

Totally Forgiving God

Overcoming hurts through total forgiveness is one of the most difficult things in the world to do. It is arguably the most major challenge one can accept in this life. I therefore put the following suggestions not as easy steps but rather as things for you to consider as a way forward in setting God free (if you have not done so).

1. Be totally honest with God and tell Him your complaint. David said, “I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble” (Ps. 142:2). This means to tell God but not the world. Perhaps you have heard of the old spiritual that came out of the Deep South in the nineteenth century. It came out of the cotton fields from black slaves who were so rudely and wickedly treated: “Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen; nobody knows but Jesus.”

The truth is, God likes it when He is the only one who knows! We all need someone to share our griefs with—thank God for friends. But when the Lord alone knows what you have been through—and no one else—you are letting Him in your feelings and not others. When a friend confides in you and you know you are the only one who knows what he or she has been through, you are affirmed in a significant way. God wants to have that place in your life—when He is the only one you tell. It has given me great consolation over the years when I was tempted to tell this person or that one what I have been through to hear the Lord saying, “RT, I know what is going on; will I do?” It connects to that question Jesus asked the Pharisees, “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?” (John 5:44, KJV). If indeed you choose to seek only the honor of God, why not let Him be the only one you tell your grievances to?

When you talk to God, be vulnerable, transparent, and totally honest with Him. Take the mask off. He sees right through you

anyway! Don't pretend; don't try to impress Him. Tell Him your anger, your hurts, and your feeling of bewilderment. The more honest you are, the more intimate will be your relationship with Him.

After all, why do you think He let you go through that trial in the first place? It was partly to get your attention. He likes your company. He wants a close relationship with you. The bottom line: it is all because He loves you so much.

2. Make a list of things you are truly thankful for. When you have been dealt a most severe blow, it is easy to forget the good things you have in life. With effort you can think of some things. The list will grow as you think harder.

I will never forget when I was first convicted over my own ingratitude. It came right in the middle of a sermon—when I was preaching on Philippians 4:6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (emphasis added). The words with thanksgiving—which I had read a thousand times before, but that day it was like the first time—made me see how I had taken God for granted, and the many, many things He had done for me. I resolved then and there to be a thankful person from that day on. When I recounted how many things God had done for me but which I never specifically said thank you for, I felt so ashamed. God loves it when we are thankful.

So I strongly recommend you take time to reflect. Go back over your life. Write down every single thing you are happy about. Did you ever think to say thank you to the Lord? When you do this earnestly and thoughtfully, you will be amazed—and perhaps embarrassed as I was—how long the list becomes.

We had a Sunday prayer meeting every week at Westminster Chapel an hour before the evening service started. We began taking the first fifteen minutes of that prayer

meeting to do nothing but thank the Lord for things. I said to them, "No requests. Don't ask Him for anything for fifteen minutes.

Just thank Him for things." The first night I put this to the people there was total silence—at first. People didn't know how to begin. So I spoke up: "Thank Him for Jesus. Thank Him for salvation. Thank Him for the Holy Spirit." Those fifteen minutes seemed like an eternity at first. But months later they were that fastest fifteen minutes of that prayer meeting! When you make an effort to recall things you are sincerely thankful for, you will be amazed how much there is!

As the old hymn put it: Count your blessings, name them one by one; Count your blessings, see what God hath done! Count your blessings, name them one by one; And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done. —Johnson Oatman, Jr. (1897)

3. Fight self-pity and a feeling of entitlement with all your heart.

We come from our mother's womb with a feeling the God owes us something. It is symptomatic of the sin we inherited from the Fall of our first parents in the Garden of Eden that we feel like this. We come into the world not only speaking lies, as we saw, but also feeling that God owes us certain things.

In this book I have had something to say about self-pity and how it is counterproductive in our lives. Closely akin to self-pity is a feeling of entitlement. Modern society has become like this, that the world owes us a living. We likewise transfer this entitlement to God—that He owes us explanations, income, comfort, and, most of all, heaven when we die. The idea that it is of God's mercy that we are not consumed

(Lam. 3:22) is alien to us—but is the biblical way of thinking. When Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon from Deuteronomy 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time"

(kjb), his hearers were shocked but also smitten. Strong men were seen holding on to tree trunks after the service to keep from sliding into hell. For Edwards had said that it was by the mere mercy of God we did not wake up in hell this very day.³ This kind of thinking is the polar opposite to the way modern man and the contemporary church have been led to believe.

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If we will just pause . . . and think . . . we will be amazed how much we have to be thankful for. My word to you: tell Him you are thankful. He notices it when we don't thank Him. When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one came back to say thank you. Jesus's response was: "Weren't all ten healed; where are the nine?" God notices it when we are thankful; He notices it when we aren't. (See Luke 17:17.) Make it a habit to tell God of the things you are thankful for. Name them one by one.

4. Choose to believe that God has a purpose in what He has permitted—and thank Him for it.

You may not be convinced yet that He has a purpose in what He has allowed. Don't worry. Joseph could not have known that God had a purpose in his brothers being jealous of him and was behind their decision to sell him to the Ishmaelites.

So with all of us. The worst suffering is the hardest to understand at first. The most natural reaction in the world is to panic and complain. But one day we will see that God was up to something that was very wonderful. As I said earlier, the worst trial of my life was accompanied with the greatest disillusionment and bleakest outlook you can imagine. I can now tell you with total honesty that it was the best thing that ever happened to us. In fact, I would hate to contemplate where we would be today without that trial.

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The God of the Bible is a God of purpose. He does nothing accidentally, and all accidents are under His allseeing eye. The reason that all things work together for good to them that love God is because of God's purpose (Rom. 8:28). His plan. His intent. Joseph said to his brothers, even though they meant to harm him, God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20). God does everything He does according to His sovereign plan; He works everything according to the purpose of His will (Eph. 1:11). If you don't have a robust view of the sovereignty of God, I predict that you will come to this eventually; the sooner, the better. It is the best way to live, namely, knowing that God has a plan for your life. What He said to others centuries ago He says now to you: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jer. 29:11).

5. Be patient and willing to wait for things to become clear to you.

Perhaps one of the hardest things of all for us to do is, simply, to wait. "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:14).

What exactly are you to be waiting for? First, for the dust to settle and for things to become clearer to you. This may take time. It could take a long time. Joseph waited twentytwo years for his dream to be fulfilled. David waited for

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twenty years before he was made king. During those years he had the anointing but not the crown. Do not be intimidated or envious of those who appear to wear a crown—they are happy and prosperous and perhaps arrogant; it is far better to have the anointing without the crown than the crown without the anointing. As it happens, I waited for twenty-two years before I heard my own dad affirm me. I told him in 1956 I would have an international ministry,

thinking it would come any day. But in 1978 as the train was pulling into London's King's Cross station, I actually heard my dad say to me: "Son, you were right and I was wrong; God has indeed been with you, and I am proud of you."

But what if the dust doesn't settle for you and things don't become clear in the present life? This could be the case. I can only say that, if it is, the glory to come is worth waiting

for. Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before him" (Heb.

12:2). It did not come in the days of His life here below. It came later when He was welcomed home to the right hand of God by His Father.

There are some things I don't really expect to be cleared up for me in this life. I gave up a long time ago thinking I would understand this vision, that dream, or the promise I took to be from God. Vindication does not always take place on this earth. We all have to wait for some things to be clear in heaven. Vindication for some will take place in heaven.

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Think of the judges that have been bribed, the elections that were rigged, the lies that were believed, and the murders and crimes that were unsolved. Think of the murders that were committed but the innocent person was executed for. Do you think those things were unseen by God? God loves justice. And He will love to vindicate you. Sometimes He does it in the present life; sometimes He waits. But I make you a promise: the longer He waits, the sweeter the vindication will be. I guarantee it. "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

That, dear reader, is worth waiting for.