

How to Walk in Forgiveness

Life is full of difficult situations that are beyond our control. Many times we are faced with things we cannot fix, and at those times we often look for excuses, for reasons why, for someone other than ourselves to point a finger toward, to ease the pain of what we are having to go through.

But I have learned through experience that blaming someone else is not the answer. It doesn't make the situation better; instead, it complicates it by creating a relational rift that dishonors God.

LORD, CHANGE ME I married my husband, Harry Salem, nearly 19 years ago. Before we met, neither of us had any intention of getting married. We both had resolved that we would "just stay single" to better serve God with our lives. Then we met each other, and everything changed.

Like most newlyweds, we entered into our relationship loving nearly everything about each other. But after the "new" had worn off, many issues began to surface.

For one thing, our personalities were completely different. Harry came from a Lebanese cultural background, and I came from the southern United States. Harry didn't trust anybody, and I trusted everybody. Harry was guarded in his interaction with others, and I considered everybody my friend.

For another, we both brought our share of past issues into our marriage, and without any thought of how we would make the relationship work, we plunged in. We faced some very difficult times, and the end result was that each of us began working to change the other. We both were crying out to God, "Lord, please change my mate!"

Amazingly, God never seemed to hear these prayers. He did absolutely nothing about the other one's problems.

But one day the Lord spoke to my heart. He said, "Cheryl, today I am going to teach you how to pray for your husband."

I thought, Finally! Now things will change around here.

God said, "Pray this after Me."

I said, "OK, God."

The Lord then led me to repeat after Him, word by word, the phrase, "Lord, change me." At first I hesitated.

But He explained: "Cheryl, you do not have the right to ask me to change another of all, when you think you don't need to change, you are the one who needs to change the most.

Second, when you truly say, "Lord, change me," I will begin to change you, and because you and Harry are one in My sight, I will have legal access to your husband. I will begin to work in his life also."

The light in my mind turned on and I got it. Of course, I had to change so that we could change. I prayed, "Lord, change me."

When I stopped focusing on changing Harry and began to ask myself, "What can I do differently to make a change in our relationship?" the process began for eternal change in our marriage and family.

Two of the things the Lord taught me to do to help bring about transformation were to leave the past in the past and to forgive. These two things—along with learning to live in agreement with my husband—were the keys to helping me stop playing the blame game.

We all have things in our past that we drag along with us, bringing them into our current relationships. But the Bible says we are to "[forget] those things which are behind and [reach] forward to those things which are ahead" so that we

may “press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14, NKJV).

We cannot even look forward, let alone reach forward, until we do the one thing—forget those things that are behind. This is the first and biggest step toward our freedom from blame. Without this step there can be no other steps.

We must forget our pasts. We must let go of the hurtful thoughts we carry around like a badge of honor.

I had a hard time doing this at first because I had bought into a lie of the enemy that says, “By blaming my past, I excuse my present.” What a huge lie! There is nothing in my past that has any right to exist in my present life—or that can absolve me from my current responsibility of living according to God’s will. But in order to get free, I had to learn to walk in supernatural forgiveness.

Some people think that extending forgiveness to a person who has hurt them somehow releases the person to repeat the offense. This is not true. Holding on to unforgiveness does not prevent future victimization; rather, it binds the victim spiritually, mentally and emotionally and makes healing impossible.

Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die! The only one who is hurt is the one who will not forgive.

Though forgiveness is one of the most important keys to freedom, it does not come naturally. We don’t necessarily walk in forgiveness simply because we say we forgive. It is a mental and emotional choice that we may have to make over and over until we finally experience release.

Harry and I had to work through many memories and hurts from our past. As we did, God showed us pathways to freedom from

abuse, depression, rejection, abandonment, and many other emotionally and relationally crippling thought patterns. We stopped the vicious cycle of blaming each other for our emotional hurts and little by little learned to operate as one. We truly became “one flesh.”

We even blended our ministries into a family ministry, proclaiming one message with two voices—a message of restoration, hope and healing. Our children traveled, ministered and sang with us. Our life together was truly a dream come true for us both.

LIVING IN AGREEMENT Then in January 1999, our dream was shattered when we learned that our 5-year-old angel, Gabrielle—our only daughter—had an inoperable brain tumor. She was given just weeks to live.

In the face of this trial, Harry and I battled together, continually walking in agreement, no matter what the decision, from the smallest to the most life-threatening. We walked as one, operated as one.

We tried to keep life as normal as possible, and when Gabrielle’s little body could handle it, we would go back on the road preaching. We would shout, “Restore, restore, restore!” And we believed God would heal her.

One particularly hard day came in July of that year. We were in Michigan, and very suddenly Gabrielle’s condition began to deteriorate rapidly. We loaded up the motor coach and as quickly as humanly possible headed down the interstate toward Tulsa, our home.

After we were on the road a few hours, I couldn’t get her to respond at all. No matter what I did, no matter how many shots I gave her, she was turning blue—no air was getting through. She was dying.

I told Harry we had to do something. We were very close to an

exit where we knew a church was standing with us for Gabrielle's healing and restoration.

I called ahead, and miraculously they were gathered in the sanctuary interceding and standing in the gap for our daughter at that very moment! One of the people in the group met us at the exit and escorted us at record speeds through the town and toward the nearest hospital.

When we arrived the medical personnel put Gabrielle on life support. They ran a cat scan and gave voice to the worst of our fears. If something did not change quickly, she would be gone in an hour or two.

They loaded her in a helicopter to fly her to a neonatal intensive care unit (ICU) in Kalamazoo. My heart was broken, Harry's heart was broken and our boys' hearts were broken, but we quickly jumped into action, pulling down strongholds, casting down imaginations that were trying to take hold in our minds because of what the doctors had said. We prayed, we agreed, we stood together.

The doctors told us they would need to operate immediately. The surgery would not prolong her life, but it might ease some of the pressure at that moment.

Harry and I told them we had to pray. We went into a small room by ourselves and sought the Lord.

Harry spoke first. He rehearsed the facts. This operation would only weaken her further. It would not cure her, and it would not help the overall situation.

We prayed and sought the counsel of the Holy Spirit. We both felt the operation was not God's choice for this situation. Ultimately, it would not change anything. We agreed.

When we told the doctor our decision, he reiterated that without the operation, she would live for only another hour.

We refused to receive this death sentence. We tried not to think; we just stayed in agreement. No matter what, we agreed.

An hour passed, then another. Three, four, five hours turned into 10 hours—the night was over, and she was still with us!

The peace of God was so pervasive in the ICU that the attending doctor remained after his shift was over to talk with us. In the course of our conversation we discovered that just a year before his 3-year-old son had died of the same thing Gabrielle had!

We shared Jesus with him. We loved him. Our agreement and strength spoke to him. Gabrielle came out of the coma and was taken off life support. She continued to breathe on her own. After 36 hours they told us we could take her home. They did another MRI, and what they had seen on the first one that gave her only an hour or two to live was not there any longer.

In spite of this triumph, however, on November 23, 1999, Gabrielle took her last breath on Earth and went home to be with Jesus. She will be alive in heaven forever—and we will see her again when our time comes!

We fought hard, we battled long, we agreed. But no matter what we did, Gabrielle did not survive.

Can you imagine what our lives would have been like after her death if at any point during her illness, we had not agreed on her treatment and care? The question of whether we had made any mistakes would have haunted us, and the opportunity for one of us to blame the other would have been ever-present.

As it was, the fact that we agreed ruled out any possibility for blame in the future. Even when we were at the most critical point with Gabrielle's illness, we refused to go back to old thinking. We stopped, we prayed, we sought the Holy Spirit, and we came to an agreement.

That left no one to blame later. There were no grounds for pointing a finger and accusing, "You did this" or "You did that." We headed off any future attempts by the devil to separate us by making decisions together.

It is not easy to get to the place of continual agreement in marriage but it is vital for a healthy relationship. Agreement is the preventative for blame.

Blame is simply a refusal to take responsibility for one's own choices, shortcomings, attitudes, fears and so on. Blame is easier than change. It is easier than maturity. But it is not an ingredient in healthy relationships.

A person who continually blames someone else will eventually find himself sick in his flesh. Unresolved emotional hurts and scars will turn into anger, bitterness or both and will manifest in physical illness.

Looking to the future instead of the past, walking in forgiveness and living in agreement with your spouse and others will help you stop playing the blame game so that you can enjoy God's best for your relationships and your health.

Cheryl Salem and her husband, Harry, are founders of Salem Family Ministries and the authors of *From Grief to Glory: Rediscovering Life After Loss* (Whitaker House). A dynamic singer and speaker, Salem, along with her husband and two sons, travels the world, teaching people how to win and overcome in life.