

Freedom to Forgive When All You Feel Is Hatred

“I just couldn’t forgive him. I just couldn’t!” Sheila exclaimed as tears streamed down her face. “I tried over and over to forgive him, but the pain went too deep.” Following that admission, Sheila dropped another bombshell. The man she could not forgive was now dead.

So what do we do when people hurt us? And worse yet, what can we do when the individual has died and the seemingly last hope for reconciliation or forgiveness has passed? Let me encourage you, it’s never too late, but there are steps that we must take. Steps I will demonstrate through Sheila’s story.

It all started after I ministered for two days at a retreat for women about forgiveness. We had meetings morning, noon and night, so the attendees heard at least eight hours’ worth of God’s Word on the subject. They learned how He had forgiven us, how we can forgive others and the freedom that it can bring to our lives.

The women were scattered around the living room on various couches and chairs as they listened, but in the very back of the room, one lone woman caught my attention. “Sheila” sat in the back on the hearth of the fireplace. Because she was behind everyone else, I was the only one who could see her face. I noticed through every meeting, she was crying. Not a big boo-hoo type sob, yet tears silently streamed down her face the entire time. Occasionally, she brushed them away with a tissue, but they only returned.

Because she cried so much, I remember thinking, “Gosh, I hope she doesn’t get dehydrated!” It was obvious the messages hit home with her in a powerful way, and I prayed that God was doing a work in her heart.

At the end of the last evening meeting, I had all the women write in their Bibles the name of the people they needed to forgive and date it. Then I led them in a prayer of forgiveness. After that, we all went to bed.

The next morning as we concluded the retreat, we had one final meeting. During this time, the women shared testimonies about how the teaching had impacted their lives. And at the very end, Sheila raised her hand. I couldn't wait to hear what she had to say.

"Last night, I slept through the night for the first time in 20 years," she began.

Her announcement was greeted with stunned silence. I wondered if everyone was thinking the same thing as I: *She hasn't slept through the night in 20 years? How horrible!* And that's the thing about unforgiveness. It not only can steal our peace during the day, but it can continue to wreak havoc on us at night.

Sheila went on to share the details of her pain. When she was a child, her family joined a cult. Members were required to sell all their worldly goods and then live in a communal society on a ranch. I don't know how long they lived there, but from Sheila's point of view, it was a terrible time. In the end, her parents divorced, and their whole family was thrown into chaos.

The devastation and memory of that time was so imprinted on her child-heart that Sheila completely blamed the cult and its leader for the destruction of her family and all she loved. As she grew older, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake the despair and pain of her childhood as evidenced by her sleepless nights. Many times friends would tell her, "You need to forgive that cult leader, and put this behind you."

Sheila knew they were right, but she just couldn't let it go. As she told this part of the story, she began to cry again.

With teeth clenched she continued, "I tried over and over to forgive him, but the pain went too deep, and I just couldn't. I still hated what he had done to my family." To add to her pain, the cult leader had died, so now there would never be any retribution for him or vindication for her family nor the apology she felt she deserved.

My heart went out to her. Unforgiveness creates a cycle that keeps us trapped in the past unable to move forward into the present. It becomes a prison that binds us to anger and hopelessness

Thankfully, Sheila's story didn't end there. After hearing God's Word on forgiveness over and over during the retreat, she began to realize she could forgive that cult leader. It was his name that Sheila wrote in her Bible the previous night as she made the decision, by faith, to forgive. With a smile that lit up the room, Sheila explained that the moment she prayed to forgive him, she felt a weight lift off her. "It was the most peaceful, wonderful feeling!" she exclaimed. And the immediate result was realized that night as she slept like a log for the first time in years.

'I Forgive You, But I Still Hate You!'

It is one thing to know that we should forgive, but it's an entirely other thing to be able to do it isn't it? We've all dealt with unforgiveness at one time or another where we have tried to forgive, but failed just like Sheila. So how can we get out of this dangerous cycle?

1. **Get immersed in God's Word.** As Sheila soaked in the teaching on forgiveness during the retreat, the Word of God ministered to her soul and broke through the layers of hurt and pain to bring healing.
2. **Act in faith first.** If we wait until we feel like forgiving, we remain captive to the cycle of unforgiveness. It is only as we step out by faith to

forgive that release can come into our heart and emotions. Sheila began to understand that forgiveness was not only possible, but that she could do it. She received the faith for it because faith—even the faith for forgiveness—comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).

3. **Expect God's supernatural intervention.** Sometimes in our lives the hurt goes so deep, and it's been there so long that we have to have supernatural help to be set free. The good news is we do have supernatural help. When the Word of God is dwelling in us richly, we can overcome (Col. 3:16).
4. **Release the anger.** Obviously, if we are still harboring hatred in our heart towards anyone, we haven't forgiven them, just like Sheila hadn't. True forgiveness is to release the one who has done us wrong. God wants our heart to be free from hatred, and forgiveness is the way to get there. One thing we have to understand is that forgiveness is a faith proposition, not a feeling.
5. **Don't continue to rehearse the past.** I heard someone once say it this way: forgiveness is the decision you make once; forgetting is the decision you make daily. I think that says it perfectly. It helps me know that I shouldn't be surprised when feelings resurface after I've forgiven someone. The step we must take is to decide that we will no longer rehearse the offenses of the past but extend blessing to those who have hurt us.

Forgiveness is a Lifestyle

To walk in forgiveness must become our lifestyle. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." I like the way the Living Bible says it: "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but be a new and different person with a fresh newness in all you do and think. Then you will learn from your

own experience how his ways will really satisfy you.” That says it all, don’t you think? Don’t copy the behaviors of this world.

One thing the world tells us is to hold a grudge—make someone pay for what they’ve done to you. Don’t let someone get away with it. Get revenge. But we can see that the Bible says don’t conform to that way of thinking—don’t copy it. Instead, be a new and different person with a fresh newness in all you do and think. Be transformed.

One of the definitions in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary for the word transformed is “to change in character or condition.” Renewing our mind to think the way God does about forgiveness supernaturally changes the condition of a hurting heart.

Renewing our mind is really just changing our thoughts to agree with God’s thoughts. In Isaiah 55:9 (MEV), God says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

God’s not saying to us, “Ha ha, my thoughts are higher than yours!” Instead, He is saying, “Come on up and think like I think—this is where the freedom is!” We do that by reading His Word. His Word is His will for our life. It’s His thoughts. When we study and meditate on His thoughts, we replace wrong, worldly thinking with His higher thinking that leads to peace and freedom.

When we think like God thinks, we can live like He lives. He’s never worried and never sick. He never lacks, never wonders how things will turn out. I want to live like that. I bet you do, too. I believe we can, when we forgive.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we’re pretending that it never happened. It is also not excusing what the other person did. We’re not saying, “Hey it’s OK,” validating wrong actions. Instead, it is freeing us from their actions. Forgiveness is freedom and, once offered, will allow us to move on even after

people have hurt us. {eoa}

Karen Jensen Salisbury is the author of *I Forgive You, But...*, which releases next month, as well as *How to Make the Right Decision Every Time*.

Karen understands about the need to operate in forgiveness as she learned how to forgive God when her husband died in his sleep at a young age, and she was left to raise their two boys alone through most of their teen years. Today she is remarried and travels and teaches around the world. For additional information or to schedule her to speak, go to: