

FORGIVE & LOVE AGAIN

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The names of some of the people appearing
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Hope for the Wounded Heart

Holly sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a blank sheet of stationery. Brian had left for work, and the kids were off to school. She was alone. It was time to write the letter. It will be difficult, she reminded herself. But she knew she had to do it.

Her pen hovered over the paper for a thoughtful moment. Then at the top of the sheet she wrote, "Dear Daddy, You've been gone for almost 20 years now, and I've been angry with you almost as long."

Holly paused as the words in front of her triggered a flood of memories and feelings about her late father. She winced as she thought about his stern demeanor that prevented him from showing her any affection as a child. She again searched her memory for an incident when he hugged her or said "I love you" or "I'm proud of you." But all she could hear echoing in her mind were his painfully haunting words: "You're such an ugly child."

She remembered the time as a seven-year-old when her father, a deacon in the church, disciplined her angrily by hitting her on the back with a shovel. Then, when he finally consented to take her to the hospital, he lied to the doctor about the cause of the cuts and bruises on her back. She wondered at the time how he could tell an

outright lie and call himself a man of God. She didn't understand until much later that he knew he would be arrested for child abuse if he told the truth. *It's been 25 years, and the physical scar is long gone, she thought. But even after all these years I can still feel the emotional scar from that experience.*

Holly fortified herself with a sip of hot coffee as she recalled how as a child she wished that her father would die, even prayed that he would die. Then, a month after her twelfth birthday, he did die. *I didn't miss you, Daddy, she mused painfully, but I did miss having a father.*

Holly thought about her teen years and early twenties and how she allowed herself to be used by several men, desperately hoping that she would find in them the acceptance and love her father never provided. She wondered again, for the umpteenth time, how different her life would have been if she had grown up feeling good about herself instead of wishing she was somebody else.

Holly sighed deeply. "But that's all behind me now," she reminded herself aloud. "I've been set free, Daddy, and I just need to tell you something." Holly returned her pen to the paper and wrote:

Please know that today I let go of all my bitterness and anger toward you. I let go of the feelings of hate I've held inside me for so long. I can't grow in life and be the person God wants me to be with so much anger and resentment festering inside. I must let it go now. I forgive you.

I've often wondered what happened in your life to make you so bitter, so hateful, so unaccepting, and so unloving. Surely there was a time when you were full of love for others and for God. I wish I'd known that side of you.

Maybe now I'll be able to visit your grave on Memorial Day and Father's Day and really

feel a sense of loss. Up until now I've gone because it was expected of me. And the last few years I refused to go at all. I know it will take a while for my feelings to adjust to my decision to forgive you. But I've let go of the pain, and for the first time in my life I'm beginning to feel free.

Rest in peace now, Daddy. You are loved.

Healing for Inner Wounds

What do you do when your spirit has been wounded or your heart has been broken like Holly's? It could be that your father was a harsh disciplinarian who gave you the rod but not a relationship. Perhaps your husband left you for another woman. Or maybe you were offended deeply by a friend. The wound is still there. The blood is still flowing.

Is your heart filled with heaviness? Do you toss and turn at night? You can't stop thinking about what happened, and every thought is filled with frustration, despair, and incredible hurt. Is there a solution for your insomnia and a safeguard for your sanity? What must you do to be healed?

You already know there is no quick fix for the devastation that occurs when you have been mistreated. If there was a simple solution, someone would have packaged it by now and made millions. I, for one, would pay just about anything for instant relief when my soul is ravaged by the malicious deeds of another person.

So how then do you turn off the memories that sting every time you see or think about that person? How do you wipe away the flood of tears that flows from a great ocean of pain inside you?

Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door to our peace, healing, and ability to love again. That's what

Holly discovered. An instant solution it is not. But it is the key.

This idea of forgiving someone who has hurt us can be both confusing and controversial. Although it is to be one of the distinguishing marks of a Christian, few of us understand what it means to forgive. This is tragic when you consider that, in His model prayer, Jesus Christ told us to forgive those who have trespassed against us (Matthew 6:12,14-15). The Savior directed us to ask for our daily bread and also extend to others daily doses of forgiveness. And then He warned that should we fail to do so, our own experience of God's forgiveness will be jeopardized.

Why then is forgiveness shrouded in so much mystery? Maybe it's because we have a hard time believing God would tell us to do something that seems to be both absurd and impossible.

First, from the human perspective forgiving another person seems downright dumb. You have been injured, so why shouldn't you go to the wall to collect what is owed to you? It is the way of the world, isn't it? It may well be, but it isn't God's way.

Forgiveness also seems impossible. The steel shackles of anger, bitterness, and even hatred chain us to the offense and the offender. We long for freedom, but we find nothing that can break the chains until we come to understand what God means by forgiveness.

Tough Questions

Forgiveness is the soil in which God nurtures our emotional healing and our ability to love once again. It's about time we pull back the curtain to see forgiveness the way God does. To do so we must answer some important and admittedly difficult questions. For example:

- Can I forgive someone when I don't feel like forgiving?
- Does forgiveness take time?
- Will I feel better once I extend forgiveness?
- Do I need to confront the person who harmed me?
- Does forgiveness mean I must resume a relationship with the person who caused me such heartache?
- Should I forgive someone who does not seek my forgiveness?
- How can I forgive myself for the things I have done?
- The thoughts of what happened still plague me. Can I ever get them out of my mind?

Do you have ready answers to these questions? If so, you are unusual. Most of us are in a spiritual fog when it comes to forgiveness, and if we are honest about it, we'd admit that our lives show it.

In this book we're going to deal with forgiveness in two important steps.

First, we need to clear away the fog about what forgiveness is and what it isn't. You need to understand why your emotions often resist the idea of forgiveness. You need to know just how to go about forgiving those who have wounded you. And you need to see the importance of forgiving yourself as well as forgiving others. We will cover these topics in Part One, *Choosing to Forgive*.

Second, we need to understand what happens after forgiveness. How do you handle the painful feelings that often don't agree with your decision to forgive? How do

you confront the person who hurt you in order to prevent him from hurting others? When and how do you reconcile a relationship with someone who hurt you? How are the dynamics of forgiveness applied to the unique demands of a marriage? We will deal with these questions in Part Two, Learning to Love Again.

Before you begin Part One, we invite you to make some important initial decisions.

First, *trust God's Word*. Drop your preconceived ideas about forgiveness and be open to what God has to say. Remember: "The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them" (Hosea 14:9). And His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). Don't settle for what men say about forgiveness. This is God's domain.

Second, *allow the Holy Spirit to be your counselor*. He will reveal to you the persons you need to forgive and will give you the ability to follow through. "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6).

Third, *expect God to do a special work in your life*. God does not want you to live your life tied up in knots. He wants to set you free from the prison of your personal pain.

The Holy Spirit has a way of making us live the message we proclaim. Writing this book is no exception. Tom Thompson, my co-worker at The Art of Family Living, and I have had to test the truth we are about to teach in these pages. Even though I serve as the principal writer, Tom and I contributed equally to the content of this book, and we have both personally traveled through the principles we now share with you. This is not ivory-tower theology with a lot of clichés and pious platitudes. We know what the psalmist meant when he wrote, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Is there anything standing between you and learning to forgive and love again? How about your feelings? You may well be experiencing inner turmoil and a great deal of anxiety as your heartache replays again and again in your mind. The offense may have occurred years ago, but you relive it with each memory.

As your emotions are stirred, don't turn back toward thoughts of "Why me?" or "I can't forgive." Quiet your heart now to hear fresh insight about forgiveness. Your healing and freedom lie just ahead. It's what God wants for you, and He will show you the way.