

When You Can't Forgive

If you asked anyone who knew Laurie A. Coombs, they would tell you what an incredibly strong person she was—the kind of person who can make it through anything. As Coombs details in her new memoir, *Letters from My Father's Murderer: A Journey of Forgiveness* that outward veneer of strength masked a crumbling interior.

SpiritLed Woman: Almost immediately after learning about your father's death, you say the hate for his killer began to fill your heart. How did that hatred affect you?

Coombs: My hatred affected just about everything I thought and did at first. Anger quite literally consumed me. But then after several months, I chose to lay aside my anger and my grief. I knew my dad wouldn't have wanted me to live like that, so I deliberately chose to put the whole terrible thing behind me and move on.

I didn't see the affects of anger on the surface after that, and I honestly thought I had worked through it. In reality, I had simply unintentionally buried it. For years, that anger festered in my heart and turned into bitterness without me even knowing it until the day God brought it to my attention nine years after the murder.

SpiritLed Woman: What was it like for you to return to college and complete your daily classes and tasks after such a life-altering event?

Coombs: Oh, that was hard. Nothing was the same after the murder. It all seemed pointless. The way I viewed just about everything had changed. My entire life had shifted in one moment, yet I knew I had to move on. I didn't want to. I wanted to escape my life and pretend like nothing had happened. But I knew I couldn't just stop doing life. I had to press on. I didn't see any other choice, so I just sort of did

it.

SpiritLed Woman: How did this experience change how you view the attitude toward violence in the media?

Coombs: Initially, I couldn't do the things I did before the murder. I stopped watching TV, I turned off the news, I carefully screened movies to protect myself from seeing any type of violence, and of course, the rap music I once listened to was definitely out. Honestly, I just couldn't take it. All around me, throughout most of our culture, I saw an unhealthy fascination with murder. Rappers glorifying it. Television shows depicting it to boost ratings. Movies using it to entice audiences. Kids running around, saying, "I'm going to kill you!" like it's no big thing. We have murder-mystery dinner parties. Murder-mystery board games. True crime TV shows. We're glorifying it. Sensationalizing it. Because, after all, murder sells, right?

Seeing murder elevated to entertainment sickened me, to be honest. I just wanted to scream, "This is not a game, people!" Murder is real. Murder is horrific. It is not entertainment. It is not something we should have this unhealthy fascination with. It's murder. Real people exist behind each and every murder. Real victims. Real families left behind. Murder is not a game. And it is certainly not something to be glorified.

SpiritLed Woman: You began to build a lovely life with your family in the years following the trial, and appeared very strong. What happened that finally brought you to the point where you turned to the Lord?

Coombs: I fell apart. I did. God presented me with something I couldn't fix. It was anxiety and depression that finally brought me to my knees, and for the first time in my life, I couldn't fix myself. I couldn't pull myself up by my bootstraps, so to speak, as I had many times before. I had fallen into such an incredibly dark place, and I was scared. I

tried everything the world tells you to do in a situation like that, but nothing worked. As a last resort, I found my way to church.

SpiritLed Woman: What were some of the little daily miracles and occurrences that drew you to Jesus when you started seeking Him?

Coombs: My family and I willingly walked through those church doors with an incredible sense of desperation. God was truly my last hope, but even though I desperately wanted Him to be the answer, I was highly skeptical He would be. You see, I didn't believe in God. I was a skeptic—a scoffer, even. At the time, I didn't think proof of God's existence was even possible, and I certainly didn't want to be one of those "blind faith suckers." But as I sat there listening to the pastor preach, it was as if I was the only one in the room. The message spoke to where I was in that exact moment, and I thought, the sheer probability of that alone is crazy.

Coombs: The concept of God speaking to man was foreign to me, but having that pastor preach a message to my inner thoughts got my attention. It was enough to draw me back the next week and the week after that and the one after that, and each time I fully expected the God-thing to be a fluke. But it wasn't. Over and over again, God showed Himself to me in many ways, and I was given the proof I needed to believe.

SpiritLed Woman: You prayed a prayer at the beginning of your forgiveness journey. Tell us about that and how it was answered.

Coombs: At the beginning of this whole thing, the only way I knew how to love my enemy was to pray for him—so I did. I prayed good things for him, though it was counter-intuitive to everything I was feeling. I prayed God would change him. I prayed God would heal him. I prayed God would bring him to complete repentance. And I even prayed he would be transformed

by the gospel to the extent that he would be motivated to live to the glory of God in prison, bringing many prisoners to know and serve Jesus. It was a pipe-dream prayer, I thought. I mean, I knew God could do it, but I honestly didn't think He would. But then He did.

After I forgave, God brought him to his knees. All the blame-shifting, all the justification stopped. He began taking complete responsibility for what he had done, and he was repentant. Ever since that time, I have witnessed this man share the gospel of Jesus Christ subtly yet powerfully with his fellow inmates. Lives are changing in there. He truly is living to the glory of God in that prison.

SpiritLed Woman: Why do people often feel like forgiving someone means that person "got away" with the wrong they committed?

Coombs: I think a lot of people mistakenly think forgiving someone is saying what they did was OK, but it's not. What that person did will never be OK. God does not take sin lightly, and neither should we. But God does call us to forgive. Forgiveness is not letting the person off the hook. It's giving that person to God. It's stepping down from the judgment seat, allowing God to take His rightful place as judge. God does not take sin lightly. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God's wrath, for it is written: 'Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,' says the Lord." Justice will be served. Our sins will be paid for one way or another, either by Jesus on the cross or by us.

SpiritLed Woman: What is at the heart of the message you share in your book?

Coombs: Hope is at the heart of my message. God truly has worked all things for good in my life. Romans 8:28 says, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love

God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” The first part of Genesis 50:20 says, “But as for you, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many lives.” God brings good out of evil. Love out of hate. Peace out of despair. I believe it is His desire to do this for every one of us. You see, our pain won’t be wasted. We don’t have to sit in it. If we bring our pain, past and present, to God, He will redeem it.

SpiritLed Woman: What do you mean when you say your “pain won’t be wasted”?

Coombs: We all have wounds. Every one of us. My pain is no more valid than yours. I believe pain is pain, regardless of its cause. But here’s the thing: Jesus came that we might have life. Life to the full. He came to bind the brokenhearted. To proclaim freedom to the captives. To release prisoners from their darkness. To comfort all who mourn. To bestow a crown of beauty instead of ashes. In short, He came to redeem. To make us new.

Coombs: Jesus once said we will have troubles in this life, “But,” He said, “take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Troubles will come, pain will be felt, but our troubles and pain are not without purpose. God uses everything. Nothing goes to waste. If He allows something to take place, it is because He has a plan for it. There is absolutely nothing we can endure that won’t be used by God.

SpiritLed Woman: There are people who believe they will never be able to forgive people who have hurt them. What would you say to them?

Coombs: I would tell them they’re right. They can’t forgive the person who hurt them on their own. I had tried to will myself into a place of forgiveness and healing for more than a decade, only to fall to bitterness and anxiety and depression.

Until we come to God for help, until we lay ourselves down before Him and are willing to do whatever it takes to forgive, we won't be able to do it. True forgiveness is only possible by the grace of God.

SpiritLed Woman: You chose to begin *Letters from My Father's Murderer* with Romans 13:12, which says: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us take off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." Tell us about the significance of that Scripture to you.

Coombs: I was in such darkness before I came to Jesus, and as I came to faith, it honestly felt like I had been plucked out of a deep dark pit. The light of God shone in my life, and I felt alive, truly alive, for the first time in my life. Darkness flees in the presence of light, and to me, Romans 13:12 is a picture of salvation. It's a picture of what happened to me and what I hope happens to every one of us.

After coming to faith and experiencing all I did throughout my correspondence with the man who murdered my dad, I finally felt free. The darkness of my past was in the past. I had cast off my sin and sins others committed against me and had put on the armor of light, which is Christ.

*Learn more about **Laurie Coombs** and *Letters From My Father's Murderer* at [and on Facebook \(lauriecoombs\)](#), [Twitter \(lauriecoombs\)](#) and [Pinterest \(laurieacoombs\)](#).*