

Craig Stone: Forgiving the Unforgivable

Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, your honor." It was April 1993. Three hours and 20 minutes after beginning deliberations, the jury returned to the packed courtroom to issue their verdict. The case had been stacked against us; we knew it months before the trial began. But the final decision lay not with the attorneys, the judge or the witnesses who would frequently twist the truth or commit outright perjury. The final outcome rested with 12 people—in this case, eight men and four women.

"How finds the jury?"

"On the charge of criminally negligent homicide, three counts, we the jury find the defendant: not guilty."

That verdict would crush our family and profoundly affect many of us for years to come. Even today, some of our relatives remain locked in heartache and unforgiveness over the tragic events of that fateful night when our family members were killed in a car accident and by the injustice later committed in the courtroom.

The other driver, who was drunk at the time, drove into the wrong lane on a two-lane back road and hit the car I was driving, causing us to veer into a ditch on the side of the road. Fortunately, no one in our car was injured. However, the driver continued down the road, slammed into the car behind us, which carried my visiting family and my 10-year-old son, and split it in half from front to back. My father Rev. Fred C. Stone, grandmother Pauline Hunt and great-grandmother Retha Williams were all killed, while doctors diagnosed my 10-year-old son as brain-dead.

The emotions I experienced in the aftermath of that accident were bad enough, but they were compounded by the court case that followed. The jury was comprised of quite a few young people, which probably worked in the driver's favor. I imagine they would be sympathetic to someone their own age. But the biggest boon for the driver was that his attorney was able to successfully plant doubt in the minds of the jurors. Attorneys know that questioning important details is the best way to plant reasonable doubt in the minds of jurors. And the jury is given instructions that, if you have reasonable doubt, you should not vote to convict.

Many of my aunts and uncles were present during the trial. One aunt in particular is someone to whom I pay attention when she speaks because she is a very wise woman. During the trial process she affirmed what I already knew. "Craig, this is stacked," she said. "I can feel it in this courtroom." Everybody sensed that something was not right, but she had a more keen awareness than any of the rest.

From the time of the accident until after the trial—and even up to this day—we have seen no remorse from the driver. During the trial, my brother and I were in the restroom when the driver walked in. I was thinking to myself, "My brother and I could mess you up right now." We were in an ideal position to beat him to a pulp, which is exactly what I wanted to do. But had we done that, we would have caused a mistrial, and we would have been the ones going to jail. The Lord helped me control my emotions and be smart enough to restrain myself from pulverizing the guy.

Yet for years it bothered me that the driver showed no remorse for his actions. I did talk to his father, who at least showed concern for what his son had done. I believe this tragedy would have been easier for our family to deal with in the long run had the driver expressed some sorrow for the events that killed three people and seriously injured three others. But I learned after being tortured by grief and unforgiveness for

years that my healing couldn't depend on what the driver did or didn't do. I would have to make a choice to forgive.

Facing Real Anger

Grief is a natural and, therefore, predictable reaction to loss. But unresolved anger that kindles a flame of bitterness and unforgiveness is not only unhealthy; it is unbiblical. Peeling away the layers of pain to deal with the sin of bitterness and unforgiveness is not easy for most people, and by no means does it come naturally. I know this firsthand.

In those initial years after the trial, forgive wasn't a word I was ready to hear. In fact, I have a confession: I wanted revenge. Twenty years ago I was—and today by the grace of God still am—a minister of the gospel. That makes this confession even more difficult: I was so full of rage I wanted to kill the other driver.

Amid all the grief that follows a trauma such as this, it is impossible to crawl into a hole and disappear. Most people have only one choice, and that is to keep working and putting forth the effort and appearance of a normal life. For me, a normal life meant preaching the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet it wasn't easy to stand behind a pulpit and preach while dealing with an overpowering sense of grief and anger. Not only was I mourning the loss of my family, I was angry over the outcome of the trial. Live with anger long enough, and it can turn into an all-consuming rage.

I continued to preach because this was my occupation and I had to support my family. But I went through the motions of preaching. I stood in someone else's church by invitation as an evangelist, but I felt empty. Everything seemed mechanical.

Even as I tried to engage in ministry, I was still fiercely angry at the young man driving the car that night. I was angry because he never once said I'm sorry and never once expressed an ounce of remorse. Could the guy not even manage a simple

heartfelt apology?

I was angry that this young man was able to walk from the courtroom a free man instead of serving time in jail, where I felt he belonged. He was free to carry on his life as though nothing happened, while the rest of us were left to pick up and put back together the broken pieces.

Justice was not served, so I was angry. It was shocking to watch the judicial system in action. The facts were twisted to create doubt, and I believe some witnesses lied outright. For many involved this seemed to be just another case to win, whatever the cost. The end justifies the means.

Why, God?

Such were the thoughts racing through my mind after the trial. And I confess that I also was angry at God about this. Over and over I asked, "Why, God? Why did You allow this to happen? Why?" I was 32 years old at the time and would never again talk with or spend time with my dad. He would never again play with his grandchildren, whom he loved dearly. He would never know his great-grandchildren.

I knew the Lord could have stopped that accident. He could have protected my family. Or He could have healed every one of them. Instead, God let my family die while the other driver walked away with a cut on his leg.

I knew it was wrong to be angry at God. But I was angry at God. Even as I kept preaching, I continued to question God, my faith and everything I stood for. I asked myself, "Do I believe all of this because it's what I have been taught? Or is it truly real?"

Given time, unresolved anger will turn to bitterness. It seemed that I could do nothing to deal with losing Dad and seeing the driver go free. Thoughts raced over and over in my head. And the more I entertained those thoughts, the more I

allowed rage and bitterness to take root and grow. My life became consumed with hatred for the man I considered responsible for the deaths of my family members and for the people involved in helping him walk free.

Finally I concluded there was only one way to fix this. I would get revenge. I would deal with this guy once and for all. I didn't believe he deserved to walk free. So I made plans to avenge their deaths. I had been preaching a revival and was driving back home along the interstate. I had a gun in my car. And I kept thinking about shooting the guy. How spiritual is that? I just preached a revival, and now I'm thinking about shooting someone.

These thoughts controlled my mind as I left the revival and drove toward home. Nobody else knew what I was thinking, but God did. And in the car that day, He arrested me, stopping me in my tracks. He clearly spoke to me and said, "How can you preach and tell others about forgiveness if you will not forgive? I cannot take you any further in ministry until you get past this."

I pulled my car to the side of the road and stopped. I threw my hands in the air and confessed to Him, "Lord, I can't do this on my own. You know that I hate this guy and I want to hurt him. You know I can't forgive him. But I give it to You because only You can get me through this. You have to help me."

A Slow Change

Only when I committed to putting everything in God's hands and letting Him do His work in me did the healing process begin. I started to work through this bitterness and reconstruct my life.

I began daily speaking the words I'd heard from Church of God Bishop Paul Walker: "I will never be defeated because I will never quit." And I began to meditate on Scriptures that

addressed what I was going through, not only Psalm 91:1-2 and Philippians 4:13, but also John 8:36, "If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed," and 2 Corinthians 1:3, which says the Lord is the God of all comfort.

Change happened slowly, day by day, as though God was peeling away one layer at a time. I was not an overnight success. My life was still a roller coaster, and I dealt with depression. I had always been a positive person, but this destroyed my positive outlook for a long time.

But I thought of what Jentezen told me: "Craig, I could sense that the enemy wants to destroy you." I knew this meant that the enemy was hoping to destroy my emotions, my spiritual life and my ministry.

Would I let this happen? I had to make a choice. I could get this out of my spirit and not allow the enemy to defeat and destroy me, or I could let the enemy win and my life would be over. I would forever be remembered as the evangelist who got wiped out after his family was killed in a car accident.

Before the accident happened, it seemed that we had reached a high point in ministry. We were ready to go worldwide. But this knocked me off my feet. There were years on the dark side of the desert where I felt like everything was over. Because I was hurting and depressed, I felt like I was being a hypocrite. I was on the path of giving up, but quitting is not something God wants us to do. He is not against us. God will never be against us.

Did this accident have to happen? I cannot answer that. But it did and nothing can ever be done to reverse it. I had to move forward.

Learning to Forgive

With the Lord's help I was eventually able to forgive the driver. Forgiveness is not about forgetting, because you will

never completely forget. You can, however, stop rehearsing it over and over in your mind. One of the most difficult issues for me after the accident and for the next two years was the fact that the driver did not spend one night in jail. It was difficult knowing that three wonderful people were gone and he did not have to pay for anything he did. I carried that anger and hurt toward him for years, and I did not have one moment of peace that entire time.

When I gave all of that anger, hurt and unforgiveness over to the Lord that day in the car, I got freedom. I was no longer defining my life by the hurt I experienced, and instead of seeking vengeance myself, I put that in God's hands. Romans 12:19 tells us that vengeance belongs to the Lord; He will repay. I chose to take Him at His Word, and when I did, a weight seemed to fall off.

If you want peace in your life, you absolutely cannot hate the person who harmed you, nor can you continue to justify your wrong attitude by playing the blame game. You can't desire to harm the person and seek revenge. I had that desire at one time, but I don't anymore. Yes, I believe the driver was irresponsible when he decided to drive home after drinking that night, even if a jury didn't consider him legally intoxicated at the time of the accident. And I still have no tolerance for those who drink and drive.

The primary reason to forgive is because God tells us to forgive. Men with clenched fists cannot shake hands, and it's essential that we learn to express true forgiveness with open hands and open hearts. You are never more like Jesus Christ than when you say to someone who has wronged, harmed or crushed you, "I forgive you." Those are three of the most powerful words you will ever speak.

To forgive is to show true Christlikeness, while harboring hatred, malice, bitterness and unforgiveness toward someone causes you to become more like the adversary. To be more like

Christ or more like the enemy is your choice. But I pray you will choose to release forgiveness and refuse to be bound in chains the enemy wants to wrap around us.

It isn't possible to pray as you should when you live with unforgiveness because it blocks the channel between you and God. Forgive, keep the Lord first and stay in right relationship with Him. I have been in the place where I neglected all three, and I almost let the enemy succeed in his efforts to wipe me out. It's easy to become angry and bitter, and then spend the rest of your life blaming the perpetrator for making you angry and bitter. But consider the biblical story of Job. He lost everything except his wife and his life, and still he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15).

Whatever God wants me to do in the second half of my life, I want to do it. And since I wanted to obey God, I had to deal with the anger, forgive and move on. There was unforgiveness among other family members as well, but I could not control them. I could only work on myself. I couldn't preach to them about unforgiveness when I wasn't being a good example myself.

Even when I was living with so much anger and preaching those empty sermons, as a minister I knew in my heart that I couldn't keep going through the motions. So I told the Lord, "If You will give me back the anointing, I will never preach without it again. I've preached with it and I've preached without it. And I don't want to preach without it anymore."

The anointing of the Holy Spirit returned and the channel opened again. I've been on the other side, and I won't go back. One minister said to me, "You mean after all that, you're still serving God? It's a wonder you didn't go the other way."

I replied, "You'd better believe I'm still serving God. I'm sure the enemy wanted me to go the other way. But by the grace

of God, the people who love me and the power of prayer, I'm still serving God. To Him I give the glory."

The Lord will use your circumstances to help others if you will overcome and obey. Jentezen and I filmed several programs together on drunk driving, and the response was incredible. Today, if somebody in our church goes through a similar tragedy, I am able to help that person through it. I go to court with him or her if necessary. It's good to know that the Lord is using my own painful experiences to help other people make progress.

One of the lessons we learn is to consider how we might have handled things differently, both as a benefit to ourselves in the future and as wisdom to impart to others. We learn about forgiving ourselves, as well as the person we held captive in our mind. And always, we hope to look past the wrong and see the humanity of the person who harmed us. That always leads us down the path of asking our heavenly Father to help us extend forgiveness to that person. By the end of the process, we more fully understand tragedy, ourselves, God and eternity.

God restored my hope and how He can do the same for you. Whether you've been divorced; lost a loved one, a business or a job; been abused or betrayed; by God's grace it is possible to forgive even those things we think are unforgivable. It is possible to have a life of joy and freedom even after we've been dealt a devastating blow.

God is able to destroy the traumatic effects of the unexpected attacks on our lives. I know that now, and 20 years after my life was turned upside down, I am finally able to tell the story.

Craig Stone is a TV host and evangelist widely known for his dynamic preaching and deliverance ministry. His crusades are known for their mighty moves of God: souls saved, individuals

filled with the Holy Ghost, divine healing, men and women added to the local church and habitual addictions broken. His new book, Forgiven the Unforgivable, from which this article is taken, releases this month.

Discover how an attacked African church disarmed their enemies with love at

If you liked the article, you'll love the book:

In *Forgiven the Unforgivable: Finding Hope When Justice Seems Impossible* (Charisma House), evangelist Craig Stone demonstrates the power of forgiveness. Instead of denying the pain, Stone shows how to move past bitterness by God's grace. This book can be found wherever Christian books are sold, at or