

WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES



INSIGHT INTO
FORGIVENESS

Ron Kallmier and Sheila Jacobs

CWR

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WAVERLEY ABBEY INSIGHT SERIES

The Waverley Abbey Insight Series has been developed in response to the great need to help people understand and face some key issues that many of us struggle with today. CWR's ministry spans teaching, training and publishing, and this series draws on all of these areas of ministry.

Sourced from material first presented over Insight Days by CWR at their base, Waverley Abbey House, presenters and authors have worked in close co-operation to bring this series together, offering clear insight, teaching and help on a broad range of subjects and issues. Bringing biblical understanding and godly insight, these books are written both for those who help others and those who face these issues themselves.

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FOREWORD

While Psalm 23 and 1 Corinthians 13 are frequently read at funerals and weddings, the most quoted scripture throughout the world is Matthew 6: 9–13 – what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus taught His disciples then and now how to pray. Sadly, however, this pattern is often repeated more as a ritual than a prayer, especially that middle sentence ‘... forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors’. Or, as we usually pray, ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us’. What is almost always ignored is the poignancy of these words of verses 14 and 15 which underline God’s forgiveness when we forgive – and what happens if we don’t!

Jesus was teaching that we can be forgiven by God in the same proportion that we forgive others who offend us! That’s quite a thought.

This superb book deals with these questions and puts them into topical context.

I have been forgiven much by God, initially as I was born again – and ever since. Within our family we have had to forgive much and we have known the harshest of testings when we willingly forgave the terrorist who was found guilty of killing our Special Branch son. We have experienced real healing when we are able to forgive, even in the smallest of matters; such an attitude deals with bitterness, thoughts of retaliation or the silliness of not speaking to an unforgiven friend. Peace of mind is part of that healing. It is then that we can move on.

Christians have been forgiven much by God and often by others, and having been forgiven, how encouraging that we are accepted by God and by friends, neighbours and even our adversaries.

On the other hand, if *we* are able by God's grace to forgive others, we are taking on ourselves that which Paul advocated in Philippians 2 verse 5: that our attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus. What better way of following Him who forgave the apostle Peter and so many others in His walk on earth – even forgiving from the cross.

The willingness to forgive, to say sorry and to be forgiven is the basis of life at peace with God, with our family, our neighbours and even those who give us a hard time. The impossible is also possible – loving our enemies – in the strength which God supplies.

I commend this book to you and your friends. Its truths are proven beyond doubt, so let us practise what is preached.

Robin Oake
August 2008

INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this book have been sown over many years. As a pastor and counsellor, I have listened to people of all ages struggle with issues of forgiveness. Many of these people have been victims. Others have been perpetrators. And each of us, if we are honest, will probably agree that during our lifetime we have participated in both roles at various times.

Forgiveness is not an easy matter. It cuts across all our natural desires for justice or revenge. For the victims, it seems too *cheap* to 'just' forgive the offender; on the other hand, for the offenders, there are often consequences of guilt and shame which wrap them up in the suffocating blanket of their failures and sins. How does one undo the past? These issues are our central focus.

For Jesus, the issue of forgiveness was very important. It was so important that He was willing to give up His own life to make the offer of forgiveness available to us. He understands that the journey of forgiveness can be life-transforming.

Over the years I have been privileged to offer a number of seminars that include the topic of forgiveness. More recently, in my role as Director of Training at CWR's centre at Waverley Abbey House in Farnham, Surrey, I led a day workshop on this topic. *Insight into Forgiveness* is offered to you as a practical guide, and is based upon the seminars and discussions of that workshop.

Additionally, I have appreciated the skill of Sheila Jacobs in picking up the various threads of my workshops and writings, then drawing them together with her own insights to form the easily accessible information you will discover here.

Because this is a practical book, it is our prayer that everyone

who reads it and engages with the forgiveness issues it addresses will find the emotional and spiritual release that forgiveness can bring. My stories involve real people, but some facts have been changed to protect confidentiality.

May God bless you in your journey through this book. May you find the freedom of forgiveness afresh in your own life.

Ron Kallmier
July 2008

If you have read the Gospels, you have probably noticed how Jesus emphasised the importance of a forgiving attitude. You have probably also noticed, from personal experience, that

Forgiveness is hard!

Many of us have suffered emotionally, mentally or physically as a result of what someone has said or done to us and we find that this has transformed our thinking and personalities. It can seem as if we are stuck in a time warp, a constant loop of thinking back. And, before we know it, we are eaten up with resentment and our lives are defined by that person, that event, that *thing* we can't let go of. We might justify hanging on to our bitterness by saying, 'Do you know what that person has done to me? I can't forgive. It'll be like letting them off the hook.' But we have to realise that forgiveness isn't about letting *them* off the hook, it is about letting *ourselves* off the hook.

Maybe it is ourselves we can't forgive. Perhaps we are constantly

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thinking about something we said or did that hurt another, and are consequently weighed down by real or imagined guilt. Either way, we can't let go – so we find we can't move on.

The following are questions commonly asked by those who have suffered damage from others or who struggle because they know that they are the offender: 'How can a person forgive? Is forgiveness an unrealistic goal? Is it only for the virtuous and pious few? What do you do when you find you simply *can't* forgive? Does God condemn us? What about when the damage is caused by the Church, God's own people? What can we do, practically, to forgive someone who has hurt us badly? Can we really ever move on? And what if *I* am the offender?'

In this book, we will explore just why forgiveness is important for our health and wellbeing. We will look at both biblical and psychological perspectives. There are suggested activities, reflections and prayers to help us on our way. And, by the grace of God, as we learn to trust Him with our pain on the difficult journey of forgiving and being forgiven, we will begin to find peace, a fresh start and the freedom Jesus promises to all who follow Him.

Sheila Jacobs
July 2008

NB If you are coming alongside a person struggling with issues of forgiveness, you may find it helpful to refer to Appendix 2.



CHAPTER 1

WHY FORGIVE?

There may be many reasons why you have chosen to read a book about forgiveness. You may be helping a friend struggling to forgive someone for a serious offence, injury or abuse; you may personally be wrestling with issues of forgiveness concerning an injury to someone you love; or you may be on a journey of forgiveness for injuries committed against you – either recently or, perhaps, many years ago. You may equally be on a path to forgiveness but as someone who is seeking to be forgiven and to forgive yourself for actions you have committed and now deeply regret. You may have a strong Christian faith, be struggling to hang on to your faith or have no faith in God at all. Whoever you are and whatever your reason, this book is for you.

Forgiveness addresses issues at the very heart of human nature and is therefore crucially important and relevant for everyone,

whatever their belief. Forgiveness is also very tough. It is not for the faint-hearted, yet is vital for our wellbeing and growth. It's not the natural response to injury and abuse but, on more than one occasion in His teaching, Jesus emphasised how important it is to God that we have a forgiving attitude towards others. Which is why this book will be based on what Jesus teaches on this vital subject, however challenging it may be. We'll consider Jesus' own words and example below as a place to start.

But before we begin, you may be thinking, 'Why is forgiveness so important? And how does it relate to the wrongs done to me or the wrongs I have done?' This book has been written to help you unpack some of the answers to these important questions.

IS FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE?

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* brings to life vividly these words of Jesus on the cross which are the ultimate expression of forgiveness: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Jesus forgives the very people who are crucifying Him. And, He is saying to us, 'I am setting you an example of how to forgive the very worst sins.' This is an example of 'tough' forgiveness.

Forgiveness in the face of overwhelming tragedy was also seen recently in the experience of Robin Oake. While Robin was Chief Constable of the Isle of Man Constabulary, his son Stephen (a Special Branch Officer) was killed in the line of duty. A press conference was called, and a journalist asked Robin what he thought about the man who had killed his son. Robin, a Christian, told the journalist that he forgave the man – and his statement was greeted with sheer disbelief and amazement. In his moving and helpful book, *Father, Forgive*, Robin gives gentle

WHY FORGIVE?

advice on the 'hows' and 'whys' of forgiveness with the authority of someone who has truly 'been there'.¹

Someone else who exemplified the power of forgiveness is Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who, together with her sister Betsie, was imprisoned during the Second World War for helping Jews to escape from the German-occupied Netherlands. When preaching in Germany after the war, Corrie met one of the guards who had been at Ravensbruck, the Nazi concentration camp where her beloved sister had died. The former guard asked her, 'Will you forgive me?' He was standing in front of her, his hand outstretched, and she was faced with an enormous dilemma: Would she act like Jesus or remain bitter, holding a grudge? It is impossible to imagine her emotions and the memories of brutality and death that would have flooded her being in those moments of decision. She recalls the torment she found herself in:

I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness ... could not forgive. ... But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will ... 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.' ... And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother!' I cried. 'With all my heart.'²

THE TWO FACES OF FORGIVENESS

Before even thinking about how it is possible for anyone to be able to forgive the enormity of the offences committed against themselves or the ones they love, we need firstly to look at the starting point for us all – that of knowing that we ourselves are truly forgiven. People who are 'never wrong' will find it hard to forgive others who wrong them. On the other hand, those of us

who have been forgiven by someone else or who know God has forgiven us, will be in a stronger position to consider forgiving someone who offends or abuses us.

During Ron's counselling practice and pastoral ministry, there have been a number of occasions when people have dealt with the issue of being forgiven. Their emotions and personality have been impacted and their whole way of functioning improved. Ron relates:

I remember reading some fascinating statistics: a man who was researching mental illness and hospitalisation stated that if hospital patients could know that they were truly forgiven of their past actions, many of them could be released. What was putting them in hospital, making them physically and psychologically ill, was a lack of assurance of forgiveness. Guilt is a powerful thing.

It doesn't matter whether we are guilty or not; if we *feel* guilty, we act guilty. And that causes huge problems in our lives.

FREELY FORGIVEN!

Every one of us has failed in our attitudes and actions towards God. He could have destroyed us but instead He has chosen to offer unconditional pardon – we simply need to receive it. This is an essential foundation for inner freedom. So what really matters to us first of all is our own personal forgiveness. How does the forgiveness of the cross flow to us? When God sent His only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our wrong thoughts and actions so that we could be reconciled to God, it was His one-way decision. His forgiveness was there before we responded – for there was a time in each of our lives when we didn't know we needed forgiving. You

WHY FORGIVE?

may be in that place as you are reading these words. As we accept God's forgiveness which has been provided because Jesus took the punishment we deserved, God says, 'I declare you not guilty' and He does this for every person who follows Him. Price paid, new start, clean slate, start all over again. On our part, however, there does need to be a response to His generous offer. But more of that later.

So when Jesus says from the cross, 'Father, forgive them', He *means* forgive them. He doesn't mean, 'Father, wait until they work out how bad they've been, and *then* forgive them!' His enemies didn't deserve it. They were still spitting and mocking and gambling for His clothes. Even this worst of all actions is not beyond God's power to forgive. What an incredible statement. What an amazing God. And once we have experienced this astonishing love and forgiveness for ourselves, this same amazing God will help us to take the first step in our own journey towards greater freedom and personal wholeness through forgiveness – however difficult and painful it might be.

FORGIVING OTHERS

Just as it's true that living without the knowledge of being forgiven can cause mental and physical suffering and illness, so it is also true that harbouring unforgiveness and bitterness towards those who have hurt us is also very detrimental to our own health and wellbeing.

There's real power in forgiveness and it's a principle God honours. Once, while Ron was pastoring a church, a social worker brought Maria to see him. Maria had suffered with severe depression for many years. Ron recalls:

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Her family background was absolutely horrendous. She'd suffered the absolute horrors of life. And so I thought, 'Lady, you are still alive. That's amazing!' As I listened to her story, I told her, 'You have done extremely well', because I wanted her to hear that. I then said, 'The people who abused you have all died so they aren't doing anything to you now. The trouble is, you are still living under the horror of what they have done to you in the past. God says that if we forgive, there can be healing.' Maria replied, 'I can never forgive them.' We talked about the whole issue of forgiveness. But she said, 'I can't do that.' 'I totally understand, I'm not sure I could either, but that's the way to freedom,' I told her. The next day she rang me: 'I've done it!' 'Done what?' I asked. 'I've forgiven each of them,' she replied. I thought to myself, 'How on earth did you do that?' 'Things have changed,' she continued. 'Something lifted off me when I forgave. Something lifted. I felt it go.'

I saw Maria a few months later. Her face was lighter. She explained that she was now able to do things she'd not been able to do easily for years. She'd been able to reduce her medication for depression. Something had changed; some release had occurred within her. It was clearly connected to forgiveness.

Maria did not acknowledge any active faith in God. But, even so, she had followed godly principles and God had operated. Isn't that fascinating?

So this is what it means to say that forgiveness has real power. The problem is in applying it to our own lives. That's when we can really begin to see the healing ministry of forgiveness at work. This is hard enough to do with God's help. It's even tougher in our own strength.

WHY FORGIVE?

ACTIVITY

If you would find it helpful at this stage to find out more about Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, turn to Appendix 1 at the back of the book. If you are a Christian, you may also want to remind yourself of the enormity of Jesus' love and sacrifice in bringing you forgiveness, by reading an account of the crucifixion, perhaps in a different version of the Bible (eg New King James Version, Amplified, *The Message*), or by watching *The Passion of the Christ* or another DVD of Jesus' life and death.

REFLECTION

- Think about why you have been drawn to reading this book. What are the key areas where forgiveness is relevant in your life? What do you hope will be the outcome?
- Have you suffered a particular offence, injury or abuse? Or have you offended, injured or abused others?

You may like to begin your personal journey by making the following prayer your own:

PRAYER

Dear God, help me to be honest in looking at issues relating to forgiveness in my life.

NOTES

1. Robin Oake, *Father, Forgive* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2008).
2. Corrie Ten Boom with Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974) pp.56-57.