Forgive, Let Go, and Live

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This book is dedicated to my late spiritual mentor,
Dr. Juanita Smith,
who taught and modeled true forgiveness.
Acknowledgments

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“Even as a little girl, when kids would cross me in any way, I never let them back into my good graces.”

My mom’s words echoed in my spirit and found rest there for many years of my life. Similarly, my father never forgot a single offense that anybody committed against him. He and my mom argued frequently about things that happened or had been said in the far distant past. They served faithfully and sacrificially inside and outside the walls of the church. Nevertheless, a spirit of unforgiveness plagued them.

Just days before my dad passed away at age 78, I had the privilege of reconciling him and his best friend after a three-year rift. They were fellow members of their church trustee board and had disagreed over a financial transaction. Prior to their split, they had enjoyed rich fellowship and great family fun over their 50-year history. Notwithstanding, Dad believed the church had treated him unfairly (I didn’t agree with him based on the facts he presented) and he was not going to let it go—especially in light of his extreme generosity and long-term service. Through much prayer and long conversations in which I reminded him of the consequences of unforgiveness, he finally relented—or, I should say, repented.

My mom, who passed away four years later at 82, frequently recounted the many instances of my dad’s physical and verbal abuse. After 21 years of marriage, she’d finally mustered the
courage to literally escape to another state with five dependent boys in tow (my older brother and I had already left the nest). They remained separated for 40 years but never divorced. I’m convinced it was bitterness that ushered her into her 10-year battle with dementia prior to her death. All of her imaginary conversations had an angry tone and centered on her painful issues with my dad.

My parents’ legacy of holding on to offenses influenced how we, their seven children, dealt with people who offended or crossed us. With such a heritage, I knew unforgiveness was poised to become a stronghold in my life. The pattern had already started to evolve. If people offended me, I never viewed them the same. Depending on the nature of the relationship, I would either keep my emotional distance or make a mental note never to trust, favor, or include them again in my dealings. My most common tactic was to hide behind being “too busy” to interact with them again—ever. They finally got the message: Once you offend Deborah, you are out. No three strikes policy here!

Shortly after I married my wonderful husband, I sternly warned him, “Please try not to do anything where I’ll have to forgive you because unforgiveness runs in my family. We do absolutely no forgiving!” This statement seems hilarious to me today, but I was dead serious at the time I said it.

It was not until I met one of my most beloved spiritual mentors, the late Dr. Juanita Smith, that I began to make headway in conquering this emotional giant. She taught and modeled forgiveness on a level I’d never seen. She frequently proclaimed, “I release everybody who has hurt me.” She didn’t just give lip service to the idea; I watched her walk it out many times.
I finally decided that unforgiveness had wreaked havoc in my life long enough. It had caused me to write off several relatives, friends, coworkers, and others. I spent way too much time in my head rehearsing the wrongs people perpetrated against me and imagining the awful things I could have said or done to retaliate if I weren’t a Christian. I started to realize how counterproductive it is to engage in such thinking. So, as an act of faith and obedience to God, I declared my freedom from unforgiveness. It was and is a giant I could never conquer in my own strength.

You may be asking, “Why is forgiving others such a hard thing for so many to do—even strong Christians?” I believe when we have been damaged, deprived, or disadvantaged by another, we instinctively want to be compensated for our loss. The loss can take any number of forms, including property, affection, freedom, self-esteem, innocence, and physical well-being.

Every offense is an assault on our emotions. The root meaning of emotion is “to move.” When our emotions are attacked, we want to move against the offender. But when the law or our better judgment or other circumstances prevent us from moving to exact revenge, to gain justice, or to be made whole, anger rears its head. Some people choose to bury their anger. In doing so, they develop a root of bitterness that can quickly infiltrate their hearts and minds—stealing their joy and turning them into someone they don’t want to be.

This book will show you a better way to handle the inevitable offenses of life. I hope that as you read the following pages, you’ll look at how you deal with your hurts and make a commitment to walk in forgiveness—no matter what!

In Part 1, we will take a brief walk down Revenge Row and
see how retaliation impacted the lives of those who refused to forgive, let go, and move forward.

In Part 2, a number of contributors share their heart-wrenching, as well as heartwarming, stories of deciding to release the perpetrator of their hurtful experiences. I have changed the names and circumstances to protect their privacy except where the facts are disclosed in their published writings or in news reports. I make no attempt to weigh the magnitude of the offenses as they are each so personal. From being a victim of gossip to enduring the horror of rape to financial rip-offs, these forgivers will inspire, challenge, and motivate you to let it go.

In Part 3, faith and practicality converge as we explore and debunk the myths of what forgiveness is and what it is not. I hope the guidelines I present for working through the forgiving process will transform your thinking and move you to a higher quality of life.

In Part 4, we’ll look at the spiritual, emotional, relational, physical, and yes, even financial benefits of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit’s illumination of these truths will challenge you to grow and to go forward as a model and ambassador of forgiveness in a revengeful world.

Finally, the “Forgiveness Prayers” at the back of the book address a variety of hurts and offenses and will guide you in praying to release the person who has harmed you and to stand in faith for your deliverance from unforgiveness. Through these Scripture-based, courageous prayers and faith declarations, God will surely turn your ashes into beauty.
Part 1

An Eye for an Eye
Stories from Revenge Row
“Deborah, have you been watching the news about that fired police officer who’s out to get revenge?” It was my friend George. I had anticipated his call.

A few years ago I had counseled him through his extreme anger and frustration with the police department of a major US city. His dream of joining the police force had gone up in smoke during his training at the police academy. He had made the courageous but politically unwise decision to denounce police brutality against a recent victim. Shortly thereafter, he was kicked out of the academy on a flimsy excuse and flatly told off the record that he would never be hired to work for the police department in that city.

He was devastated. I had prayed earnestly with and for him that God would touch his heart and cause him not to seek revenge. The prayers worked. By the grace of God, I was able to convince him that the police department’s rejection was God’s protection. Who knows what negative detour his life would have taken had he made the police force?

Now, as I listened to his highly animated voice, I became
concerned that the Christopher Dorner situation would reopen old wounds.

“You know I was there mentally at one point,” George continued. “That could be me hunkered down in that cabin. But I thought about my mom, my children, and the rest of my family. I knew it would really hurt everybody if I’d done something like that. Dorner has a legitimate beef though, Deborah. Somebody has to bring the police department’s problems to light. If this is what it takes, so be it.”

I winced at the thought that my friend, like numerous others in the minority community who had weighed in on the drama that unfolded over the past 48 hours, might be condoning Dorner’s actions. I reminded him that nothing could justify the killings.

When our conversation ended, I went online to research more facts about the case and to read Dorner’s 11,000-word “manifesto” that he’d sent to various news organizations explaining his behavior. Here’s a quick review of the circumstances that led to the events that had the entire city on edge.

In July 2007, Officer Christopher Dorner and his partner were called to a public disturbance where a disorderly, mentally challenged man was creating a nuisance. Dorner later reported to department officials that his partner had used excessive force during the arrest, kicking the man in the face while he was handcuffed. The department investigated the incident and decided that Dorner’s claim was not true. They fired him in 2008 for making a false report.

He charged racism and appealed his case for job reinstatement. He exhausted every level of the police department’s
appeals process to no avail. He went on to file a wrongful termination lawsuit through local and state courts; they upheld the department’s decision.

In February 2013, consumed with rage, Dorner decided his only option was to retaliate. He went on a shooting spree from February 2 through February 12 against specific officers and their families. He killed four people, including three police officers, and wounded four other officers. He became the subject of the largest manhunt in the history of that city’s police. Acting on a tip, the police finally tracked him to a cabin in the mountains. He died there on February 12, 2013, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head during a standoff with the police. He was 33 years old.

In reading Dorner’s manifesto, I observed five toxic, erroneous, and overall “bad beliefs” that ultimately derailed his destiny and caused untold heartache for his family and the families of his victims. The truth is that any of us could fall prey to these beliefs.

**Bad Belief 1: The Bible is not a guidebook for everyday living.** Referring to it as “that old book, made of fiction and limited non-fiction,” Dorner pooh-poohed the idea of turning the other cheek—going as far to say that “Jesus was never called a nigger.” No, He wasn’t, but He was ridiculed, beaten, and crucified. Plus, He knew that only God has the right to avenge wrongs.

**Bad Belief 2: The value of a person’s life is measured by career success.** Many people, especially men, define their worth by their work. Unfortunately, when an economic downturn, a firing, or other adverse circumstance brings their employment or ability to make money to a screeching halt, they feel worthless and
powerless. This response is a result of a bad belief system. Oh, that Dorner would have known and embraced the truth that we are all created with an intrinsic value and have a Divine destiny apart from our work.

Bad Belief 3: Life should be fair and no inequity should be tolerated. On Planet Earth, nobody is going to escape being treated unfairly, rejected, or disadvantaged in some way at one time or another. It’s called life in a fallen world. Bad things happen to good people. We can make every effort to change a situation through proper channels—like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and countless other great men and women have done. However, in the final analysis, wisdom dictates that we sometimes just have to ignore some offenses.

Bad Belief 4: Forgiving a perpetrator is a sign of weakness. Dorner declared, “I have the strength and benefits of being unpredictable, unconventional, and unforgiving.” Yes, his grudge was indeed a mighty force; however, it propelled him in the wrong direction. It ultimately proved to be his weakness. Only the mentally and morally strong can keep moving forward when offended or treated unfairly, and that requires Divine empowerment. Simmering resentment doesn’t strengthen you; it weakens your moral foundation, your ability to be rational, and your ability to succeed.

Bad Belief 5: Revenge is the only viable option. The subject line of Dorner’s manifesto read: “Last Resort.” How could he possibly believe that revenge killings were his last option to get his name cleared? If he had embraced biblical principles, he would have followed the pattern of Jesus who never fought to protect His name or His reputation. He endured all the hardships and
fulfilled His purpose. Today, His name is the name above all names in heaven and on earth. In contrast, what will the masses remember when they hear the name Christopher Dorner?

One of the tragic outcomes of the Dorner case is that many will lose faith in the good, hardworking, honest law enforcement personnel dedicated to serving and protecting—many who are God-fearing and who are my personal friends and family members. The police department’s current leadership has acknowledged its troubled past of racism and is making great strides to overcome it.

I pray that neither Dorner’s death nor that of his victims has been in vain. I pray that you, dear reader, will remember that when you linger in the Pool of Victimization, your hopes and dreams can shrivel up. We must always believe that God can turn every offense, every disappointment, and every negative situation into something good! He has plans for us to prosper and to bring us to an expected end (Jeremiah 29:11). Let’s commit to ridding ourselves of bad beliefs. Let’s be transformed by the Word of God and finish well.