

## Chapter 1

### Changing the Past

Standing on a rocky crest overlooking the desert, Tom cried into the night, "This is it! I'm calling it quits with her! I've had it!" Tom resolved right then and there he would wash his hands of his wife quietly and quickly. Their life together had been a living hell for the past ten years.

It began differently. In the early years there was tenderness and courtship; then the wedding and the thrill of their firstborn son; later two more children. Their ranch became a success. Both had a deep love for God and worked together in a little church in the valley. Those were good years.

Then came the first night she refused to talk. Something was wrong, but she wouldn't tell him. Slowly a wall began to build between them. She wouldn't talk about her problem. He couldn't cope with the silence. Days became months, months became years, and the wall between them grew into gigantic proportions. Finally they sought help from their minister, then their doctor, and finally a psychiatrist. Nothing helped. The wall of silence was impenetrable.

Years passed and the silence remained. Their oldest son became bitter and left home. Yet Tom continued to pray and tried to make up for his wife's neglect to the children. She began to drink socially, then quite heavily, until one night, in a state of drunkenness, she began to talk. The wall of silence had developed a crack, and they talked about how happy their early years together had been. At last the story behind the years of silence emerged.

A man used to come by the ranch routinely in his work. He became good friends with Tom's wife, who was always there while Tom was working elsewhere on the ranch. At first the man made only playful advances, eventually they became more serious, and finally the attraction resulted in an affair. That night, ten years of guilt and fear tumbled out. Tom sat stunned by what he heard his wife saying. However, it wasn't until some months later that the complete story was revealed. The man who came by the ranch and had an affair with his wife was Tom's best friend.

Tom died inside the night he found out. His blood turned bitter as he ran from the house into the desert. He spent the night alone, crying

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and praying. As the first rays of the sun touched the desert sky, Tom determined to get even. He would go to his friend's wife and tell her the whole sordid story. Tom screamed into the rising sun, "I'll never forgive him! He'll pay for every moment I've suffered these past ten years."

Tom didn't know why he went to church the next morning. Out of habit, he supposed. He slipped quietly in the door and came face-to-face with his best friend. The one who had betrayed him. The one who had an affair with his wife. His friend was the greeter that morning and came over to Tom with an extended hand and a saccharin smile. Tom stood frozen. The night before he had prayed the Lord's Prayer many times as he sought comfort from God, and now one request from that prayer kept ringing in his ears, "Forgive me my debts, as I forgive my debtors."

Pausing for what seemed like an eternity, Tom finally extended his hand with a heart-wrenching sob. The man who had ruined his whole life for a few moments of stolen passion, the man who he had vowed to hate until his dying day, received his hand, not knowing the forgiveness that had just taken place in Tom's heart.

Tom later recalled, "For the first time in my life I knew what it was to forgive. For the first time I felt the tremendous sense of freedom, of liberty, of lighter-than-air release as the unbearable weight of bitterness washed out of me. And I was free. Free to forgive. Free to live again!"

This act of forgiveness allowed Tom to also forgive his wife, and they began to put their lives and marriage back together again. Jesus made it quite clear in His Sermon on the Mount by stating, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Matthew 6:14, 15, RSV.

But how do I forgive? Aren't there some things in life that are just plain unforgivable? How can I change something that has happened in the past and continues to plague my footsteps today? Can I bring back the moment and do it over again? How can. I have power to change the past?

Like it or not, we are stuck with our past. We can learn from our past, but we cannot escape it. Our past is an inevitable part of our being. Only one thing can release us from the deathlike grip of our past - forgiveness!

There are basically three stages present in the process of forgiving. The first stage is suffering. If we did not suffer there would be no need

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to forgive. It is suffering that creates the conditions that require forgiveness. No one really has a need to forgive unless he has first been hurt. Like the little boy in Sunday School who raised his hand when the teacher asked, “What must you do before you can obtain forgiveness for sin?” His enthusiastic reply, “You’ve got to sin first!”

Martin Luther became so upset with Melancthon’s virtuous piety that one day he told his friend, “For heaven’s sake, why don’t you go out and sin a little? God deserves to have something to forgive you for!” Most of us don’t have to consciously seek ways to sin; unfortunately, that tendency is a part of our sinful inheritance.

Not every hurt we receive needs to be forgiven. There are those little annoyances, such as being late for an appointment, chipping the paint on the car, cutting ahead in line, or listening to a boring story for the tenth time that do not require forgiveness. There are defeats we all suffer, such as failing to get a promotion, that do not require forgiveness. There are “slights,” where people seemingly ignore us or forget our names, or fail to invite us to their daughter’s wedding, that do not require forgiveness. These things require tolerance, magnanimity, indulgence, or humility, but not forgiveness. It is the hurts that build a wall between two people that require forgiveness.

Disloyalty is a hurt that requires forgiveness. This means that someone treats you like a stranger when, in fact, you are a friend or partner. It assaults the very core of your identity. You feel abandoned, forsaken, and let down. Like when a spouse has an affair, a partner embezzles funds, a friend promises you a promotion but switches when the tide turns against you, a father fails to show up at his son’s graduation. All need forgiveness.

Betrayal is another hurt that requires forgiveness. This act turns people who belong to each other into enemies. We let people down when we are disloyal to them, but we cut them into pieces when we betray them. Peter was disloyal to Jesus, but Judas betrayed Him. You betray when you take a secret I have entrusted with you and reveal it to someone who will use it against me. You betray me when you put me down in front of people who are important to me. Betrayal involves moral wrongs that people do out of an evil intent. Such wrongs cannot be tolerated, but they must be forgiven. But doesn’t the Bible say, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”? See Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21. Why shouldn’t the person who betrays me be punished? Why shouldn’t I seek revenge?

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Such questions bring us to the second stage in the process of forgiving - spiritual surgery. Forgiveness is to slice away the wrong from the person who wronged you. It is to separate the person from the hurtful act. It is to recreate that person in your memory, apart from the hurt. It means you no longer think of that person as someone who has wronged you, rather as someone who needs you. You no longer see a person who is evil, but a person who is weak.

God actually alters His memory of a sinner through spiritual surgery. Notice the following texts: "Thou hast held back my life from the pit of destruction, for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back." Isaiah 38:17, RSV. "Remember these things,... you will not be forgotten by me. I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." Isaiah 44:21, 22, RSV. "As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." Psalms 103:11, 12.

Claiming God's promises toward us, it is possible for us to utilize this same surgical technique and separate the deed from the doer. It is possible for us to forgive the person who hurt us even though the act itself may be unforgivable. Often we can go no farther in the process of forgiveness. In some instances the person is deceased. In other cases the person may not want our forgiveness, and we can go no farther than this in the process. But, where it is at all possible, we should progress to the third stage of starting over.

The miracle of forgiveness allows two alienated people to begin again. That doesn't mean everything will be a bed of roses in the future. Two alienated people in the process of forgiveness must begin where they are with some loose ends still hanging, some questions still unanswered, and perhaps even the fear of more hurts to come.

Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. If we could actually forget we might not find it necessary to forgive. It is because we can't forget that we need to forgive. Like the man who drank too much alcohol at a party. He acted like an idiot, embarrassing himself and his wife. The next morning he was filled with remorse (not to mention a hangover) and asked his wife for forgiveness. She said she understood and would forgive and forget. However, in the weeks that followed she kept bringing up the episode until he grew tired of hearing about it. Finally he inquired, "I thought you said you were going to forgive and forget." She replied, "I have forgiven and forgotten. I just don't want you to

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forget that I have forgiven and forgotten.” The real miracle of forgiveness is to remember and still forgive.

It should be made clear that forgiving is not the same as excusing. I read about an uneducated old mountain man who was arrested for stealing a horse. The man was not too bright, but he was smart enough to hire a good lawyer. His silver-tongued attorney won the case, and the judge told the man he was acquitted. The old mountain man scratched his head for a moment and then asked the judge, “Does that mean I get to keep the horse?”

Also, forgiveness is not merely “smoothing things over.” Some people make a career out of pouring oil on troubled water. They are diplomats from birth. I think of a salesman who was a master of diplomacy. His boss was going to send him to Ottawa in the middle of January on business. Not wishing to go north in the winter, the salesman asked the boss if he could send someone else. “Why?” inquired the boss. “It’s too cold up there. Besides, there are only hockey players and ugly women in Ottawa,” exclaimed the salesman. Bristling, the boss fired back, “My wife is from Ottawa!” Without a moment’s hesitation the smooth-talking salesman replied, “What position does she play, sir?”

Mothers and managers are great “smoothers-over.” They stifle hurts, hush complaints, and smother conflicts. While all this may be important for a smoothly running corporation or family, it actually stifles the process of forgiveness. While the grace to forgive comes from God, the decision to forgive must come from YOU!

Having defined what forgiveness is and is not, why should I forgive at all? Isn’t forgiveness really unfair? Any straight-line moral code has to agree with “an eye for an eye.” But, a closer look reveals that some things, cannot be settled with restitution. It is impossible to demand repayment for a broken home. How does one reinstate a damaged reputation. What about an unwanted pregnancy or rejection by a loved one? How do you repay those things?

So, the next step is revenge. If we cannot get equal restitution, then we should “get even.” God warns us against following such a path: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” Romans 12:19, RSV. Why does God ask us to leave revenge with Him? Why can’t I get even on my own? First of all, to get even you must make yourself even with your enemy. You must lower yourself to his standards. There is an old saying: “Doing an injury puts you below your

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enemy; revenging an injury makes you but even with him; forgiving it sets you above him.”

Revenge is the most worthless weapon in the world. It is like shooting yourself in order to injure your enemy with the recoil. Revenge only confirms the enemy in his wrongdoing. Revenge starts a string of reprisals that knows no limits. Revenge becomes a “Can you top this?” contest in which everybody loses!

Failing to get revenge, the final step in coping with a wrong is hatred. But, in hatred (like revenge) everybody loses. Hatred results in loss of friends, clients, customers, employees, health. Hatred causes high blood pressure, ulcers, coronary disorder, nervous breakdown, etc. The Bible states that by beholding we become changed. See 2 Corinthians 3:18. Hatred actually turns the hater into the object he hates.

It is at this point that forgiveness offers the ultimate solution. Forgiveness releases us from an unfair past. Revenge never evens the score. Revenge merely cements us with super glue to the past. Revenge merely puts us on a never-ending elevator into more hatred, more revenge more hatred. The only way to stop the elevator into oblivion and misery is to press the forgiveness button and get off.

Johnny and Sally were visiting their grandparents on a little farm in the Midwest. Grandpa made Johnny a slingshot and showed him how to use it. The next day Johnny thought it might be fun to shoot at their pet duck Much to his horror, the stone hit the duck in the head and killed it. Sally saw Johnny commit this act, but didn't say anything at the time. Later, at dinner, Grandma asked Sally to help in the kitchen. Immediately Sally piped up. “Johnny said he wanted to help you, Grandma.” Then leaning close to Johnny, Sally whispered, “Remember the duck!” Johnny dutifully helped Grandma clean up the kitchen and went to bed. The next day it was more of the same, as every time Sally did not want to do something, she would volunteer Johnny and then whisper, “Remember the duck.” Finally, Johnny could take it no longer. In tears he went to Grandma and confessed that he had killed their pet duck. Grandma hugged him and said she had known it all along. In fact, she had already forgiven him. But she wondered how long he would let Sally make him her slave. How long will we remain a slave to our sin? Until we are willing to ask for, or grant, forgiveness, as the case may be.

Forgiveness actually brings fairness to the forgiver. Is it fair to us to be stuck with a painful past? Is it fair to constantly view instant replays

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from the videotape of our memory? Is it fair to instantly feel the pain all over again? The one who has been wronged has the power to turn over the instant replays - through forgiveness. Forgiving sets us free. Forgiving stops the replaying of unfair pain within our heart.

But, how do we forgive? I wish I could give you a step-by-step procedure that will always work. I'm trying to learn. But it isn't easy. I fumble around, trying to find ways to make it easy. It never is. I search the Scriptures, and God tells me I must forgive if I want to be forgiven. But my inner being rebels at being treated unfairly. Then I remember that God has promised not to treat me unfairly in the judgment if I claim His Son as my Saviour. Think of that! God will not treat me like I deserve to be treated because He has forgiven me. God will not treat me fairly! God will treat me as though I had never offended Him in any way. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9.

God's forgiveness includes the sins of revenge, hatred, and even an unforgiving spirit. When we forgive, we not only participate in a divine attribute, but at the same time we receive a divine pardon. Think of that! Forgiveness takes the place of hatred, revenge, or even justice! But, how do we do it? There are three things I have observed concerning how people tend to forgive. First of all, there are not too many instant forgivers. It is usually a slow process. C. S. Lewis tells about a teacher he had that mistreated him terribly. Just a few months before he died, Lewis wrote to his American friend, "Dear Mary: do you know, only a few weeks ago, I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I had been trying to do it for years."

I remember a similar experience in my own life. I had been trying to forgive a person whom I thought betrayed me, lied to me, and hurt me deeply. I had understood his actions, but never forgiven him. This hung over me like a black cloud and kept me from enjoying my life fully. It took over three years, but finally forgiveness came and I was free. Forgiveness comes slowly at times. But when it comes, we feel like a person who has just been freed from a prison cell.

I have found it much easier to forgive when someone in my circle of friends has also experienced what I am going through. I need people in my life who are forgivers. I need people who have experienced deep hurts and yet forgiven. I need people who have hated as I hate and still forgiven. Just knowing that someone else has been through these same emotional trials, and yet forgiven, encourages me in my quest to

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forgive. It gives me hope that forgiveness is a miraculous possibility in my life provided by a loving heavenly Father. It helps me understand Jesus' plea, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34.

Finally, I find it easier to forgive when I have been forgiven. Often it is difficult to tell the difference between feeling forgiven and being the forgiver. I find it necessary to experience forgiveness in order to offer forgiveness. Yet, even when I am the one offering forgiveness I find forgiveness. I am the one set free. No wonder Jesus said, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The two emotional experiences, forgiving and being forgiven, are so intertwined it is difficult to separate them. Perhaps it is enough to know that in forgiving we find forgiveness - and in forgiveness we learn to forgive.

When we forgive, we free ourselves from the shackles of revenge, bitterness, hatred, and all the horrors these emotions bring into our life. Because we have already been forgiven by God, we have experienced forgiveness; therefore, we can also forgive. True, we often forgive slowly, imperfectly, haltingly, and even selfishly before we finally experience true forgiveness. This is to be expected, since forgiveness is not natural for the carnal heart. Sin makes it not only necessary to ask forgiveness, but also difficult for us to forgive. The miracle of forgiveness is that we can forgive at all. Forgiveness is a gift from God to both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Forgiveness restores a right relationship. Forgiveness creates fairness out of unfairness. Forgiveness creates justice from injustice. Forgiveness is God working a miracle within you. To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover that the prisoner was you!

A seminary professor told the following story concerning his own forgiveness. As a young man he told his father a lie that caused his parent deep hurt. This hurt went unresolved for years. Finally, guilt and remorse prompted the young man to write to his father, confessing his sin and asking his father to forgive him. To make certain his father recalled the incident he described the episode in great detail.

He received a reply from his father, "Of course I remember, and of course I forgive you." The professor said it was like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. This single sentence of forgiveness made him a new man and changed the direction of his life.

The real payoff came some years later when both his parents had died and he was going through some of the things in the attic. He came across the little treasures they had kept down through the years. Special



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treasures from their childhood and marriage. His eyes welled up with tears as he relived the incidents that had meant the most to his parents down through the years.

Then he found the letter he had written to his father asking forgiveness. He opened it and began to read. Tears ran down his cheeks as he turned it over, and there in his father's handwriting, was one word - **FORGIVEN!** It was scrawled in bold writing and underlined for emphasis. He realized then that his father really had let go of that thing that had come between them. He had written forgiven on the letter, so there really was no unfinished business between them.

Jesus reminds us that the miracle of forgiveness offers us the assurance that there is no unfinished business in our lives. "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you." Matthew 6:14, RSV.