, we truly will become a "Caring Church."

The Bible says that "God is love." The hurting world has heard of the love of God as taught in Scripture and preached from our pulpits. What they need, however, is the living example of this love in action. The pastor may preach healing, redemptive sermons, but unless the attitudes of the members in the church radiate the same kind of redemptive acceptance, there will never be the necessary climate for healing. Some hurting people are like the little girl who awoke in terror several times during the night from a recurring nightmare. Her mother hurried to her side each time to comfort and reassure her. Each time she quietly shared Bible verses with the child and prayed with her, yet the little girl's fear persisted. She just didn't want her mother to leave her side. Finally, in desperation, the mother said, "But honey, Jesus is with you." "Yes I know," the child answered, tears streaming down her face, "but I need someone with skin on!" This is the cry of many a hurting person. They need a fellow human who cares and is there. They need a fellow human who cares and will not judge them. When people "out there" do not seem to care, there tends to be doubts about "up there" as well.

"While we are all very sensitive to the least blame in

regard to our own course, most of us are too severe in dealing with those whom we suppose to be in error. No one was ever reclaimed from sin by censure and reproach; rather they are driven further from the right path and led to harden their hearts against the conviction of the Holy Spirit. A spirit of kindness; a spirit of empathy; a spirit of Christian love could save the erring brother and sister and restore them to a right standing with God.” (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 519). When someone falls into sin, we often focus on the symptom rather than the cure. We focus on the behavior rather than the remedy. And by doing so we are revealing our own unhealthy concept of God. We are revealing our own spiritual dysfunction. When we react to the sinner by attacking the symptom, our behavior only serves to drive that person further underground. When we unload on a person who is already overloaded, we bear the responsibility for tripping their spiritual “circuit breaker.”

“When one at fault becomes conscious of his error, be careful not to destroy his self-respect. Do not discourage him by indifference or distrust. Do not say, Before giving him my confidence, I will wait to see whether he will hold out. Often this very distrust causes the tempted one to stumble... We need to put ourselves in the place of the tempted ones.” (*The Ministry of Healing*, page 167).

“No matter how ‘lovable’ you may seem, the world is quick to discern the touch of condescension. Nothing turns them off faster than condescension, and nothing makes it harder to reach them afterward, even if later they contact the genuine. If you cannot minister life through the reality of God’s love abiding within, for His sake, do not through hypocrisy minister death.” (Florence Bulle, *Lord of the Valleys*, page 68).

“To help another person feel forgiven by God, you and I must treat that person in a forgiving manner. Our motto must be, If you come around here, we’re going to love you. No matter who you are or what you’ve done... The minimal guarantee we must make to people is that they will be loved—always, under every circumstance, with no exception. The second guarantee is that

they will be totally accepted, without reservation. The third thing we must guarantee people is that no matter how miserably they fail or how blatantly they sin, unreserved forgiveness is theirs for the asking with no bitter taste left in anybody's mouth." (Jerry Cook, *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*, page 11).

Peter's lesson on forgiveness

In Matthew 18:21 Peter came to Jesus asking, "*Lord how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?*" The Rabbis limited forgiveness to three offenses, but Peter, trying to appear generous, doubled that figure and added one. Jesus replied in verse 22, "*I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.*" I'm sure that Jesus' words were a little hard for Peter to swallow at first, and knowing this, Jesus told a parable that illustrates the true nature of forgiveness. This parable shows the difference between the way God forgives us and the way we often forgive one another.

Jesus' parable begins in Matthew 18:23, "*Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all. Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.*"

In the New Testament one talent weighed about 75 pounds, which was equivalent in weight to 6000 denarii (a standard silver coin used by the Romans who were ruling Israel at the time). In the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20), one denarius was the amount of a day's wages. A working man in Christ's day would have to work 6 days a week for 20 years to earn one talent, or 6000 denarii. But we are not dealing with one talent here. In the parable Jesus said the man owed *ten thousand* talents. This made

the debt the servant owed equivalent to *sixty million* day's wages, which is an astronomical amount of money. In making the debt so ridiculously high, Jesus was showing that man's debt to God can never be repaid by human means. Man must accept God's forgiveness for the debt to be commuted. But now let's continue with our parable.

Verse 28 says, *“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what you owe! So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.”* Compared to sixty million denarii, one hundred denarii was a very small debt. The first servant violated the compassion that was shown to him. He had no true conception of the greatness of his own debt. He did not realize his own helplessness. His heart was not broken and humbled on account of his own sins.

We are often blinded to the greatness of our debt to God. We seldom appreciate the mercy that is shown to us, and we show that lack of appreciation by our treatment of our fellow man. In Luke 7, Jesus was having supper at Simon the Pharisee's house. As they were eating a woman of the street came in and washed Jesus' feet with perfume. Simon was disgusted because Jesus let a sinner touch Him, so Jesus, reading his mind, told another parable. In Luke 7:41 Jesus said to Simon, *“There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more? Simon answered and said, I suppose the one whom he forgave more. And He said to him, You have rightly judged.”*

The contrast between *ten thousand* talents and 100 denarii is *six hundred thousand* to one. Our own debt to God is infinitely greater than that. When you are tempted to feel unforgiving toward your fellow man, remember, his debt to you is insignificant compared to the debt God has forgiven you for. Remember that if you harbor an unforgiving spirit toward him, you cancel out your own forgiveness.

Probably the greatest obstacle to forgiveness that most of us struggle with is attributing our own fallen human feelings to God. When someone wrongs us, we often make it difficult for him to feel forgiven. We figuratively seize him by the throat, and because we do this to one another, we assume that God does the same to us. In order to really feel forgiven, we must take God at His word, and realize that He does not operate on our fallen human system. Isaiah 55:8 says, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”*

Peter came to Jesus and asked, *“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?”* The defect in Peter’s question was that it implied a legalistic, mechanical kind of forgiveness. Jesus’ answer to Peter was that man should strive to forgive like God forgives, because God’s forgiveness is not legalistic or mechanical at all.

God, justice, and forgiveness

The main purpose of this book is to deal with God’s forgiveness toward us. Our own treatment of one another has occupied much of our attention, because those relationships always affect one’s ability to process God’s forgiveness. It’s time to refocus back on God’s forgiveness again.

Many people have wondered why others must suffer for Adam’s sin. They ask, *“If only one man sinned, why do all people have to suffer?”* Let me see if I can answer that question for you. At creation Adam was created sinless (Genesis 2). But after he sinned things changed, and that change could not help but affect his offspring. As partakers of his mind and body, you and I had to be affected by what affected him. Romans 5:19 says, *“For by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners...”*

God created our first parents (and us) with the power of choice. They could choose to obey God, or they could choose to

disobey. Learning to exercise proper choice is an important part of the development of every child. Learning to be consistent is just as important to the role of the parent. God told Adam that if he sinned, the natural consequence of that choice would be death, and we all know the choice our first parents made. From the moment that sin became a fixed fact, every human being who would ever live would become subject to the effects of sin, and to the natural consequences for sin. Immediately after Adam sinned, and before the death penalty was carried out, God introduced the plan of salvation. Revelation 13:8 calls Christ the “*Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*”

At this point the thought may be going through your mind, “God’s justice demands death. We are all sinners. How can God uphold His justice, and still offer us forgiveness at the same time?”

God met this dilemma in a very simple way. He would let all mankind live their limited lives and then die, regardless of whether they did good or whether they did evil. The first death would take care of the hereditary consequences for Adam’s fall. 1 Corinthians 15:22 says, “*For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*” Then at the end of the world, God will raise all men from that first death, into which they fell through no fault of their own. They will then stand before God in the judgment to answer for their own personal sins for which they are responsible. If in the judgment they are found forgiven, they will spend eternity with the Lord. But, if in the judgment they are found guilty, they will then die the second death (Revelation 21:8), which will be the consequences for their own life of unconfessed sin.

Genesis 5:5 tells us that Adam died. Adam died because he ate of the forbidden tree, not because of any sin he committed after he ate of the tree. But if in the judgment he is found guilty, it will not be because he ate of the tree. If he is found guilty in the judgment it will be because of other sins that he committed, after he ate of the tree, that were not repented of and confessed. (You may have to read that more than once). God allows all men to die the first death, whether their life was good or evil, so that at the judgment they can

be placed beyond the effects of Adam's sin. This is the only way that man can be judged on the basis of his own sins, and not Adam's.

The second Adam

1 Corinthians 15 calls Christ the second Adam. Verse 45 says, "*The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*" Verse 47 says, "*The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven.*" Why does the Bible call Christ the second Adam?

Jesus came to this earth, took humanity on Himself, and stood in our place as our representative. He did this to show, in the controversy with Satan, that man, as God created him, could obey God's will. He did this to show that man did not have to fall into sin. One very inspired writer once wrote, "Christ is called the second Adam. He began where the first Adam began. Willingly He passed over the ground where the first Adam fell, and redeemed Adam's failure." (*Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, page 253). Jesus defeated Satan on the same ground over which, in Eden, Satan obtained the victory over Adam. This is why Jesus is called the second Adam in the Bible.

Jesus came to this earth to redeem Adam's fall. Romans 5:19 says, "*For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also, by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.*" But He didn't stop with redeeming Adam's fall. He also became the substitute for the entire human race, by taking our death penalty upon Himself. Hebrews 2:9 says, "*...He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.*" He did not change Adam's first death penalty, but He did abolish the second death for anyone who will accept Him as their Saviour.

Here is a story that should give us a tiny glimpse of what Jesus has done for the entire human race. In August of 1977, John Ervingham, a journalist working in Laos, was expelled by the Communists. He was engaged to marry a national from that country by the name of Keo. For ten months John carefully

planned how he would rescue Keo. On May 27, 1978 he set out on his mission. Outfitted with face mask, fins and scuba equipment with two breathing devices, he plunged into the rain-swollen Mekong River. The water was murky and visibility was zero. The only means of navigation was a compass attached to his face mask. He battled swirling currents, crawling along the muddy bottom where he was occasionally tossed about by whirlpools. When he surfaced he discovered that he had underestimated the current. He was still several hundred feet off shore and being carried past the spot where Keo was waiting. Exhausted, John swam back to the Thailand side of the river. On his next attempt, he entered the river further upstream. Let me quote him at this point. "I made it, and crawled out on the bank. Keo seemed to have given up and was dejectedly walking away in the distance. I yelled at the top of my lungs. She turned and saw me and, running forward, fell into my arms." Keo had never learned to swim so John put a slightly inflated life vest around her neck and one of the breathing regulators in her mouth. With their faces just at the surface, John pushed hard into the water. After a long, desperate struggle they made it to safety. (David A. Seaman's, *Healing of Memories*, page 49).

John's story illustrates what Jesus has done for us. It illustrates God's identification with us in our terrible human predicament. God is not a God who stands back unwilling to get involved with us. But rather He is a God who loves us so much that He was willing to plunge into the murky waters of this human life and be identified with us in every way. That's what the Bible means when it says that Jesus became the second Adam.

How does the cross provide forgiveness?

How does Jesus' death make it possible for Him to forgive? What does His dying have to do with His forgiving? These are age old questions that have been asked in every generation since the cross.

To understand the cross and forgiveness, one must understand a very important principle first. That principle states that *forgiveness is rooted in substitution*. Whoever forgives another person must actually substitute himself for the one he forgives. This does not come naturally. The human reaction to being hurt is anger, bitterness, and revenge. As sinful human beings we resist the thought of forgiving someone who has hurt us. Yet through prayer and a relationship with Jesus we can experience that forgiving peace. Jesus said, “*pray for your enemies*,” and “*pray for those who despitefully use you*.” He said this because He knew that the greatest change would come to us who are doing the praying. Forgiveness is a special gift that God is just waiting to give those who ask. Let’s get back to our principle again, *forgiveness is rooted in substitution*. Whoever forgives another person must actually substitute himself for the one he forgives. An example will make this easier to understand. If you hit me, justice demands that you be hit back (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). I could exercise my human feeling of revenge and hit you back, or I could choose to forgive you. If I choose to forgive, I must be willing to suffer the pain of your blow in order to forgive you. In other words, I suffer your wrong. *Forgiveness is rooted in substitution*.

Let’s look at another example. If you owe me money and can’t pay, justice demands that the courts force payment. But if I choose to forgive the debt, I must be prepared to suffer the loss of the money in order to forgive you. In other words, I suffer your wrong. Are you beginning to get the picture? *Forgiveness is rooted in substitution*. Justice says, “*You did wrong, you suffer*.” Forgiveness says, “*You did wrong, but I will bear that wrong so that I can help restore you through forgiveness*.” If the state pardons a debt, society bears the burden of that debt. If I break your priceless heirloom and you forgive, you must bear the loss. James Buswell wrote, “No one ever really forgives another, except he bears the penalty of the other’s sin against him.”

I have mentioned the word “empathy” a number of times in this book. To empathize with another person is to have the ability to vicariously experience the feelings, thoughts, emotions,

and attitudes of that person. It is the ability to put yourself in his place, or shall we say, to walk in his shoes. Thomas Dubai, in his book, *Caring: A Biblical Theology of Community*, page 53, says that empathy is “to jump into the other’s skin. It is to become the other in mind and heart, to live the other’s interests.” In order to truly forgive another person, one has to be able to empathize with the situation that other person is in. Empathy is the very heart and soul of forgiveness. That’s what is meant by forgiveness being rooted in substitution. The Indians have a saying, “Don’t Judge a man until you have walked in his moccasins.” You will find it a lot easier to be forgiving when you substitute yourself for the one you feel unforgiving towards.

What does any of this have to do with Jesus dying? Well, let’s just look at the very best example of this substitution principle yet. Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. Romans 3:23 tells me that I am a sinner. Sin hurts God. Sin is an attack on the character of God. Justice demands that I die, but Jesus has chosen to forgive me. But in order to forgive me, Jesus must be willing to bear the same punishment that the broken law would demand of me. He must be willing to die in my place. Is it making sense now? *Forgiveness is rooted in substitution.* Jesus suffered my death penalty so that He can freely forgive me.

Isaiah 53:4-6 says, “*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisements of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes [flogging] we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*”

God understood the substitution principle all along. He understood that without a substitute, I would always doubt His forgiveness. That is the ultimate act of love. The first text I memorized as a child was John 3:16. It reads, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*” Verse 17 continues, “*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*”

As white as snow

Isaiah 1:18 says, *“Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord, Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* How can I know that I have been forgiven? How can I know that my sinful heart has been washed as white as snow? 1 John 1:9 is a familiar text to most of us. It reads, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* The only condition to receiving this cleansing is repentance. True repentance means to have a sorrow for sin, and to be *willing* to turn from sin. It is just that pure and simple. Do not try to make it difficult. God has placed forgiveness within easy reach of every single human being no matter what he has done in the past. Forgiveness is there for you regardless of how low you have fallen, or how many times you have fallen.

Do you recognize yourself as a sinner? If so, you also know that you cannot atone for your past life of sin. You cannot change your heart. You cannot make yourself holy. Isaiah 64:6 says, *“But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.”* You cannot change your sinful heart. You cannot, by your own power, make yourself stop sinning. And what should comfort you is to learn that you are not expected to do this by yourself. God has promised to do this for you through Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...”* You confess your sins, and commit yourself to God. You give your will to Him. And just as surely as you do your part, He will do His part and supply the forgiveness and the cleansing. A continual, day by day experience like this with Jesus, of confession and surrender of the will, causes one’s heart and desires to be completely transformed. If by faith you believe the promise, He supplies the fact, and *“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”* (Romans 8:1).

Once you have experienced true repentance, do not wait until you *feel* that you are made whole. By faith say, “I believe it; it is so, not because I *feel* it, but because God has promised it.”

Repentance means to have sorrow for sin, and to be *willing* to turn from sin. I once thought that sorrow for sin meant promising God that I would never do it again. And then when I did it again I felt even more lost than before because I couldn't keep my promise. Victory over sin is not achieved by focusing on one's behavior. Victory is gained by looking past the behavior and focusing on our relationship with Jesus. Once the relationship improves, the behavior takes care of itself. Sorrow for sin is not promises of better behavior. Sorrow for sin is not doing penance or counting beads. Sorrow for sin is not going on some long pilgrimage. Sorrow for sin is not exposing one's dirty laundry to the world. Sorrow for sin is a broken, contrite spirit that realizes its own weakness.

Many people have expressed to me that they understand the concept of God's forgiveness as it applies to other people. But what they seem to struggle with is believing that He really forgives them personally. If you have ever wrestled with this, as I have for much of my life, then Jesus' miracle in Matthew 9 was meant for you. Matthew 9:2 begins by saying, "*Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus, saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you. And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemes! But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier to say, Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Arise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins—then He said to the paralytic, Arise, take your bed, and go to your house.*"

The Scribes and Pharisees did not believe that Jesus could forgive sin. So in order to demonstrate that He had power to forgive sin, Jesus healed this paralytic. Notice His words, "...*which is easier, to say, Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Arise and walk?*" I have always wondered why Jesus approached a physical healing by saying, "*Your sins are forgiven you.*" Then just a few days ago, as I was working on this book, the answer came to me and it has helped me immensely with my own understanding of forgiveness. Jesus said to the man who needed physical healing, "*Your sins are forgiven you... arise and walk,*" so that the paralytic himself, the Pharisees, and

you and I, might know His power to forgive. The power exhibited in the healing is the same power bestowed in the forgiveness of sin, and the result is exactly the same! Forgiveness is just as real as this healing was. Jesus combined physical healing with forgiveness so that it would be easier for us to understand that *forgiveness* is real. The point I believe Jesus was making is very simple, yet very profound. The power of Jesus' words removed the paralysis from the man. The power of Jesus' forgiveness is just as real in removing the sin from us. This illustration can make it easier for us to accept Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*"

If you are someone who struggles with believing that you are forgiven, read again and again this story of the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9. Meditate upon it morning and evening until it becomes a living reality to you. It was only after I read it many times that its full impact began to register on my own sinful heart.

There can be many reasons why a person slips into sin, but there never ever can be any excuses. Sin can never be excused. Sin is always wrong under any circumstance. One must never use God's gracious forgiveness as an excuse to continue in sin, because confession will not be acceptable to God unless it is entered into sincerely. Psalms 66:18 says, "*if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.*" Regarding iniquity means to cherish sin. If you have sin in your life that you do not want to let go of, you are cherishing sin. If you are not *willing* (emphasis on willing) to forsake sin, God cannot fulfill His end of the bargain.

When one experiences true repentance, God will not withhold His promise of forgiveness and cleansing. The text says plainly, "*If we confess... He will forgive.*" Remember Jesus' parable of the sheep, the coin and the son? Jesus (who cannot lie) said that there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents. When we have met the condition of repentance, we are completely forgiven no matter what we have done in the past. And when we are forgiven we stand before God just as if we had never ever committed a single

sin. Completely cleansed! Doesn't that encourage you? When I stop listening to Satan, and through faith accept what Jesus said, then I know that I am forgiven, and that gives me complete peace of mind.

Starting over again

Simon Peter is mentioned more frequently than any other disciple in the Gospels. His position among the disciples was one of prominence. He was the leader. He was the main spokesman. He could draw a crowd by the sheer force of his Sanguine personality. His contribution to the formation of the first Christian Church is second only to that of Paul.

Peter, as boss of his little group, was evidently used to getting his own way. Jesus, who could read the hearts and minds of the Pharisees, saw this in Peter and commented on it in John 21:18, "*When you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished.*" Peter's insistence on getting his own way showed through even more clearly in Matthew 16:22 where he actually rebuked Jesus for His submission to the events leading to the cross. Another occurred in John 13:8 where Peter flatly refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. These are examples of a mind that was not used to submitting to a will higher than its own.

Peter was impulsive. His tongue often ran away with itself. Like many of us, he would talk first and then think about what he said later. As an example, one moment he said, "*You will never wash my feet,*" and the next, "*Not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.*" One day he declared that Jesus was the Son of God, and the next he denied Him with an oath. Jesus knew all of Peter's human weaknesses ahead of time, and yet He still loved him. Doesn't that give you courage? What's coming next should really give you courage!

Jesus knew that Peter was going to fall. That's right, even before He called him into ministry, He knew. The truth is that God knew ahead of time that David was going to fall, and yet He

still called him to lead Israel. Through His omniscience (infinite foreknowledge) He even said that David was a man after His own heart. In Psalm 139:16 David acknowledged God's foreknowledge by saying, "*You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe.*" God knew ahead of time that Elijah was going to fall, and yet He still called him to be a prophet. Does that shock you?

It is a human tendency to want to spotlight certain sins that seem worse than others. By "grading" one sin as more significant than another, we bypass the central Biblical theme that *all* of us are sinners, and that *all* of us need equal forgiveness. The focus of Scripture is on the underlying condition of evil that leaves every single one of us, without exception, vulnerable to sin. Gordon MacDonald, in his book *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, says, "God seems to be less concerned about the actual failure than He is about our ability to learn from the failure and receive the grace that is offered when one is properly humbled." Now someone is going to interpret that as though I am saying that sin is not serious to God. But that's not what I am saying at all. What I believe Gordon MacDonald is saying, and I agree with him, is that even though sin is a serious thing to God, He is not as concerned with our "occasional good deeds" or our "occasional misdeeds," as He is about our ability to learn from our failures and live more Christ-like lives as a result.

If only we could stop trying to make another person's sins look worse than our own. Before God we are *all* sinners whether our own failures have received public attention or not. The stories of Moses, David, Mary, Zacchaeus, Peter and a long list of others, suggest that God communes with, and uses people, not because they are perfect and spiritually antiseptic, but because they have painfully discovered, through failure and defeat, the good news of the forgiving grace of God. The Bible paints a wonderful, hope-filled picture of how the reality of forgiveness makes a person want to live a better life.

The Bible likens this life to a race. Hebrews 12:1 admonishes us to remove all sin from our lives and to "*run with patience the race*

that is set before us.” Ecclesiastes 9 tells us that “*the race is not to the swift,*” and 1 Corinthians 9 tells us that everyone who finishes the race is the winner. Gordon MacDonald wrote, “Like runners who have sustained terrible falls in a race, they sprint toward the finish line with grass stains, dirt smudges, and bruises all over them. For most of them, the fact that they appear in the Bible at all is based on the fact that they ran, fell—usually more than once—got up again, and finished.” (*Rebuilding Your Broken World*, page 51).

Let’s get back to our central character again. We have been discussing the fact that Jesus knew that Peter was going to fall before it actually happened. In Matthew 26 Jesus and the disciples gathered around the table for the last supper. Jesus told them that He was going to die and that all of them would be offended because of Him that night. Peter blurted out in verse 33, “*Though all men shall be offended...yet will I never be offended.*” Jesus looked at Peter in verse 34 and said, “*Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.*” The fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction can be seen by reading the remainder of Chapter 26.

But Matthew 26 is not the only place in Scripture that tells us that Jesus knew that Peter was going to fall. In Luke 22:31 He said, “*Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.*” In essence Jesus was saying, “You are going to fall, but I have prayed that you will not lose your faith when you do. And when you have returned to Me, your experience will be an encouragement to others.”

Years before Calvary, the eye of Jesus rested on Peter. He saw his impulsive nature, his ambition and self-confidence. His eye also scanned the years and saw him curse and swear as the rooster crowed. Jesus saw all this and yet He loved Peter with an everlasting love. A love that could see past Peter’s failures after he was humbled. Many of us will have to be humbled before Jesus can really use us as well. Jerry Cook, in his book, *Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness*, page 70, says, “God is big enough to even turn our goofs into something positive.”

Matthew 26:75 says that Peter went out and “*wept bitterly.*” He had not planned on falling. Nobody ever does. But after it happened, he must have wanted to die. He had broken the heart of his best friend. The remorse of his failure must have been overwhelming. A Pharisee would have left him there to die, but that’s not God’s way. Jesus came to this world to show us what God is really like. Oh how I wish that those of us who take the name Christian could show the rest of the world what God is really like as well. Mark 16:7 tells us that the ladies who came to the tomb on Sunday morning were instructed by the angel to “*Go tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you into Galilee...*” Jesus especially wanted Peter to know that even though he had failed miserably, He still loved him and was anxious to see him again.

I’m going to close with four texts of Scripture that I’m sure Jesus must have gone over with Peter as soon as they had some quiet time together. Jesus was excited about letting Peter know that he could start all over again. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “*The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*” Tragically, with man, starting over again is not always possible. Someone once said, “Man’s greatest sin is his inhumanity toward his fellow man.” There is a saying, “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” But some people have a knack for not allowing others to forget the bad parts of their past life. I’ve known people who have gone to great lengths to try and dig up a person’s past, but with God it’s different. God has done everything to make it possible for us to put things behind us. No matter what a person has done in their past, they can completely start fresh again with God.

Have you ever loved someone who later withdrew their love from you? Or have you loved someone who later said things about you that were not true? If so, you may find it difficult to really trust and love in the future. If you grew up in an abusive home, or where emotional distance was used as punishment for wrong, the problem can be compounded even more. Sadly most of us endow God with human feelings and responses. That’s where we get the feeling that if we can’t trust humans, we can’t trust God. If only we

could comprehend that God *“does not see as man sees.”* I know from experience that this can be hard to fathom, especially when one suffers from guilt or low self-esteem. But I hope that these next four texts of Scripture can help you to fully realize that you truly can be forgiven. You truly can be healed from the paralysis of sin, and you can completely start over again with God.

I boarded a plane in Seattle one dreary, wet morning bound for Denver. It was early, and as I looked for my seat I noticed the mood on board reflected the weather. We all waited in silence as the plane taxied for takeoff. Then with a thrust of the engines we began to climb up into the fog. The ground quickly disappeared and I could no longer see anything but clouds. I remember feeling uneasy as the plane bounced around. I asked God for His protection, and then all at once it happened. We broke through into the most beautiful sunshine that I have ever seen. Everyone on board clapped and cheered and the mood changed as abruptly as the weather had.

In Isaiah 44:22 God said, *“I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me; for I have redeemed you.”* The implication here is not that God covers our sins so that we cannot see them, but rather He covers them so that He cannot see them. My thoughts came to rest on this verse as I settled back in my seat on the way to Denver that day. When I looked down I could see nothing but pure, clean whiteness, and I felt God talking to me. God has told us that when we ask for forgiveness, He cleanses us (1 John 1:9) and covers our past mistakes just like those clouds covered this dark, dreary earth. He said, *“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow...”* (Isaiah 1:18). It is a loving God that takes all of our wretchedness and sin and covers it up so that He cannot see it anymore (it’s too bad that we don’t do the same for each other). Doesn’t that make you love Him and want to be a better person? It surely does me.

Another verse that illustrates this same forgiveness is found in Isaiah 38:17. In it the prophet said of God, *“...for You have cast all my sins behind Your back.”* I’ll never forget my fifth and sixth

grade teacher, Miss Nida Davis. She could be writing on the blackboard with her back turned to us, and she still always knew which one of us was acting up without turning around. She use to tell us that she had eyes in the back of her head. Every chance we had we would try to look in her hair to see if she really had an extra set of eyes that we didn't know about. Now that I am older, I know that she knew who was acting up because she knew us. God has told us that He has thrown all our sins behind *His* back. He hasn't thrown them behind our backs where He can still see them when He looks at us, rather He says that He has thrown them behind His own back so that they are *behind Him* and out of *His view*. One thing that I have struggled with all of my life is wondering how God can really love me when He knows and sees all of my sins constantly. God has done everything possible to communicate to us that He doesn't go around digging through our past filth. When we are forgiven, God throws our sins behind His own back and covers them with a thick cloud so that He cannot see them anymore. Hallelujah! What a good Father He is.

The third text that I would like to go over with you is found in Psalms 103:12. It reads, "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.*" When my boys were small, I asked them about this verse at worship one morning. I asked them how far the east is from the west. They had to think about that one pretty hard, but soon the oldest came up with the answer. He said, "It's always the same, isn't it?" And that is true! No matter how far east you travel, you are still the same distance from the west as when you started. It is infinitely immeasurable. That's how far God has removed our sins from us when He forgives us! Are you beginning to believe it yet?

The fourth verse is found in Micah 7:18-19. Verse 18 says, "*Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy.*" It makes me feel good to know that God "*delights in mercy.*" If God was not a merciful God, I would have no hope whatsoever. I would find myself in the same kind of despair that Judas found himself in, and I would

probably take his way out as well. Verse 19 continues, “...*You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*” I took a scuba class a few years ago, and one of the things I learned is that in Puget Sound you have zero visibility when you get down to a hundred feet. It is dark at one hundred feet. I’m reminded of a story I read recently about the Tuscarora Deep. It’s a place off Japan where the ocean is seven miles deep. That is over thirty-five thousand feet. Now if it is dark at one hundred feet, think how dark it must be at thirty-five thousand feet.

God, in trying to communicate to us the reality of His forgiveness, is telling us that He throws all of our sins over His shoulder, behind His back. He is telling us that His arm is so strong that when He throws them they travel as far as the east is from the west, to a place that is covered with thick, heavy clouds. And He is telling us that when our sins fall through those clouds, they do not stop falling until they settle clear down to the bottom of the deep, dark ocean. Friends, what more can God do to convince us of His forgiving love? Lie down and die? Well, He did that too! Our unbelief must frustrate God at times.

Raymond Holmes wrote, “Christ helps those begin their lives over again who seek truth and desire to live obediently under their heavenly Father’s loving care. However, if they then sin, they have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the totally Righteous One (1 John 2:1). Wearing the cloak of His righteousness, they stand before the Father, and because of Jesus and His love, God forgives.”

Holmes continues, “The sinner who repents and surrenders to God by faith in Christ finds a whole new life, a new experience. The Christian believer who has walked with the Lord for many years also experiences a new beginning each day, for God’s grace is renewed every day. In forgiveness and peace each new day can be faced with renewed grace, renewed power from God. If the believer fails and falls, God, like any loving parent, picks the fallen up and sends him on the way again. Every day with Him is a new beginning. God’s will and plan for every life is full of new beginnings. That’s what makes the Christian life so

thrilling and exciting! It is certainly not boring. God has proven His trustworthiness and faithfulness to His people over and over again. The believer can be confident that God will never forsake His people, never leave them, never lead them up a dead end. Our God is a God of redemption. He redeems the situations and circumstances of life and turns them into blessings.” (C. Raymond Holmes, *Stranger In My Home*, page 114).

John 21 gives us the account of Jesus restoring Peter to ministry again. Verse 15 says, “*So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these? He said to Him, Yes, Lord; You Know that I love You. He said to him, Feed My lambs. He said to him again a second time, Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me? He said to Him, Yes, Lord; You know that I love You. He said to him, Tend My sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me? Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, Do you love Me? And he said to Him, Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You. Jesus said to him, Feed My sheep.*”

Three times Peter had denied Jesus, so now three times Jesus directly challenged his love and commitment. And each time Peter gave the same humble, repentant answer. He knew that his sin had given the others cause to doubt his love for Jesus. The repeated questions by Jesus brought his shameful denials vividly to mind. With each question that fiery arrow must have cut deeper into his already wounded heart. One might think that Jesus was trying to hurt Peter for what he had done, but that was not the case. The ritual of Jesus’ questioning was not only for Peter’s benefit, but for the other disciples as well. Three times Jesus asked him, “Do you love Me?” and all three times He followed that question with the commission “Feed My sheep.” Three times He tested his commitment, and three times He recommissioned him to the work of evangelism. Despite the magnitude of his failure, Peter was not to be deprived of his call to be a “fisher of men” (Luke 5:10).

The story is told of Michelangelo walking down the streets of Rome one day. In a dark corner he noticed a piece of marble which had been cast aside by another sculptor. It had been pushed aside

as useless because of a large split seam across the face of it. But each time Michelangelo passed that way he seemed drawn to it. Finally one day he called for his workmen to haul the marble to his studio. Behind that ruined face Michelangelo could see something that no other sculptor had recognized. He began to work on the stone with chisel and mallet. Weeks passed into months as he hewed the scarred reject, until finally there emerged from his skillful hands the figure of a man. The statue of David, which was said to be so perfect that it lacked only life itself, stood for years in the basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. David was Michelangelo's most perfect masterpiece.

Don't you think that's what Jesus sees as He looks at each one of us? Others see only a reject with a spoiled surface. But He looks beyond the ruined surface and sees what we can be under the skillful influence of a Master. No amount of manipulation or coercion could ever force me to want to serve Him. But the simple realization of what He has *lovingly* done for me, and what He wants to *lovingly* do in me, breaks my sinful heart and makes me want to serve Him forever.

I was driving down the freeway one day, when the words of a song caught my attention. It went like this—

The look of love was on His face,
The thorns were on His head.
The blood was on that simple robe,
And stained it crimson red.
And though His eye was on the crowd that day,
He looked ahead in time.
When He was on the cross, I was on His mind.
He knew me, yet He loved me!
He whose glory makes the heaven shine,
So unworthy of such mercy,
Yet when He was on the cross I was on His mind.

The Bible tells us that God knows the end from the beginning, so it's true! He did see me (and you) while He was on

the cross that day. Though my self-esteem may be shattered at times, to Him I was important enough to die for. You are worth everything to Him, no matter what your track record has been. How others may perceive your track record really doesn't matter either. With Jesus that fresh start is just waiting for you to accept it!

If you are one who has treated your fellow sinner with contempt, try Jesus' method. You'll find His approach works where yours didn't, and you won't have that ache in the pit of your stomach anymore. If you are one who has struggled with accepting God's forgiveness, I pray that you now see Him in a different light. He's the best friend you could ever have. *Surrender* your life to Him, *accept* His gift of forgiveness, and most of all, *BELIEVE!*

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**If you are better at finding fault than
forgiving—**

read this book.

**If you are better at forgiving others
than yourself—**

read this book.

**If you keep asking Jesus to forgive
what He has already forgiven—**

read this book.

**If you've been hurt by the very people
who should have helped—**

read this book.

**If you don't have peace or joy in your
life—**

read this book.

Ron Halvorsen Jr.

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