

Forgiveness on the Road to Reconciliation

By Craig Conrad

Introduction

It was November of 2009 in Kigali, Rwanda. I was sitting in a hotel video-taping an interview with Frida Gashumba, a survivor of the 1994 genocide who has one of the most amazing of the hundreds of forgiveness stories that I've heard. We first met in 2004 when I was there observing the gacaca courts (a cultural system of restorative justice the Rwanda government is using to clear the overwhelming number of genocide cases that would have otherwise taken more than 100 years to complete). She had since written a book about her experience, *Frida: Chosen to Die, Destined to Live*, which I highly recommend. It is an account of forgiving in ways that are possible only because of God's gracious intervention.

Forgiveness stories have been my favorites from the day in 1971 (though I've long forgotten the actual date) when I was overwhelmed with the realization that God sent His only begotten Son to endure my penalty for my sin - to make it irrevocably clear that He loves and forgives me! I had been taught as a child that He died for the sins of the world. But I was dumbfounded when the Holy Spirit brought it to my attention that Jesus Christ, the spotless, sinless, and perfectly holy One actually took on my sin that I might be forgiven. I knew then and I know now that I had done absolutely nothing to deserve it. I wept then and admit that I often still do when contemplating the implications of His suffering and death on the cross.

That was also the beginning of my fascination with forgiveness. Every day of my life for the last 39 years I have been gripped by this mind-blowing initiative of God. Frankly, I would not believe it if I was not experiencing it for myself. I've interviewed people who by the grace of God have forgiven heinous crimes and brutality that are practically inconceivable to most of us. I've also been perplexed by professing Christians who are unwilling to forgive even the slightest offense. I've lamented those times when my own forgiving was slower than I would have preferred. But I'm always thrilled by even the slightest reminder of the forgiveness our Father continues to lavish upon me - and you! As incredible as it is - we're forgiven!

After sharing a bit of my own experience with Frida, she suggested that I write about it. It was the first time I've seriously considered writing what I had shared. A friend then asked me to pray about jotting my testimony of God's forgiveness to at least edify my immediate and extended family. It seemed like a good idea for "grampa" to leave something for those who I will leave behind, but I've never been all that fond of writing. Then with my recent discovery that "Forgiveness" is the theme of the 2010 Peacemaker Conference, I was for some reason compelled to begin. Timing is everything; I'm assuming it is God's time for me to get off the dime because I'm motivated to do that which I would usually avoid.

Much has been written on the topic of forgiveness, some from a biblical perspective, but mostly not. Many of the authors are immanently more qualified than I to exegete the appropriate scriptures or to address the psychological, sociological and spiritual implications (depending on their area of expertise). I have no intention of going there. You will be disappointed if you're looking for a theological treatise or scholarly discourse on forgiveness. I'm simply going to tell my own story, with reference to some others, of how God has led me in my own journey of forgiving, sometimes weighed down by my own sin and dragging my heels. It's been a process, not an event. It's often not been pretty, but it's always been transformative.

Whatever this turns out to be, I'm dedicating it to Peacemaker® Ministries for them to use or not as may be helpful. For more than 15 years, they have helped me immensely. Their executive director, Ken Sande, wrote *"The Peacemaker,"* a practical, systematic, and thoroughly biblical approach for responding to conflict. As a professional mediator, their training has been invaluable in my practice. God has used them to graciously encourage and equip me to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They trained me as a Certified Christian Conciliator™. Most importantly, they faithfully remind me and every other Christian to glorify God, serve the best interests of others, and demonstrate our relationship with Him. Lord, may it be!

Deciding

In Rwanda, Frida told me how she was assaulted by her neighbors who thought she was dead when they buried her with the other fifteen members of her family they had murdered. Rescued by a passerby, she discovered that her father who she thought survived was also murdered. Hers is an amazing story! In our interview, I was struck by her stating how she felt entitled to not forgive by virtue of how awful the offenses. She said she knew from the moment she became a Christian in 1998 that she needed to forgive. She could not escape the biblical commands to be at peace with those who brutalized her and destroyed her family, even if it meant forgiving them. It took awhile, but she got there. She even introduced some of them to Christ!

Memories were flooding my mind with every word she spoke. I met Christ at college in 1971 when a Campus Crusade for Christ staffer shared the Gospel with me. Nobody other than possibly my wife knew better than I (and still does) what an absolute rascal I was. I'll skip the details other than to say that the idea I could be forgiven by anyone, much less God, just blew my mind (please forbear the 70's jargon). Once I understood the implications of the Gospel, I started telling everyone who would stand still long enough to listen. I prayed, read the Bible, listened to tapes, shared my faith, went to every meeting, and was before long a campus leader. A few months later, I hit a wall. As much as I sincerely wanted to remain motivated, I couldn't.

Concerned with what was no longer happening, I spent many hours talking with my spiritual mentor. He eventually pinpointed a problem. He shared that in light of my being forgiven by God, I should be willing to forgive others; that forgiving those who sin against me as God in Christ forgives me when I sin against Him is an imperative (Mt. 6:14-15; 18-21-35; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). He loved me enough to tell me that otherwise bitterness would defile my relationships, both with God and others (Heb. 12:15). Then he got personal, identifying my bitterness toward and my need to forgive my dad. I told him in less than edifying words that if being a Christian meant I had to forgive my father, he could keep his Christianity.

My brother (my only sibling) and I despised our dad. He was a violent alcoholic who perpetrated various sorts of brutality. He mercilessly abused our mom. The invalidating words and phrases he used to describe us were unbelievably profane. He often beat us black and blue. He sometimes locked us in closets and our garage. He would make me challenge and fight whoever was the current neighborhood bully, publically strapping me if I lost the contest. He made me watch while he stomped my favorite puppy to death and threw it in the trash. He arranged my first sexual experience to prove to him my "manhood." Our upbringing was really despicable! As far as I was concerned, nobody, not even God, could expect me to forgive that man.

Fortunately, God is faithful even when I am unfaithful. The work He begins, He will see to completion. It seemed like every time I read the Bible or heard someone speak, I was presented with the need to forgive. I was reminded over and over again of how lavishly and undeservedly I

had been forgiven, and the cost to our Savior to secure that forgiveness. I had what I call a Garden of Gethsemane experience (see Matthew 26:36-46), the first of many since. By that I mean confessing my reticence to take the hard road that I knew the Father had set before me and praying until I could say with integrity, "not my will, but thine be done." Many weeks after being faithfully exhorted to do so, I *decided* to forgive my dad.

Grieving

Grieving was an interesting discovery in my journey. Webster's Dictionary defines grief as intense emotional suffering caused by loss. We most often think of it in the context of grieving the death of a loved one. My friend Frida certainly grieved the awful loss of her family. But the loss of things like trust, intimacy, loyalty, commitment, integrity and various other casualties of sin can also engender suffering. There are many biblical examples of grieving, including that of Jesus. It is an emotion that we have by design, which is actually helpful in the process of forgiving. To the extent that it highlights by its intensity the impact of a loss, it can motivate us to restore that which was lost. Grieving the loss of relationship can move us to pursue reconciliation.

Even though I had decided to forgive my dad, just thinking about completing that transaction in person was very scary. I had memories of being beaten just for hinting disagreement with him, one time being thrown down a flight of stairs for mentioning my support of a political candidate he didn't like. My dear wife, Alison, and I had been married less than two years and had been Christians only a year. She knew the horror stories! Her experience of my dad was when I took her to meet him and mom. When we arrived, my mother was as a prescription drug addict stoned and incoherent. Dad was in bed struggling to breathe due to stab wounds he had earlier suffered in a bar fight. Alison wasn't all that enthused about another encounter!

Be-that-as-it-may, we arranged to visit because we knew it was the right thing to do. We went with fear and trepidation, but in utter reliance on God's grace and mercy. We had asked Him to grace dad with repentance, we prayed all the way for the empowering of the Holy Spirit, trusting that God was ordering our steps and totally convinced He would honor our obedience. To the astonishment of us both, I was actually able to say what I had so prayerfully planned. I confessed my own sin and the sorrow I felt for having such a sordid attitude and saying such awful things about my own dad. I pleaded with him to forgive me, letting him know how much I desired a father-son relationship and that I forgave everything that could hinder reconciliation.

He went livid. He vehemently denied any need to be forgiven for anything by me or anyone else, including God! Protesting his own innocence in every regard, he was also quite clear in his opinion about what a sissy I was for requesting his forgiveness. He felt that real men should be repelled by religion. After subjecting us to a tirade of anti-Christian sentiment too profane to repeat, he kicked us out of his apartment stating he never wanted to see either of us ever again. It definitely did not go as well as we had hoped - not even close! He committed a robbery shortly thereafter, skipping town and abandoning my mom to abject poverty. We neither heard from him or knew where he was for another 13 years.

We consistently prayed for him in the interim. We also prayed for my mom and my brother with whom we also wanted to reconcile. Mom was first. Her poverty and addiction finally forced her consenting to live with us. I had the privilege of leading her to Christ; she was delivered from drugs and enjoyed being grandma to our sons. She eventually died of cancer cradled in my arms with me reading to her from Philippians, which had become her favorite book of the Bible. My brother is another whole story of forgiveness that is his to share. Suffice it to say that after cycles of coming

and going, living with then ripping us off, bouts with drugs and stints in jail, and our forgiving with his every expression of repentance, he came to Christ and back to us!

We were of course thrilled by those reconciliations in the years since my dad's cruel rejection of us. I had in the meantime graduated from seminary, been ordained to the ministry and was a Christian nonprofit executive. God had been re-fathering me and I was basking in the joy of having been adopted into His family. There was and remains nothing more important to me than being in fellowship with our heavenly Father, enjoying His acceptance, care, compassion, forgiveness, love, mercy, presence - and discipline (see Hebrews 12:4-11). But there were still times when a sermon or testimony regarding anything about fathers and sons would trigger emotions that betrayed my *grieving* the loss of relationship with my earthly father.

Initiating

In 1984, I was speaking at a conference near Kansas City, Missouri, which is where dad had once lived. His siblings had also lived there, all but one of whom had long since died. I had not heard whether his one surviving sister was still alive, but I had an old address. I decided to spend my free time looking for her in the hope she could lead me to him. I told the conferees my plan and asked them to pray. I went in the city only to discover a vacant lot at that address. But in speaking with neighbors, I learned that the house on that lot had been demolished and the elderly lady who had owned it had gone to a local nursing home. After calling a few of those facilities, I found my aunt and gave her a visit.

Dad had forbidden her to reveal his location to anyone, including any family who asked. At my insistence, she called him and requested that he meet me at a local restaurant. Soon thereafter, my dad and I were together having coffee and pie. After all those years of no contact whatsoever, his first question after saying hello was whether I was still into the "religion thing." He cut me off when I tried to explain, once again sharing his low opinion of Christianity, although this time it was a bit less profane. I had long ago decided that if ever given another opportunity, I would tell my dad that I loved him - so I did. When he said, "I love you, too," there was an indescribable rush of conflicting emotions. I had never heard him express love for anyone, much less me!

Dad immediately let me know that our time was up; that he had other things to do. Seizing our emotional connection, I requested his address and phone number. I let him know I would use them only for an occasional call, to correspond, and to send pictures of the grandsons he had never met. He consented if I would promise never to visit, which I did. That began a fairly bizarre period of Alison and I always taking the *initiative* to make calls as well as to send cards with family pictures. But in every follow-up phone call, he told us that he had not received what we sent. We would reconfirm his address and resend, only to be retold that it did not arrive. He rebuffed all our requests to visit, always promising that he would come to us, but he never did.

After 4 years of this routine, I was back in Kansas for a speaking engagement. I called dad and asked if I could visit with him - he said no! I drove to his address anyway because I really wanted to see him and to figure out why he never received our mail. He lived in the attic of a boarding house with his own outside door at the top of a long stairway. Climbing to the top, I looked in the door window to see dad sitting on the other side. He looked at me as I was knocking and told me to go away, saying he told me he did not want to see me and he meant it. There I was at nearly 45 years old, begging my dad to open the door, experiencing the same sort of emotion I had as a child when he would slap me away or subject me to his abuse of others. I left!

Alison and I continued initiating occasional contact after the porch incident. I apologized for breaking my promise never to visit, taking responsibility for the rejection that dad said I deserved for having lied about never trying to visit him. The routine of our sending and resending pictures, his claiming never to receive them, and hearing his promises to visit continued for another 5 years. We never stopped praying for him, but our contact was much less frequent. To say that we gave up on him would be an over statement, but we definitely gave up the idea of ever seeing him again. We were as conciliatory as possible whenever there was any sort of contact, but on our part we had as far as we knew *initiated* every overture of reconciliation.

Empathizing

In the fall of 1993, I was in Virginia trekking the Appalachian trail with two friends. It was a trip that had been a year in planning. At a rest stop, one of them called his wife who told him that my wife needed me to get in touch. So I phoned Alison in Colorado who told me that dad was terminally ill in a Kansas City hospital and had asked for me. While I was picking up my backpack to continue our trek, my friend asked about the call. When I told him about my dad, he insisted that we stop and find a way to reconnect me with my vehicle that was parked at a friend's house in Maryland. While I had grown so cold that I felt no need, my faithful Christian brother sprang into action pulling off the logistics to get me off the mountain and on the road to Missouri.

Headed west on Interstate 70, I had a lot of time to pray. I had to face not only my new awareness of passivity toward reconciling with my dad, but my resentment of his interfering with what I had planned as an innovative discipling experience with friends. He had messed up my ministry! I knew I was being called to again share the Gospel with my dad. I argued with God that if anyone on earth deserved to die and go to hell, it was my dad. I was back in the garden! God gently countered, not audibly but scripturally, that I was no more worthy of His forgiveness than my dad was of mine. Recalling what Christ had done to secure my forgiveness, my arrogance and self-righteousness gave way to repentance. As always, God was gracious!

My dad was a hulking, muscular man. He was an ex-boxer with a boxer's broken nose. There was a symmetrically square scar on his left cheek where during a bar brawl the skin had been peeled back by a broken beer bottle. It was his badge of courage. Wherever he went, his presence was intentionally intimidating. He always carried himself as the toughest of the tough. Standing in his hospital room, looking at his frail and emaciated condition, I realized I was looking at a picture of the real Ernie Conrad - weak, broken, and ravaged by the same condition that ails us all. I had one of the most important epiphanies of my adult life, that my dad sinned against me for the same reason I sinned against him - sin is our master absent submission to our Lord Jesus Christ.

I also came to a realization that Frida said she had likewise reached. At this milestone in our journeys, we had recalled the words of Jesus and Stephen who both asked the Father to forgive those who were murdering them because they did not know what they were doing. They of course knew technically what they were doing and the expected results. But those who crucified Jesus had no idea they were being used to accomplish the salvation of all who would subsequently believe in the centuries since. Nor did those who stoned Steven know they were doing that which would result in the message they wanted to squelch being spread to the entire known world then and our world now. They were clueless of the eternal implications!

Neither Frida's tormentors or my dad knew how our Sovereign God would use their offenses to shape us into the persons we have become - nor did we! While He saw the big picture and was in no way surprised by anything that happened, we were unable to see beyond the ends our noses.

Stuck in space and time, our perspectives are limited to what we experience here and now. God has no such limitations! The *empathy* we needed was for our offenders and ourselves. Staying on track with forgiveness required our realizing that no matter the brutality of the offenses, the offenders are simply manifesting the symptoms of being controlled by sin. Equally important was confessing that any refusal to forgive betrayed our own succumbing to the same master.

Entrusting

It would be wonderful to report that having that epiphany of empathy rocketed me into again sharing the Gospel with my dad. But that's not what happened. I could not get beyond just saying hello, expressing my sorrow for his suffering, bringing him up-to-date on my family, and requesting that he authorize the doctors to keep me informed. I then went to spend the night with friends at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, before driving back to my home in Colorado. They were having a Bible study when I arrived. I shared what had happened and that I would be driving home in the morning. They stopped the study and spent the evening praying for me and my dad, specifically that I would in the morning re-visit him and share what was on my heart.

A spiritual battle raged in me the next day as I drove back to the hospital. Memories of dad's rejection of me and all that was most important to me were literally flooding my mind. The tug to hang a u-turn and head for the accepting arms of my loving wife was as strong a temptation as I have ever experienced. But I had only the acceptance and love of God on which to rely. Psalm 37:3a, which says "Trust in the Lord and do good" (NIV) was taking on a whole new meaning. I was back in the garden, most definitely wanting to avoid being rejected again. I did not want to visit my dad, but I knew my Heavenly Father wanted me to so I kept moving toward the hospital. This was walking by faith like I had never known.

Instead of welcoming me back to his room, my dad asked me why I had bothered to return (which of course immediately felt like rejection). My totally unplanned reply was "because I am concerned about your soul." His response was, "me too." I asked him if he knew that it was his own sin that had so utterly destroyed his relationships with his family; that it also stood in the way of his experiencing the love of God. He said yes, that he knew he had lived in his words, "a hell of a life." He began to cry, to confess the ways that he had abused and hurt me and my family, mom, brother, and many people throughout his life. He asked for my forgiveness and expressed his sorrow that he would not have that opportunity with others he had offended.

When I asked him if he would be interested in trusting Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, to be assured of God's forgiveness, love and acceptance, he said "yes, please tell me how." So there I was, at his request sharing the Gospel that he had so profanely rejected 22 years earlier. When I asked if he would like to pray with me to confess his sin and invite Jesus into his life, he said he would love to but had no idea how to pray. At his suggestion, we started by him repeating after me everything I had ever hoped to hear from him. He was soon praying on his own as God graced him with repentance and freed him to call on the Lord with all his heart. We wept, hugged and prayed until we were both exhausted - a reconciliation beyond my wildest imagination!

Dad passed away a couple of weeks later, but not before he was visited by my brother, Kurt, who had been absent when mom died so did not want to miss his chance to say goodbye. Although dad was less coherent in that visit, they made peace. Alison and our oldest son, Bruce, were also able to visit dad who at the age of 89 years finally met the 19 year old grandson he had never before seen in person. Unfortunately we were not able before he died to introduce him to Darren, his 17 year old grandson who he had also never met. But when we cleaned out dad's apartment, we discovered in a

hidden box all the correspondence we had sent over the years. It was obvious he had for almost 10 years watched his grandsons grow via the pictures he had received.

During Alison's and my last visit with dad, I was confronted in the hospital by the owner of the boarding house in which he had lived. He told me that I should be ashamed of myself, as should all my family, for having abandoned my dad for so many years. He wanted to know how I could possibly call myself a "man of God" after decades of treating my dad with such cruelty. He went on to berate me for what was a total fabrication my dad had concocted to explain his not having any family pictures and never having any visitors. Rather than argue, I told this man that I had a different recollection that I would be willing to share if he was interested. He was not! He told me in very certain terms what I could do with my religion; I never saw him again.

This and many events since have served to remind me that getting and staying on the road to reconciliation will always be ridiculed and opposed by the enemy of our souls, often by the offenders and even unknown people on the periphery who have no vested interest. It can even come from other Christians who feel they need to exact judgment and punishment before they can extend grace and forgiveness. It has taken decades, if ever, for some folks in that camp to let me know whether they've moved me from the former to the latter phase. But that is beyond my control. The important lesson learned was the necessity of *entrusting* the offense(s), the offender(s), myself and the process to God. Trusting and obeying Him was the real crux of the matter!

Remembering

Whenever I interview someone who has forgiven some grievous offense, I ask them for their understanding of the "forgiving means forgetting" teaching that I often hear from Christians. They believe that when God forgives our sins they are somehow erased from His memory because Isaiah 43:25 says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and *remembers your sins no more*" (NIV, italics mine). Therefore, they say, when we forgive we should do the same, that until we have forgotten we have not fully forgiven. In disagreeing with that idea, Frida framed her answer with as profound a statement as I've ever heard in this regard by saying that, "it is not a matter of whether we forget, but of how we remember."

Frida reminded me that any offense that can be easily forgotten is one that likely should have been overlooked in the first place. She very astutely shared that her losing the memory of the kinds of offenses she had suffered would be more symptomatic of mental illness than of forgiveness. It is putting the memories in perspective, recalling them objectively without vengeful or retaliatory feelings, allowing them to prompt our own appreciation of the Gospel, and using them in the ministry of reconciliation that are the unmistakable indicators of God's healing grace and forgiveness. *Remembering* is exactly what God did by writing so many of the sins of so many people in His ultimately edifying book that for centuries has been read by a whole lot of folks.

Not only has God not forgotten, He apparently intends that we not forget either. Whether it is in remembering the sins of the Prophets and Apostles, offenders or ourselves, the objective is to remind us of the immeasurable lavishness of His love, grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness that He literally pours on us by virtue of the substitutionary death, victorious resurrection and current intercessory ministry of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than holding our sins against us, His only intention for any recollection is to create in us such deep gratitude for His forgiveness that we cannot help but do the same for others. Memories of sin are actually redemptive at the point they motivate us to live out the implications of the Gospel!

To summarize, I've learned that healthy *remembering* shifts the focus from the sin to the Savior. Rather than constantly remunerating on the offenses, I use any memories thereof as opportunities to worship and revel in God's grace. Rather than times of unhealthy regret, remorse or retaliatory thoughts, they become redemptive occasions of reflection and any necessary repentance. I can seize the opportunity to recall what God has taught me through the process, how He is conforming me into the image of His Son, and how He may be convicting others likewise. It can even be turned to ministry as rather than decry, I can describe the sin(s) in ways that emphasize God's forgiveness and edify those who are listening.

Conclusion

There really isn't any conclusion per se this side of perfection. As sinners saved by grace, it would be self-sabotaging to expect that we will never again offend or be offended. Like confession and repentance, forgiveness is a way of life in the process of living out the Gospel and being continually conformed to the image of Christ. It's a means of appropriating toward one another the grace and mercy that we all so desperately need. *Deciding, grieving, empathizing, initiating, entrusting* and *remembering* are not steps or skills. They are simply forgiveness milestones that I've discerned on my own road to reconciliation. I suspect you'll run into them too. The repetition, order and intervals vary with every story, but they are quite common.

Most importantly, I pray you will read this not as some sort of "how to" of forgiveness, but as appreciation for how God works. I'm not implying that the process of reconciliation requires any more or less time than the 22 years that it took with my dad, or that it will ever happen. There are people from whom I am estranged who have chosen not to reconcile with me regardless of my efforts to be at peace with them (Rom. 12:18). That is their choice over which I have no control. But I can always avail myself of God's abundant resources in His Word, His Son, His Spirit and His Church to live to the praise of His glory by serving others in ways that edify them and serve their best interests, thereby cooperating with what He is working in me - and them!

For some who read this, the best conclusion would be to begin on the road to reconciliation. You have already been *grieving* the loss of some relationship. It's likely time to *decide* to do whatever you can to *initiate* forgiveness. You're on the road! As you reach each milestone, no matter how many times, pause only long enough to learn whatever God has for you at that juncture that will keep you moving in His direction. Remember that it's a journey. It's frankly a lifetime of our Lord transforming our attitude to be more like His, who "...does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10, NIV) so that we might pay it forward by forgiving one another just as He has forgiven us (see Colossians 3:12-17). Lord, may it be!