

FORGIVENESS

**AN ACT OF MERCY
AND
A KEY TO ANSWERED PRAYER**

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FOREWORD

In this third edition I have added two chapters: Chapter Eleven, A Guide to Forgiveness and Chapter Twelve, Reconciliation.

A number of people have asked me to add a how-to to this small book so Chapter Eleven gives a detailed outline on how to guide someone in Prayer Resolution. It is one thing to read about something, another thing to actually do it. The reader will not fully understand the concepts of forgiveness and Prayer Resolution until he or she actually helps someone in this way.

We cannot talk about forgiveness without recognizing that it provides the grounds for reconciliation. That theme in itself requires a book but Chapter Twelve presents some of the factors that should be considered.

PREFACE

There have recently been scores of good books that have been published on forgiveness so why add this one to the list? This book presents what my wife and I have discovered as we have worked with and counseled Christians, especially missionaries, in the area of forgiveness and the lessons we have learned, as well as the biblical perspective that has come out of our experiences, in seeing God work.

I have accepted the fact that if people have an outward symptom then most likely there is an inward cause for that symptom. It does little good to encourage the Christian to pretend that the hurts and scars do not exist or the feelings and results of sin have been handled once and for all at Calvary when, in fact, their feelings do not correspond with what they have been told is true.

I have been trained in Bible and in linguistics. It is from out of my linguistic training that I have approached this topic. In linguistics I have often created a model to explain how or why a part of language works only to have bits and pieces left

For most of my early ministry as I tried to help people, I found that either God did not do his part or that he did so in ways I did not understand. When my "God working model"—that neat package of theology I had learned or created from the Word—did not explain all, I recognized that God's Word, the language data so to speak, was not faulty, my model was.

So I began to go back over the Word to see where I had gone wrong while accepting as valid that: 1) People's spiritual symptoms were a reflection of real spiritual need, 2) God, through Christ, had fully done his part, and 3) God intended us to live a life of victory not defeat when we actually operate as part of the vine.

My study has forced me to more fully appreciate and expand three areas that I have known in part all along. One area

I have come to appreciate is the Law. Only as we place sin in its proper perspective to the Law and Christ's sacrifice can we hope to provide the grounds for permanent, lasting results.

Secondly, I am beginning to get a glimpse of why we are called a priesthood of believers and all that that phrase implies and, thirdly, I have come to realize the power of knowledgeable, focused prayer. I agree with one young husband who said, "You know, I never realized before that something actually happens when we pray." This book deals with one aspect of knowledgeable, focused prayer: dealing with forgiveness using God's perspective.

We want to understand why God cannot answer prayer today unless we recognize the process and agents involved. It is vital that we screen this different approach to forgiveness for effective counseling using the Word as our guide and test its biblical soundness.

If God is truly working then there will be harmony between the Law and Grace. Increased understanding will come through focused prayer based on awareness. And we will fully involve the agents who create the conditions for change; these include ourselves, God as Father, Christ as the Lamb of God, and the Holy Spirit as guide.

I consider myself a mainstream evangelical, Biola University taught and Wycliffe Bible Translators trained. I tend to be skeptical. I have a distrust of, and predisposition against, things supernatural but years spent in the jungles of Colombia, the highlands of Ethiopia, the wilderness of Southern Sudan, and the world of Islam, has created more willingness to accept God's working. I have come to realize that while God wants to answer our prayers, he will do so only on his terms. This book deals with fulfilling one of his conditions for answered prayer.

I do not claim to be exhaustive in my treatment. I am going to open the doors a bit wider so we can see in the corners and I encourage you, dear reader, to read your Bible with new understanding and hope. God did it all and I am only just beginning to glimpse what that all means.

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- ONE -

OUR BURDEN AND GOD'S RESOLUTION

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:12-13).

We trudge along like burros, our tattered saddle blankets hidden by what appears to be huge loads of firewood. Hot and tired, we do not like the weight but, surrendering to fate, we patiently bear the load. This load consists of our past actions, thoughts, feelings, experiences and (distorted) assumptions, in one form or another. It would seem we are burdened for life because our load is never lightened. And people passing by add yet more sticks.

These burdens continue to shape, mold and hurt us long after the events have receded into the dim recesses in our minds. However, even though we placed this burden on ourselves, or others did, we do not have to surrender to a lifetime of burden bearing. We can unload one stick at a time and lighten the load if we understand and use the resources God has given us through prayer. This unloading process is dependent upon, more than anything else, our willingness to give and receive forgiveness.

Ultimately, as the load lightens—and the forgiveness process takes hold—we will relate more properly to God as our Father, to his people as our brothers and sisters and to our families in the relationships we have as, for example, father, mother, sister, brother.

Sin created the burdens that weigh us down. The key issue now is effective prayer that allows us to mend our broken relationships and bring reconciliation after we have sinned or others have sinned against us—thus bringing resolution and removing the burden itself.

Effective prayer is praying according to God's specifications. When we do, we gain greater understanding of sin and its consequences. As Denise put it, after some hours of counseling and prayer, "I never realized before how terrible the consequences have been for myself and others because I chose to sin." When we pray according to God's specifications he answers! During Al's time of forgiving, confessing and receiving forgiveness from God he said, "I never knew that when we pray something actually happens."

Talking out our feelings about what we have done or what others have done to us helps to relieve some of the tensions and anxieties. The process is even cleansing to a point. But the mere sharing does not remove a stick from our load. Talking the problem out helps connect our minds with our hearts (the rational and the emotional) but only God can bring resolution. God must complete a divine transaction for true forgiveness to be experienced and for us to permanently take a stick off our backs.

To experience true forgiveness we must have God's perspective: his perspective as to the participants in the transaction; his perspective as to the understanding of the wrongdoing/sin involved; his perspective on forgiveness itself.

– TWO –

THE PARTICIPANTS

Every play has its cast of characters on stage. If each character plays his or her part well, the play comes to a significant, meaningful conclusion. In the same way for prayer, we bring together a special cast of players. As each member understands and faithfully plays out his or her part, the prayer can also come to a significant and meaningful conclusion. For both the play and the prayer, the cast must understand who are the stars and who are the supporting players.

The Father

In prayer God stars as the Father. We should not normally pray to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit. Christ came that we might come to God and call him Father. Thus we pray to the Father—assuming that we have been born-again and are his children—and present our case as members of his family.

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11)

Since one of the results of redemption was adoption, we should approach God as Father, not as Creator or Judge. Thus God in his role as Father does not judge us in his wrath but disciplines us in love. As we keep in mind our roles of Father-son and Father-daughter it is amazingly easy to know his will and pray accordingly.

So the Father stands center stage but another is with him.

The Lord

We can say that $2 = 3$ and $3 = 4$ when we come together in Christ's name. In some mysterious way the Lord is present also: "*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them*" (Matthew 18:20). We should not take this lightly. We should acknowledge his part in the play for his death provides the means for answered prayer and his presence insures his participation and adds power to our prayers to the Father.

Two now stand on stage: God as Father and Christ as Lord and High Priest, but others of the cast arrive.

The Believers

With the exception of one other, the rest of the cast are the children of God. We should acknowledge our redemption through Christ and adoption into God's family because of the Lord. Paul put it this way,

"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem

those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

We must be members of God's family to be on stage. Now, as members of the cast we can shape the script if we are in accord. It counts, according to the Lord, when we come to the Father in agreement:

I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven (Matthew 18:18-19).

Working on the script is usually more than any one member of the cast can handle. We have an advantage if we have at least one other person involved with us. We need "safe others" to share our burden. Because our participation as the wronged or the wrong doer can distort the picture and the play may finish without an appropriate ending.

If we are too emotionally involved our feelings get in the way and the script can be distorted. For example, Dan blamed himself for being stimulated when he was put to bed with his older sister. Before Dan could confess and be fully cleansed from his sinful thoughts at that time he had to recognize that his mother had control over the situation and to forgive her for placing him in such a spot. He was so guilt ridden over his own actions he could not see how his mother had wronged him.

Lani had forgiven the man who raped her but she had not forgiven herself nor asked God's forgiveness for allowing herself to be in a position to be raped while unconscious because of drugs and alcohol. When "safe others" helped Lani the script worked.

The last member of the cast, the director, enters.

The Holy Spirit

While we have authority to edit the script and recognize the need for others to help, we must have a director. He makes it all fit together. Christ gave us authority to use but it is imperative that the Holy Spirit controls this power of authority. We must permit the Holy Spirit to do his part in the play. He must minister to us and direct us in all things so that our authority is under God's controlling Spirit and hence all we do is according to the Father's will.

The cast is assembled. Now let us look at the script. We had prepared it but as we edited we began to comprehend just what scenes we needed to present to the Father, the star in our play.

- THREE -

THE WRONGDOING/SIN

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:31-32).

The script deals with interaction and much of interaction is dialogue between players. We want the dialogue to work. What needs to be said must be said. Meaningful dialogue advances the play and moves it toward a successful end. In prayer we want the dialogue to work as well. Notice, dialogue is not monologue. Players have both speaking and listening parts. We speak our part and then listen to the heavenly Father's response before continuing. Without interaction there is no play. So our script considers all the players, what needs to be said, by whom and to whom, and when. The script does not always say what we want so we need to revise. Because if the script is not correct then the play will not be a success.

Agnes

We had a brief encounter in the Middle East with Agnes, a young lady who had been gang-raped years before. Even after Christian and secular counselors helped Agnes and she had forgiven these men she continued to relive the incident with all the feelings of anger, shame and defilement.

It was not the best time for counseling. We needed to catch a ferry and had just a few minutes to find the block to spiritual healing. It is usually very difficult to forgive when we are the totally innocent and helpless victims. So, "Agnes, on what basis," I asked, "did you forgive those who raped you?"

"On the same basis," she said, "that Jesus did on the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"

Unfortunately Agnes gave the wrong answer. People often respond this way: this spiritualizes their act of forgiveness. Here are the circumstances around Christ saying what He did:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots (Luke 23:32-34).

The soldiers knew what they were doing, they were professional executioners, but they did not know to whom they were doing it. They were crucifying the Son of God. Jesus did not want the wrath of God to descend upon them.

Those men who raped Agnes knew exactly what they were doing. To forgive them because they did not know is a wrong basis in this case. Such a prayer of forgiveness cannot be acknowledged. On the other hand, is forgiveness always required? Must she forgive them?

We are forgiven because of what Christ did on the cross. Because Christ paid the full price to cover our sins God can show mercy and forgive us in Christ but he does so with full knowledge of who and what we are. He knows what we have done and that we are without excuse. We deserve death. He shows us mercy, accepts Christ's death in our place and extends forgiveness to us.

God is our example here. We cannot truly forgive what we do not acknowledge. We cannot forgive if we lessen or redefine as nothing the wrong of another. Doing so eliminates the grounds for forgiveness.

Agnes, the lady who had been gang raped, eventually truly forgave—but not because the men involved did not know what they were doing. That wasn't true. They raped her with premeditation. They took advantage of her because they had control. The humiliation was deliberate. The pain they caused her physically and emotionally was incidental to them. If she had been around the next week they would likely have raped her again.

I am making a point here. God forgives us when we do not deserve forgiveness. He set the example; we forgive people when they do not deserve forgiveness. Forgiveness is not extended when we pray:

"I forgive them, Father, they didn't know what they were doing."

Or ". . . they could not control themselves."

Or ". . . because if I were in their shoes I would understand them (and condone their actions)."

Or "They really didn't mean it."

Or "We are all sinners so . . ."

It is only when we accept the fact that real or perceived wrong has been done to us without excuse that we are then faced with extending forgiveness.

It is my personal opinion that we cannot forgive unless we really feel the emotions that occurred at that time. It is those emotions, not merely the intellectual knowledge of the offense, that fester under the surface affecting our lives now. They add immensely to the weight of the burden we carry. Unfortunately, our American culture distrusts emotions. If we become too emotional we are cautioned to calm down, control ourselves or leave.

We have been educated to think linear, to trust the logical and rational and to distrust our emotions. We have been told that our feelings can interfere. Not true. We have a right to those emotions. We are justified in feeling that pain. We must face the anger, bitterness, hurt, humiliation that arose when we were wronged—or when we wronged another.

Rational thinking does not preclude emotions. Our feelings give our thoughts perspective. Regardless of what we think, when we feel deeply, we have experienced.

This is why Christ could say,

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28).

Our thoughts and our feelings are equivalent real acts. We must see our actions and the actions of others from God's perspective, with both reason and emotion.

Paul

A young man in his thirties, we will call him Paul, came for counsel. He felt unloved, among other things, even by God. We asked the Holy Spirit to reveal to Paul the basis of his feelings in this regard and the Spirit took him back to when he was seven years old.

Paul had been in the hospital for over two weeks when the day came for his release. He vividly remembered himself as a small boy sitting on a bench in the hospital lobby longing for his parents to come. Bags packed, little Paul waited and waited. From time to time, one of the nurses would comfort him by saying, "Don't worry, your parents are probably delayed in traffic." Paul's mother and father never came that day. They had forgotten.

We asked Paul if he thought his parents loved him. Paul's first comment was, "They do not outwardly show me love but of course they love me, they are my parents." Yet these "loving parents" left little Paul alone and forgotten at a hospital.

As Paul prayed to the heavenly Father he wept and in a little boy's voice acknowledged his parent's perceived lack of love. It was hard for Paul to forgive his parents—that is as it should be. Easily stated surface forgiveness accomplishes nothing. No healing comes from such an action. As Paul felt again the hurt, loneliness, fear and betrayal, he came to see that his parents were without excuse. But it was not enough for Paul to verbalize his feeling.

Relieving tensions and anxieties through sharing is cleansing and does promote mental health but sharing is not an end in itself. Through sharing Paul was able to recognize the terrible way his parents had wronged him and that this was the basis for his feeling of being unloved. Then, and only then, could Paul truly forgive them.

– FOUR –

AN ACT OF MERCY

Forgiving others is at the core of the process of our own forgiveness. When Jesus gave us an example of prayer, He included, "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (Matthew 6:12). The "as" here means in the same way as we forgive might we be forgiven. This section of the Lord's Prayer is causal in Luke: "*Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us*" (Luke 11:4a). *Because* we forgive, forgive us . . .

Jesus makes forgiveness of others a clear condition for our own forgiveness,

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Jesus also instructed us,

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins" (Mark 11:25- 26).

Don't forgive and you won't be either.

Make no mistake; God does not forgive us because he loves us. Out of his love he provided a way that payment could be made for us, thus making forgiveness possible. But love alone was not enough to provide for forgiveness. God can forgive us because Christ provided the avenue for mercy. God forgives us because, through Christ, he himself paid the debt.

We also cannot forgive a wrongdoer because we love him or her. In fact, loving that person is usually beyond us. We can, however, extend forgiveness because the payment for that very real awful wrong against us has been made.

God's mercy allows Christ's payment to be applied to our sin. When we give mercy to the one who wrongs us we allow Christ's payment to be applied to that sin if God wills.

For us to say that any sin, even a "small" one, which we commit or which another commits against us is worthy of death sounds ludicrous. Especially when we use such a standard for *our* forgiving another. But this is not a ridiculous concept to the Southern Barasanos of the Amazon jungle.

The Indians accidentally burnt our house down to the ground. We were out of the tribe at the time and heard about the burning by radio. When we landed in the tribe we found two cringing Indians waiting on the strip, a small boy and an old lady. The rest were hiding in the jungle.

Because of this incident we found that, to the tribes people, there was no such thing as forgiveness even for "small" matters. Let alone for burning down our house! Death evened the score with another.

So it was only when the boy and the old lady, left to bear the punishment, were not killed that the rest of the Indians crept, amazed, out of the jungle. We had showed them mercy when we showed-goodness-to-them-contrary-to-expectation (instead of what they deserved: death).

God does not forgive us because he understands our humanness and thus excuses us. There is no excuse for sin.

There may be reasons why a person sins against God or against us, but there is no excuse. Sin requires the payment of death. God forgives us because he counted the death of Christ sufficient payment and applied that to us. Are we willing to allow the one who wronged us to have access to that payment as well?

God does not forgive us because he has to. We cannot forgive just because we are commanded to do so. Neither can we forgive just because our own forgiveness depends on it. We extend forgiveness when and only when, in mercy, we give God the freedom to apply the payment of Jesus' death to that sin, wrong doing or hurt against us.

God does not forgive us just because he arbitrarily decides to do so. He forgives us because in his mercy he chooses to apply the death of Jesus as payment for our sin. We do not deserve this forgiveness. We are without excuse. God's standard, then, forms the basis by which we can forgive the awful deed done against us. We must make a deliberate choice to show mercy. We must allow the death of Jesus to be the payment for that awful person who wronged us even though he or she does not deserve our forgiveness and is totally without excuse.

As Agnes began to understand God's specifications for forgiveness, she acknowledged to the Father those terrible wrongs committed against her and that she chose to extend mercy and allow the death of Jesus to be the payment for those who raped her so long ago.

Before, Agnes had always said a quick prayer of forgiveness for the young men who had raped her—and continued to feel all the rage, hurt and humiliation. This time she bowed her head in silence for several minutes. When she prayed it was with difficulty as she talked to her heavenly Father about what the men had done to her. And it was with difficulty, after several agonizing gaps of silence, that Agnes finally forgave them. It is not easy to extend mercy to those who do not deserve it.

– FIVE –

THE PERSPECTIVE: OURS

We must view the wrong done from several perspectives in order to forgive the right thing for the right reasons. As we think of what has happened we must recognize the harm done to us and/or to others and we must recognize how God views these wrongs.

God's perspective and that of the culture can be the same. For example, we have met a number of Asian ladies who earlier in life had allowed a man to kiss or hold them when their cultures did not allow this type of behavior. The ladies violated their own inner standards of purity and felt the full consequences of their sin. By American standards, their conduct was innocent but, to themselves, they had committed fornication and needed full confession, forgiveness and cleansing, and they needed to extend forgiveness to those who had caused them to violate their standards.

Should we have comforted these ladies by saying, "It was nothing. Forget about this." Of course not! If God had been in control, these Asian ladies would have always lived pure lives.

From Paul's perspective, he experienced only deprivation of love yet Paul's parents, we assume, did love their son. If God

had been in control, Paul would have clearly and unmistakably known and experienced love from his parents.

From our perspective the issue is not: did a wrong occur, but did we feel that we wronged or were wronged. Forgiveness takes place on the emotional level not at the intellectual level and so a perceived wrong is a real wrong.

Wrong here can be translated in different ways depending on the circumstances; it can be betrayal, lack of love, rape, stealing, hitting, anger, abuse, etc. Whatever the sin, we must take responsibility for our part. But we must also recognize the part others have had to play. Remember that thought and emotion create their own context of reality and out of that right or wrong context can come sin or perceived sin.

Bonnie

Unanswered prayer is often a result of praying without understanding or with a distorted view of the issues. For example, Bonnie had an abortion and prayed for over twenty years for forgiveness. But God could not pardon her for sins she had not committed.

After sharing her burden with "safe others" during counseling, Bonnie recognized the guilt and responsibility that others shared: Her boy friend threatened to leave her if she did not abort the baby; her mother stated that Bonnie had brought it on herself; the nurse assured Bonnie that an abortion was of no consequence.

Before Bonnie forgave these people she raged against them before God. Worn out and grieving for her lost baby she finally forgave them for the terrible things they had put her through. It was difficult for her to forgive, but she did. Then she confessed her part and for the first time in twenty-three years felt forgiven and clean and at peace.

You see, Bonnie could not play all the parts in the play. When she finally understood what her part was and only played her role in the play, following the correct script, her Father answered and gave her peace.

– SIX –

THE PERSPECTIVE: GOD'S

We feel that we must analyze in a logical and rational way; everything must be explained or justified to have validity. But our reasoning can be faulty. We have an earthly view. Our feelings can be distorted as we try to maintain our own (high or low) self-image.

If we are to forgive we must do so from God's perspective. He is the Great Forgiver. Jesus gave us a parable that illustrates God's character and perspective:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back

everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35).

There are three important lessons in this parable. (1) God releases people from debts when they don't deserve such treatment. (Actually, the debt is paid at the cross.) (2) The extending of mercy is an act of our will. (3) God is angered if we do not treat others in the same way he treats us. God is angered by an unforgiving spirit, especially so in one of his children.

I disagree with Paula Sandford when she says, "It is important to understand that there is no way anyone can ever accomplish forgiveness by an act of will. However we can make

a choice to let go, to allow the Lord to accomplish forgiveness in us for us"¹

Nowhere in Scripture are we taught that it is impossible to forgive. Nowhere are we taught to pray, "Father, I cannot forgive my brother but I will give my unforgiveness to you." God does not command us to do that which we are unable to do; God does command us to forgive.

Linda

The issue is not, can we or can we not forgive another, because we must forgive. But can we give blanket, generic forgiveness? Can we "forgive them for all the bad things they have ever done to us?" The answer is no. However, we can forgive in small doses. God does not ask more of us than what we can give. He allows us to begin right where we are. For example, Andrew had molested Linda, his younger sister, from the time she was a toddler until he left home at graduation. Linda had forgiven her brother numerous times, in general terms, for molesting her. But tremendous rage surfaced whenever Linda mentioned Andrew. And she never referred to him by name.

It seemed impossible for Linda to forgive her brother, but after much thought, sharing and prayer she could truly forgive him for the first remembered incident. It was extremely difficult to forgive at first. But as Linda, one incident at a time, acknowledged before the heavenly Father Andrew's violations it became progressively easier to forgive him. As Linda forgave her brother for each occasion through the years her rage began to go. At the end Linda's anger was gone and she began to pray for her brother's salvation. (And at her request, the heavenly

¹*Healing Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Tulsa: Victory House, 1988) p. 70.

Father gave Linda, the defiled victim of her brother's lust, cleansing and Linda felt pure for the first time in her life.)

God wants us as his children to exhibit his character. As Jesus pointed out:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28).

And this is only possible by first extending forgiveness to those enemies.

– SEVEN –

THE RELINQUISHING OF OUR RIGHTS

The right of judgment (and hence forgiveness) belongs to God alone. Is that a true statement? Despite our being tarnished through Adam's sin we are made in God's image. We have the potential to forgive: To act as God would in extending mercy and forgiveness. By forgiving, we give up our right to prosecute and we make ourselves unavailable as witnesses for the prosecution against the wrong doer.

Yet we must recognize that all sin must be paid for. Either by ourselves, the other party, or by Christ. All sins count. All sins must be dealt with. When we release our claim against another that does not release them from God's judgment, only from our own. When we forgive we are saying that the wrong doer deserves the wrath and judgment of God but that we are permitting God to extend death if he desires: the death of Christ on the Cross as the payment. When we forgive others we give up our rights to hold those forgiven things against them. These things are now in God's hands and no longer ours.

As we forgive another we acknowledge our right to demand death but give up that right and permit God to work his will. Whether we forgive at our level or God does at his, death is the ultimate payment for wrongdoing. Forgiveness then is

being willing for Christ to die instead of those who have wounded us.

This whole concept of giving up our right to judgment is of crucial importance to those of us who have been horribly wounded. The horridness of the deed simply must be punished. Anything else is unthinkable. Only death could pay for such an awful thing.

But as long as we hold to our rights as the judge overseeing the account of the offender, we are wishing them death. And the wound remains to remind us of their wrongdoing. We have the right to hang on to our anger, bitterness and hurt. But when we do, we also retain all the consequences of an unforgiving spirit. By allowing the ultimate payment, the death of Christ, to be made, we allow God to heal our wounds and to free us from the power of sin.

- EIGHT -

THE SIDE BENEFITS

The Scriptures clearly put our forgiving others before our receiving forgiveness. For in first forgiving others we gain perspective for our own prayer requests. As we go through the process of determining exactly what sins were committed against us, we often come to see ourselves as God sees us. We then can see more clearly the sins we ourselves have committed. In forgiving others we attain a clearer grasp of reality.

Ruth, for example, even after twenty-five years, could not think about her first husband's leaving her without rage and bitterness. As she attempted to forgive him, she suddenly realized that she had been most responsible for the breakup of their marriage. As Ruth prayed and forgave her first husband, she had to confess that she was so much guiltier and had so much more to be forgiven.

Jesus cautions us,

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37).

We have already judged the one who wronged us. That is why we have anger or bitterness against them. Often, like

Ruth, we find our judgment was faulty, or not ours to make, and in the process suddenly come to see what Christ refers to as the speck versus the plank approach:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Luke 6:41-42).

As we forgive others with clarity and understanding, we learn to confess with clarity and understanding, and we receive forgiveness. We begin to understand how God feels when sin happens. "I never realized before the terrible consequences that resulted when I chose to do that one sin [adultery]," Donna said. "It has not only affected me [through the years] but my husband and children also."

Seemingly unrelated emotional changes take place when we forgive others. For example, Joyce had a history of emotional problems, including depression. Twice Joyce tried to commit suicide. After several years of therapy and counseling she was in despair. Nothing was working.

At that time Joyce shared with Connie about the tremendous anger she felt toward one of her therapists. Connie carefully helped Joyce to understand the necessity for forgiveness and what God's perspective was. Joyce forgave and extended mercy to that therapist who had so betrayed and hurt her.

That night Joyce slept peacefully and awoke the next morning, "looking forward to the day for the first time in years." Over the coming months Joyce took control of her own life. She became more sensitive to the Holy Spirit in her life. Her hatred toward others and self was gone. Amazingly, all thoughts of

suicide were gone and she was able to write, "I know from deep inside that God is alive, that I am alive, and that I want to live!" Joyce continues to struggle because there are still issues in her life that need resolution but she has a good start. She knows how to deal with forgiveness.

There is another benefit in forgiveness. It releases us to fully love and appreciate the offender. When we begin to see reality we see even our offender with new eyes. And forgiving the offender releases us to extend interest, concern, understanding, compassion, even love—but not before. Forgiveness does not produce positive emotions towards our offender, but it does, so to speak, put us back into neutral. We must work on creating or rebuilding proper relationships but we are now free to do so.

As we begin to model God in our behavior there is another side benefit. We begin to recognize and appreciate God as Father and we want to please him as his son or daughter. (Read the Epistle of Ephesians, most of the epistle has this theme of pleasing him.) When we give and receive forgiveness God's way then healing and recovery comes. Ideally, recovery here is the continuing integration of our beliefs, corrected feelings and rational thoughts so that we begin to see life from God's perspective and we live it out with mind and heart.

However, there can still be blocks in our lives that keep us from a complete relationship with God as Father and with others.

– NINE –

THE BLOCKS

Our attitudes can block God the Father so he cannot answer our prayers or we cannot receive his answers. We should always honor and respect the Father. Our esteem for him as Father is not less than his esteem for us as his children. While we certainly can call him "Abba" (Daddy) we still don't romp with him. So we must be careful not to deal with God as Father in too casual a manner.

We can have such a low esteem of ourselves that we are not willing to receive forgiveness, or any good thing, from the Father. We can accept the Father's forgiveness and yet be unwilling to forgive ourselves and consequently feel unforgiven.

We can hold on to our feelings of bitterness, be unforgiving and pay the consequences.

We can approach prayer in a casual manner or in general terms. We may not clearly understand the real issues. In a hurry, we may not take the time to deal with all the problem. We come to God on our terms and expect him to answer.

Prayer is not merely a way of asking for what we want. One of the primary functions of prayer is to appropriate all that Christ accomplished at the cross. When we pray we take our

places as the priesthood of believers and make use of the sacrifice that has been made. Sin does not automatically disappear; the need to extend or receive forgiveness does not go away with time. It exerts its influence until someone pays. Either Christ pays the price or we pay for the consequences of our unforgiven sins and unforgiving spirit.

The burros will continue to walk slowly by with their terrible burdens until the pieces are paid for one at a time at the cross. Notice that I said pieces. Christ paid for our sins at the cross. He created the grounds for God to extend us mercy and for us to become the sons and daughters of God. Having entered into the family of God as the redeemed we cannot and must not allow our sin or another's sin against us to burden us down when Christ's death provided for the removal of it all.

If we do not extend and receive forgiveness we cannot receive all that the Father has for us. Though God is all-powerful, we ourselves can block his working in our lives.

- TEN -

THE GREATER CIRCLE

A prayer to forgive or to ask forgiveness can be complex. To root out sin at its deepest level we must get at the core of the issue. To do so we must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's revealing ministry. Sin's commission is seldom limited to ourselves only. Here are some examples to consider.

Jim

Jim committed adultery. He prayed for forgiveness without apparent results. Here are a few factors that might need to be considered:

Did Jim clearly recognize the part his partner played in this affair? (i.e., if his partner had resisted or thought of Jim's welfare the sin might not have happened.)

Was Jim encouraged by friends to have an affair?

What was the real issue behind the act? (i.e., selfishness, disrespect for or revenge on his wife, pornographic material, low self-image, etc.)

Did Jim's parents provide him a model that included adultery?

Did Jim acknowledge his sin or did he side step the issue by talking of "being weak," or "fooling around?" Or did Jim say, "Everyone does it" and thereby excuse his adultery.

One fellow, I will call him John, was alone in a room with a unconscious drunken woman. Before John could do anything to the woman an employee entered the room. When John confessed his sin, he spoke of attempting "to fool around with her" and "trying to mess with her."

We interrupted and cautioned John to be more specific. "John, what was the sin you tried to commit? God knows but do you?"

When John finally acknowledged his sin, what he had planned, he was appalled. John had attempted to rape the woman and had only been stopped by circumstances. When John confessed his sin for what it was he was forgiven. It is very important to name the specific sin for which we are either asking or extending forgiveness.

Linda

Her older brother, Andrew, had molested Linda as a toddler through her early teens. On the surface, the issue appears simple: Linda was the victim; Andrew was the molester. Forgive Andrew. But if Linda forgives with both emotional and rational awareness she must consider all the participants.

Certainly, Andrew her brother was a central figure. But as we talked Linda began to remember how, as a small toddler, she had told mother about Andrew's molesting. Her mother had not believed her. Her mother had done nothing. A daughter should

be able to seek safety and security from her mother but Linda had been unable to.

Linda's father was an angry man and the entire family feared him. Linda never felt he cared for her. In fact, both parents tended to accept Andrew's word against Linda's whenever the two fought or disagreed.

Linda had an older sister and another older brother. They knew about Andrew's behavior but, because of their fear of big brother, they did not try to save Linda. Nor did they report Andrew's molestation to their parents.

Linda's uncle molested Andrew as a small boy. So uncle began this awful chain of events.

The family pastor told Andrew's parents that their son was a violent disturbed boy and he needed professional help. Her parents refused to believe the pastor and so did not seek help for their son.

As the picture developed there were many who had a part in Andrew's violations of Linda. This did not lessen Andrew's guilt but his sins could not be dealt with in isolation. If any one of her family had come to her aid and fulfilled their responsibility as mother, father, sister or brother, much of her pain, hurt and humiliation would never have happened.

Linda could not extend full forgiveness to any of them until she understood their parts in this terrible drama. And she could not recognize their parts without the help of "safe others:" one or two others who took her burden on themselves. Others who helped Linda see the entire family, not just Andrew, had a part in her very real and justified anger, pain and humiliation.

This is not a game or casual spiritual exercise. Real forgiveness must be given or received. Or we live, as Linda, John and Joyce once did, with the ongoing consequences.

Does God fill in the blanks when we extend or ask forgiveness in a casual, general manner? I have seldom seen him answer such prayers. When we take the time to dig out all the roots and when we accept responsibility for extending for-giveness, acknowledging our own part, with mind and heart engaged, then the Father always answers.

Not sometimes but always.

– ELEVEN –

A GUIDE TO FORGIVENESS

- o Discuss
- o Accuse
- o Forgive
- o Give up rights to accuse or be a witness
- o Confess
- o Ask for forgiveness
- o Ask God to handle the memory (if needed)
- o Ask God to take the harmful emotions (if needed)

Discuss:

Ideally, we need “safe others” to help us see clearly the facts and reality of what has happened. The best “safe others” will be two people: a man and a woman). Just talk does not bring closure or resolution but it is needed so that *everything is put on the table*, nothing left out so that both accusing a wrongdoer and also confessing our own sins are fully given over to our heavenly Father.

Accuse:

We are told to “forgive one another.” In order to forgive there must be a debt to forgive, the process of getting the debt ‘out on the table’ where it can be seen is accusing. This may seem a harsh word and it is, but so is the offence. To accuse is:

- ◇ To come before my heavenly Father knowing he wants to see that I am healed of this offence.
- ◇ To bring the offender before my heavenly Father.
- ◇ To see the offence, hurt, wound, sin against me through God’s eyes.
- ◇ To accuse, to tell the Father exactly, piece by piece, point by point, what I perceive that the offender did to me.
- ◇ To let my Father know whatever I am feeling—just how hurt, angry, or whatever I am.
- ◇ To agree with the Father that this offence is worthy of death.

Extend Forgiveness:

We now come to the place where I need to make a choice—to continue to hang on to this offence and seek vengeance **OR** to choose to give it all over to God.

Choosing unforgiveness means:

- ◇ That I will continue to carry the load or burden.

- ◇ That I will continue to seek revenge in order to see that payment is made.
- ◇ That I am, in reality, waiting for payment by demanding that the offender be the one to die.
- ◇ That I am returning evil for evil.
- ◇ That I will continue in my woundedness.

Choosing forgiveness means:

- ◇ That I give up insisting that the offender die to pay for the offence and give the carrying out of justice back to God, who is equipped to handle it.
- ◇ That I am trusting God to see that payment is made.
- ◇ That I permit God to decide who will make payment.
- ◇ That I trust God enough to believe that he will see that justice is done on my behalf to the point that even my sense of justice will be satisfied.

Give up my rights to accuse or be a witness:

- ◇ That I will give up my rights as an accuser of this offence ever again.
- ◇ That I will give up my rights as a witness waiting to be called.
- ◇ That I believe that the blood of Christ is enough to make full payment for the offence against me—there is nothing

that needs to be added to the payment, neither the offender's apology nor any punishment or restitution by the offender nor anything else.

- ◇ That I can be free of the load and burden now, because there is no past, present, or future in God's economy of time so that it is already paid.

Confess:

I John 1:9 says that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. What does it mean to "confess?"

- ◇ Acknowledge the wrong done—to see my offence, my sin clearly through God's eyes.
- ◇ Remorse—to feel very sorry for grieving God so deeply and hurting the other person so badly.
- ◇ Repentant—to choose to turn from this wickedness and walk in righteousness.

Ask Forgiveness:

What does it mean to ask for "forgiveness?"

To ask:

- ◇ That the great sacrifice Christ made be applied to my sin.
- ◇ That this sacrifice was enough to pay completely for my sin. I do not have to add anything for it to be complete.

- ◇ That my sin be paid for by Christ and the debt I owe cancelled.
- ◇ That God remember my sin no more.
- ◇ That this sin is removed from the spiritual realm—the eternities.
- ◇ That because I am forgiven I am no longer guilty or shamed.
- ◇ That I am free.
- ◇ Ask for forgiveness—it does not come automatically and even as his children we do not deserve it. Forgiveness is a precious commodity as my sin, my wrong doing, caused Jesus more pain and suffering.
- ◇ Grateful acceptance—an acceptance of and appreciation for the forgiveness and gratitude for his mercy should encourage me to walk in righteousness.

Order:

There is an order to be followed. I accuse those who have wronged me and I offer forgiveness before I confess and ask for forgiveness for myself. This is in keeping with the principle that ‘we are forgiven in the same manner that we forgive.’ We are also told that if we do not forgive then our Father in heaven will not forgive us.

It is important to list the grievances before I either extend forgiveness or ask for forgiveness. As I look at the pile of my grievances against my offender, I become more and more aware of the awfulness of the offences. It makes extending forgiveness

more difficult but more heartfelt and complete. As I list my offences, I am made more and more aware of the awfulness of sin and the terrible price it will take to pay for them. This makes asking for forgiveness more difficult but more heartfelt and complete.

1. I accuse _____ of
2. I forgive _____ for these things
3. I confess doing
4. I ask for forgiveness for these things

Perception:

Not was a wrong done, but **did I feel** that a wrong was done. Thought and emotion create their own reality. Keep in mind that even if I misunderstood what the offender has done—I mistakenly judged the offender—I must still forgive for the wrong committed against me *as I perceive it*. If that perception was really, in fact, a false judgment or accusation then afterwards the Holy Spirit can convict and confession and forgiveness can take place.

–TWELVE –

RECONCILIATION

Until we forgive those who have harmed us, we will have a life filled with resentment, always looking to revenge ourselves. Once we do forgive then reconciliation is possible. In a sense we can look at reconciliation as the end of a war. Before reconciliation we are enemies or at least distrustful of the other person; with reconciliation we are on the road to friendship.

The scriptures say,

You will keep your friends if you forgive them, but you will lose your friends if you keep talking about what they did wrong. (Proverbs 17:9 CEV)

Reconciliation starts with us. There is a Spanish proverb that says *it takes two to make a quarrel, but only one to end it*. Once we forgive, even though others are unaware of our forgiveness, they are aware that we have a changed attitude and the tension and anger or hurt is no longer in the air around us. Our forgiveness can restore our friendship because we have mutual love or respect for one another.

Reconciliation can take time, however, if the other person has betrayed our trust. The closer we are to that wrongdoer, the harder it can be for us to trust him again. We may not be surprised when a distant friend harms us but we can feel deep betrayal when our sister, brother, close friend, father, mother, pastor, or soul mate betrays us because we have trusted them

with our very souls and they took advantage of that closeness and betrayed us.

This doesn't mean that reconciliation is not possible, just that it can take time to rebuild trust. For example, Jane shared with her close friend Sally that she was thinking of leaving college. She told Sally to keep this a secret since she was still unsure what she was going to do. The next day all her friends were asking her about why she was planning to leave college.

So Jane and Sally lose: Jane stays away from the Sally, who betrayed her trust and, at the same time, she misses her friend. Sally, for her part, has lost her close friend. Under these conditions, reconciliation will require a time of testing or proving the trustworthiness of the other.

Unfortunately, reconciliation is not always possible. Reconciliation takes two people. For example, if Jane is unwilling to forgive Sally then all Sally can do is step back and hope that someday Jane will let her back into her life.

On the other hand, Jane can forgive Sally but Sally can feel so guilty that she is unwilling to accept that forgiveness and reconciliation. It takes two for reconciliation to happen.

Sometimes, all that is possible is limited reconciliation. For example, when a father molests a daughter then the daughter might forgive the father but there will always be a reserve between them. From that time on, the father's love will be suspect, to a degree, regardless of the father's true repentance.

Sometimes reconciliation is possible but unwise and actually dangerous. In one extreme case, a mother so abused her daughter, Diane, physically and emotionally that Diane had to keep away from her mother. She did forgive her mother but that didn't make the mother safe to be around. Also Diane couldn't let her children be around their grandmother because of her harmful and dangerous behavior.

Our heavenly Father desires that we live in peace with one another and that we forgive those who have wronged us. We can give and receive blessing through forgiveness but there are

consequences to our wrong actions. Ideally, relationships are restored but that is not always possible or practical. Nevertheless, we want to do whatever is in our power to do to bring about reconciliation.

We need to recognize that as we bring another back into our lives that this creates the opportunity for us to be a blessing to them and for them to be a blessing to us.

–THIRTEEN –

CONCLUSION

Since I first wrote this I have come to realize even more that forgiveness is central to any prayers we present to God. Even more, so I am convinced that we must come to God as our heavenly Father and we as his children. This relationship is the center point within a circle that includes other relationships. It is out of our positions as sons and daughters of God that service takes place.

When we put service first—including making Christ the center point of reference, instead of God the Father who sent him (John 3:16)—then we are operating in “payback mode.” Jesus is Lord and we are servants because it is all we deserve to be. This is wrong. Certainly Jesus should be Lord but he did not die so we could be servants. *He died so we could be born again into the family of God.*

Can we ever earn salvation or pay God back for saving us? No, of course not. Rather, our service comes out of imitation! As our heaven Father’s children we want to be like him and imitate him. Out of being like him come good deeds and fruit. Being like him means we do good and not evil. We want to please him but even more, *as his children it is not in our nature to deliberately do on-going sin.* We can obey because he commands but Christ put the love relationship first—He did not put the service relationship first—when he, the Son of God, said, “*If you love me you will obey . . .*”

Servants hear and obey. Out of their obedience and good work God gives approval, not love. Sons and daughters want to please and imitate their heavenly Father and out of lives that please him come blessing to themselves and to others and love from the father.

Both the prodigal son and his brother were mistaken in their views of who they were. The prodigal son thought he could lose his position as son, like son-ship was a coat you put on or took off. The brother thought he had to earn the right to be a son. If we have been made sons and daughters by God himself, through Christ, then we are truly his children—and joint heirs with Christ!

As we understand sin, confession, asking and extending forgiveness we want to see all these from God's perspective. If we are going to understand his thinking them we must stand beside him and look back. From where he stands, things look different and they should. We are in the world but not of it. Let's start thinking that way.

Don't forgive too quickly. There is a high price that is paid by Christ when we ask for and receive forgiveness. There is an equal price paid, sometimes a greater price paid, when we release another into God's potential mercy.

One last reminder: keep in mind that sin seldom occurs in a vacuum. There usually is a greater circle of participants who made it easier to sin or made it harder to sin. God sees this greater circle and so should we. We want to fully break the influence of the bad and enhance the good. We want to put to death the power of sin that has been at work around us.

Be salt and light. Be a blessing. But, first of all, be free as our heavenly Father intended and provided for through his Son Jesus Christ.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now

The Conclusion

we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure (I John 3:1-3).

We cannot maintain our purity as the children of God should if we withhold forgiveness. Our prayers will not be answered unless we forgive others. Forgiveness is an act of mercy and may never be easy to give but it is the key to answered prayer.

– FOURTEEN –

THE NON-CHRISTIAN

If you are not a Christian you cannot apply the principles presented here. God's full release, which is through prayer, is limited to those who call him Father. Why? Because you cannot come to God as Father except through Christ his Son.

"In that day you will ask in My name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father Himself loves you because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:26-27).

To be his children we must first come to God as sinners. We can do nothing ourselves to earn a place in his family nor to earn salvation—and a release from our sins and the penalties demanded. We do not deserve forgiveness but God chooses to extend mercy and forgiveness to us because of Christ's sacrifice. In a sense, he credits Christ's payment for sin: his death on the cross, to our account and so frees us.

Because of our relationship to Christ we can come to God as if we had never sinned. But this is only one of the things that Christ did at the cross. He also provided for our adoption into God's family. By adoption we become the sons and daughters of God. This is why we can pray to God as our heavenly Father. We are his children. Granted, we are also sinners but that is secondary—once we have been saved—to our being the children of God.

However, this means that if you have not accepted or acknowledged Christ as your Savior—and let his payment for sin cover your sin—you cannot call God Father. God can be your righteous judge and even a loving God but not your loving Father and you are without the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. And without Christ's sacrifice you cannot extend or receive full forgiveness, cleansing, release from the consequences of your sins, or the consequences of those sins committed against you.

The Old Testament Law gave us the boundaries and principles for determining sin. Then, when we sin, we create the grounds for our death. When we violate the Law knowingly or unknowingly we set in motion a cosmic universal: Break the law and the law's scale of justice is weighed against us. And justice must be satisfied for the scale to be balanced again.

Sin must be paid for.

"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

And this includes the Law's penalties.

The Law's cosmic balance can be viewed as a kind of spiritual scale with us in the middle:

Ego



Death Sin

When we sin the scale drops down to the right and is out of balance. Death acts as a counter-weight to re-balance the scale. In the entire universe, only death can balance the scale again. The penalty of death applies to all humankind but it doesn't have to be their deaths.

For God has given Christ as our substitute. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). Even though God is not willing that any should perish, as a just God he must balance the scale and satisfy the Law. So he sent his son to die in our place,

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3-4).

That's the whole point of Christ's coming, *"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him"* (John 3:17). So it is either:

Ego



Christ's death or Sin
my death

You, as a non-Christian, may reject Christ as your sub-stitute but, if you do, then you must eventually pay with your own spiritual death (Romans 3:22-24). Unfortunately there is no other way, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).

Once we are saved, once we are God's children then we can come to him in prayer and expect him to hear our prayers.

About the Author

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With his wife Connie, Dr. Richard D. Smith spent over thirty years in missions in Africa, Europe and South America. For another thirty-six years, they have been using their training and experience as Bible translators, to help ordinary Christians pray in a way that God can answer, resulting in greater spiritual freedom, and increased effectiveness showing and sharing the Gospel message. The method they developed is Prayer Resolution (www.crossresources.com) and is uniquely designed to be used by ordinary Christians to help people from any culture, not just their own.

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