

What Does It Mean To Forgive And Forget?

Rich Nathan

September 29-30, 2007

Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

Jeremiah 31:34

I've been doing a series on forgiveness. I believe that there is almost nothing more essential to our ability to maintain healthy relationships with other people and with God than that we learn how to forgive and that we learn how to receive forgiveness. Someone makes a racially insensitive remark, or displays an attitude of disrespect to you as a minority, what do you do with that insensitivity, or that disrespect? Do you just become bitter and write this person off as an ignorant racist? Do you seek to get even?

And, of course, if you are a follower of Christ, one of the things that has to play in for you is what does Jesus want you to do? How does Jesus want you to respond to offenses? Now, if you've been around Christianity for any length of time, you have certainly heard something about Jesus' desire that his followers forgive people for the hurt that they have caused. And Jesus also wants his followers to learn how to receive forgiveness from God and from others.

One of the really difficult issues that comes up in forgiveness, is what should we do with painful memories.

What should we do with painful memories?

I mean, it is one thing to brush off annoying or obnoxious behavior such as racially insensitive comments. As a Jew it has been really interesting for me to have spent the last three plus decades of my life in a largely Gentile environment. You would be shocked by what people have said to me over the last three decades. I remember I was standing in a church parking lot once and a man came up to me and for no particular reason said, "You know, you can always tell a Jew." So I said, "Really? How can you tell?" He said, "Because Jews wear squeaky shoes." So I said, "Is that right? Did you know that I am Jewish?" And this man's face just drained of all its blood. He stammered and backed up apologizing. I said, "You know, that was a really ignorant comment. But I believe that the Lord had you make that comment to me so that you could see your own heart."

I drove away and forgave that man on the spot. If he had come up an hour later, I could have easily embraced him as a brother.

But what should we do with particularly painful memories. Maybe you've heard the expression, "You need to forgive and forget..." How do you forget the trauma of coming into your bedroom and discovering that your wife or husband is in bed with someone else? Or how do you forget the trauma of reading an email that you weren't supposed

to read in which your spouse is professing love, or being sexually explicit with another woman or man.

Yes, I know as a follower of Jesus that I am supposed to forgive and forget, but what do you do with the painful memories of physical abuse or sexual abuse from your childhood? Or maybe there is a particularly vivid scene of being humiliated as a child.

- You wet your pants in elementary school and the other kids laughed at you.
- The teacher stood you up in class and in front of everyone made fun of you.
- You were publicly ridiculed by a boy who told all of his friends about the explicit details of your sexual encounter with him at a party.
- Your mother gave you a ridiculous haircut and you had to face your friends at school like that.
- You were always the last person to be picked for sports.
- You were beaten up by a bully and also had to endure the shame of crying in front of your friends or the bully's friends.

What do we do with painful memories, especially those memories that are so traumatic that we want to lock them up in the basement of our souls and never allow them to see the light of day again?

One of the most painful books you might ever pick up and read, I certainly couldn't make my way through all of it, is a book called *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* by Lawrence Langer. One of the testimonies in this book is that of a man named Abraham whose family arrived at Auschwitz from Hungary. His parents were sent to the left, which was to their death, while he and his two older brothers, and a younger brother were sent to the right. Abraham recalls this story:

I told my little kid brother, I said to him, "Solly, go to Papa and Mama." And like a little kid, he followed. He did. Little did I know that I sent him to the crematorium. I am...I feel like I killed him. My [older] brother, who lives in New York...every time when we see each other he talks about him. And he says, "No, I am responsible, because I said the same thing as you. It has been bothering me too." I've been thinking about whether he reached my mother and father, and that he did reach my mother and father. He probably told them, he said, "Abraham said I should go with you." I wonder what my mother and father were thinking, especially when they were all...when they all went into the crematorium [that is the gas chamber]. I can't get it out of my head. It hurts me, it bothers me, and I don't know what to do.

Memories, even painful memories, can serve a useful function for us. They can protect us from further harm and further hurt. When a child touches a hot stove and gets burned, the child has learned a life lesson to never touch a stove again. And if you've been with an abuser who has punched you, your memory serves as a protective device that "I'm not going to put myself in that situation again of allowing this person to punch me in the face anymore."

Imagine if you had no memory, you would constantly be repeating the same hurts over and over again. So memory serves a protective function.

Memory also serves to bring about justice. In Israel there is a huge Holocaust Museum called Yad Vashem.

Yad Vashem means “a memorial and a name.” It comes from Isaiah 56.5, “to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.”

The Israeli government in the early 1950’s was concerned about the absence of a memorial to the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust and the fact that so many of them died anonymously – just another statistic. They said that these men, women, and children, these babies that were gassed in gas chambers, people need to know them as human beings. They need to be given a memorial and a name. There needs to be a record of them somewhere because they mattered. They mattered to us; they mattered to God. They set about collecting records and have located 4 million of the names, places, and stories of these folks who were murdered.

So painful memories can serve useful functions. They can protect us from further harm. They can honor victims of injustice.

But sometimes painful memories turn against us. They torture us at night. They fill us with guilt and regret – like the story of Abraham and his little brother, Solly.

And sometimes the painful memory twists us to become the kind of people we don’t want to be – we don’t want to be fearful, suspicious, or vindictive – unable to trust; unable to give ourselves in love. But this memory has distorted the shape of our personalities like a bad-fitting back brace. So, as we continue in this series that I’ve titled “Finding Freedom From Your Past,” I want to deal with this basic question: What Does It Mean To Forgive And To Forget? Let’s pray.

We face another challenge with respect to memory other than the haunting pain of remembering things that were done to us, or terrible things we have done. One of the big challenges of healing our memories is that our memories are faulty and leaky and subject to distortion that we sometimes don’t even know what we’re to forgive. Did this event that I struggle with actually even happen?

Must we remember in order to forgive and forget?

Our memories are so faulty. Ronald Reagan for years used to tell a story about a very courageous Air Force Captain, who during WWII had his plane shot out from under him. His young copilot began panicking. But this older Captain put his hand on the young copilot and said, “Son, don’t worry. If we are going down, we’re going to go down together.” The young copilot survived the crash. The older Captain died and was

awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor after his death. Reagan told this story on a number of occasions at Republican fundraisers. He would say, "Like that heroic pilot, these are the principles I believe in. If these principles go down, I'm going to go down with them."

Well, someone decided to research that story. They looked through all the Congressional Medal of Honor winners and they found no story like this about anyone who won the Medal of Honor. And then they discovered that Reagan had been in a war movie back in the 1940's and in the movie there was a scene of an older pilot whose plane was shot out from under him riding with a younger pilot. In the movie the older pilot said, "Son, don't worry. If we go down, we're going down together." And when President Reagan was confronted with this, he laughed and said, "That's not the way I remember it."

Memory is such a faulty thing. One researcher wanted to know the impact of people's ability to implant memories into other folks. So she conducted interviews and didn't tell the folks she interviewed what she was trying to do. But she asked individuals if they had ever been to Disneyland as a child as one of the questions. Those that said yes they had been to Disneyland, the researcher would talk about her own experience at Disneyland of hugging the various cartoon animals. She would ask if that ever happened with them? Did they ever hug one of the animals? They would say yes. She would then go on and say, "Do you remember hugging Bugs Bunny?" The people would describe their memory of hugging Bugs Bunny at Disneyland and feeling the fur on his face and his big floppy ears. In fact, 36% of her research group had vivid memories of hugging Bugs. The problem is that Bugs is not a Disney character and has never been a part of Disneyland at all.

Then there was the clinical psychologist who was researching memory at a university the day after the Challenger disaster. This cognitive psychologist asked 44 of his students to write down how they first heard the news of the Challenger disaster and how they felt about it when they heard the news. Then 2 ½ years later he went back to those same 44 students and asked them the same question: How did you first hear of the Challenger disaster. Most of the students said that their memory of hearing of the event was still very vivid in their minds. What the psychologist discovered was not one of these reconstructed stories was entirely accurate, and a third were wildly inaccurate.

One student wrote the day after the event that she was in her religion class, some people walked in and started talking about the explosion. She didn't know any details except that it had exploded and that the school teacher's students had all been watching which she thought was sad. "Then after class I went to my room and turned on my TV and watched the news reports."

Two and a half years later this same student said, "I first heard about it in my dormitory while I was watching TV with a roommate. There was a newsflash that came across the screen that the Challenger had exploded. I remember my roommate and I were unbelievably shocked. I immediately called my parents."

What does all of this have to do with forgiveness? One of the hugely controversial issues in therapy over the last couple of decades has been the issue of repressed memories, the notion that when a traumatic experience occurs sometimes that memory is so painful that a person pushes those memories down into their unconscious and they have no conscious awareness of those things at all.

Now, this theory that traumas are pushed down into the unconscious and later show up in dreams, flashbacks, and various fragmentary glimpses has been the subject of hundreds of articles in the last decades. Families have been torn apart by children who claim that they've had recovered memories after 20 years of childhood sexual abuse, or sexual abuse when they were infants. There is almost nothing more controversial in contemporary psychology than this issue of whether repression actually happens at all.

One Harvard psychologist named Richard McNally won an award for his book called *Remembering Trauma*. This particular researcher looked at all the clinical and scientific evidence bearing on this issue. His conclusion was that first and foremost traumatic experiences are unforgettable. People may choose not to think about trauma for very long. But the evidence for repression, actually pushing things into the unconscious and then having them reappear later in fragmentary forms is surprisingly weak.

But this issue has torn hundreds of thousands of families apart. And there have been huge lawsuits against therapists who practice recovered memory therapy. In fact, one therapist was slapped with a 10.7 million dollar judgment.

Why do I raise this issue at all? It has become commonplace in the charismatic wing of the church to have various therapists and pastors and prayer ministers and prophetic counselors ministering in prayer sessions to folks who come in with a whole range of symptoms. Someone comes to one of these counselors and says, "I'm struggling with depression. Sometimes at night I feel like I'm suffocating. I struggle with sexual intimacy with my husband. Sometimes I have panic attacks." At some point in the therapy, at some point in the prayer session, the suggestion is made, "Perhaps you were sexually abused as a child and you don't remember it. Go home and journal and ask God to reveal what actually happened to you."

The person goes home and begins to journal. Over a period of months together with the counselor, they arrive at the conclusion that indeed this person was sexually abused as a child or as an infant and had lost the memory of it. But now it is coming back.

What should we think about this kind of thing as Christians? It is so common in the church. It is so common in prayer sessions. It is so common in Christian therapy. What should we think about this story that I just laid out?

Now, let me be really clear. Nothing that I am saying is meant to in the least cast doubt or create disbelief regarding a story of sexual abuse from someone who comes into a counselor or talks with a small group leader and they have a very distinct memory of

being sexually abused. I in no way want anything I am saying to re-victimize a person who has in fact been abused and who has a distinct memory of abuse by doubting.

What I am talking about is a situation in which someone does not have any distinct memory. They have fragments; they have these vague feelings, but they just do not remember any of this. How should we approach this? How should we approach this as a church? How do we approach this as a healing community? How do we help folks, who are suffering? And is it even necessary for me to reconstruct my memories in order to be healed?

Here are some principles for you. If any of you are in this situation, please let these things minister in love to you. We know some things from the scriptures. We know first of all that as followers of Jesus we are called upon to do justice. Micah 6:8 says:

“He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

And we also know that we are called upon to love and practice the truth. Exodus 20:16 says:

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

So, as a follower of Jesus when you are praying for someone, or you are counseling someone, or you are receiving counsel, it is incumbent upon everyone in that room to love and practice justice and truth particularly if a suggestion is made that will reflect badly on someone else like a parent. It is not enough for a Christian to just try to relieve the symptoms of our own pain, or to try to help someone find pain relief. We have a moral obligation to love the truth and to love justice.

Did the person really do what I claim they did? Did the person really do what my therapist or my small group leader, or this person praying for me claims they did? Or am I or this other person guilty of bearing false witness?

Memory is such a tricky business, friends. Virg Ganaway, who is a professor of psychiatry at Emory University warns therapists about getting caught up in their patients emerging memories and accepting those things as historically accurate. Here is what he said:

There are a whole string of entities that are incorporated into reconstructed memories including fantasy, distortion, displacement, condensation, symbolization, and confabulation (a process by which a person unknowingly fills in the gaps and holes in memories with inferences, plausibilities and guesswork). Mix into that mystifying stew a patient's suggestibility, fantasy-proneness and you end up with a potpourri of facts, fantasy, distortion, and confabulation capable of confounding even the most experienced therapists.

So what do you do when you've got this range of symptoms. You are praying for someone and there is some depression, there is some problems with intimacy, there are bodily issues. They were obviously raised in a very unhealthy family. Or you are that person and you are thinking of getting therapy.

One of the things that we must have as a rule in this church in any kind of prayer setting is that we never suggest to anyone at any time that they were sexually or physically abused and have no memory of that. We never want to be guilty of bearing false witness or working injustice. And if I am seeking out a therapist, I would want to know what their orientation is. Do they regularly find abuse? Some counselors have one tool in their bag. They always find childhood trauma and abuse. You know the old saying, to a person who only has a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Are they into searching out the corners of memory? Are they trained in dealing with my symptoms? Because this is like operating heavy equipment. You don't put an amateur on a piece of heavy equipment with a wrecking ball and have that amateur begin pulling levers and saying, "WOW! I wonder what this lever does. We're going to take down buildings...we're going to take families down. We're going to drive people into despair and morbid introspection."

Here is a word of hope and comfort for any of you who have been in therapeutic sessions where it has been suggested to you that you were abused, but you have no distinct memory of it, or you are struggling with a set of symptoms and you don't know what to do with them. Here is a word of hope and comfort. Nowhere in the Bible does it tell us that we have to piece together the scraps of our fragmented memories in order to be healed, or in order to work justice, or to protect ourselves from harm. You are not commanded ever in the Bible to try to dig into the recesses of your memory in order to get healed.

Must we remember in order to forgive and forget? The answer is no. If reconstructing our entire past was necessary in order for us to be well, the Bible would tell us to do that. But it doesn't.

Well, can we forgive and forget?

Can we forgive and forget?

You have distinct memories of having gone through a traumatic experience, or you I've suffered humiliation, or you've been betrayed. Can you forgive and forget? Or you've done something shameful; so shameful that you've never admitted it to anyone. Will God forgive and forget what you've done?

Forgiving and forgetting is a constant message that comes through all of the greats in church history. So, for example, John Calvin, one of the Fathers of the Protestant Reformation in his famous Institutes of Christian Religion said,

To forgive is “willingly to cast from the mind wrath, hatred, desire for revenge, but also willingly to banish to oblivion the remembrance of injustice.”

Forgive and forget. And this association between forgiving and forgetting is something that we read that God does in the Bible. In Jeremiah 31:34, as part of the new covenant, here is what we read that God will do with our sins:

Jeremiah 31:34

No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

And in Psalm 51:9 David prays this: “Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.”

The Bible says that God puts our sins behind his back. He covers our sin so that he doesn’t look at them. He practices the non-remembrance of our sins when he forgives us. He casts our sins into the deepest part of the ocean. He separates us from our sins as far as the east is from the west. God forgives and God forgets confessed sins – no matter how shameful that sin was.

And our forgiveness is to imitate God’s forgiveness. As Christ works in us and empowers us to forgive, our forgiveness is to resemble the forgiveness of God. That is why it says in 1 Cor. 13:5 this:

1 Corinthians 13:5

[Love] does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

How do we do this? How do we not only forgive but also forget? We label some activity as sin and wrong. And we name the person who committed this wrong against me.

- Here is the person who humiliated me.
- Here is the person who betrayed me.
- Here is the person who struck me.
- Here is the person who abused me.
- Here is the person who stole from me.

We name the sin; we name the person. And then I release that person and that sin to God. I tell God I am not their judge and I release my bitterness, my anger, my hurt to God. I give that all over to God and I ask God to work good in that person’s life. To do whatever God needs to do so that in the end that person will be blessed and they will ultimately receive eternal salvation.

But forgetting is part of that process. You say, “How do I forget the fact that I was abused, or humiliated, or betrayed? How can I forget a particularly painful memory? I can’t erase the hard-drive of my brain. I’m not going to play games with myself. There is no rewind button on my memory. There is no delete key. How do I not only do what you said to forgive, but also to forget?”

Let me change that word forget for you for just a moment. Instead of talking about forgetting, let’s talk about practicing non-remembrance. While that memory is still there in the hard-drive and will be there until we enter God’s eternal kingdom, to practice non-remembrance means that you choose not to visit the file. The file is there, but I choose not to visit it and read over it. I’ve forgiven. I’ve given the matter to God. I’ve given the person to God. I’ve given my hurt to God. I’ve prayed to God that God would bless this person. And now I’m not going to keep revisiting the file over and over again. I’m going to practice non-remembrance.

But I can’t forget. This thing was so painful. It went on for so long. It was so traumatic. I can’t forget.

Let me suggest something that you and I can do. The key when you want to forget something, or practice non-remembrance, is not to focus on that. You know that if you are trying to not think about something, the worst thing you can do is try to forget that thing; don’t think about an elephant in the room right now. Don’t think about this particular thing, it will just grind it into your memory. Instead of trying not to think about that hurtful or traumatic event, remember something else that is more compelling. That is what the Bible tells us to do. The Bible regularly calls us to fix our attention on things that are so much more compelling that we lose any interest or almost any capacity to think about the thing that hurt us in the past.

You don’t forget by trying to forget. Instead, you have something more wonderful to remember and that fills the conscious part of your mind on most occasions. What should you try to remember?

Well, first of all, you need to remember who you are.

Remember who you are

Over and over the New Testament tries to get followers of Jesus to remember their new identity in Christ. You are more than a sufferer of horrendous wrongs. You are not defined by your sins. Each of us needs to say before God, “My past does not define me. And what was done to me does not define me.” You and I are defined by God. Who I am; who you are is who God says we are. You are not your sins. To be forgiven is to be separated from your sins. You are not your wounds. If you are in Christ and Christ is in you, then the core of your being can never be hurt by anything that happens to you. Your life is hid with Christ in God.

You are more than a collection of your past experiences. You are more than your capacity to remember what was done to you. The New Testament regularly has this message. You must know who you are. Because if you don't know who you are, you will act in ways that you are not.

If you say, "Well, I'm just a sexual abuse victim. I'm damaged goods." Then why not just hook up with another loser who will treat you badly as you've been treated in the past. But, if you say, "I'm the Lord's beloved, I'm the apple of God's eye," then you will say "I deserve better than this relationship."

You say: "Well, I'm just an addict. That's who I am." Then why not just continue moving from one addiction to another.

If you say, "I am not my sins. I am not my wounds. I will let God define me." Well, let's figure out what God says about us. Turn with me to Ephesians 1. Here is what we read beginning in verse 3. And what I want you to do when we read the word "we" or "us" insert your name. Because this is who you are. This is what's been done for you.

Ephesians 1:3-14

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed [your name] in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose [your name] in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined [your name] for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given [your name] in the One he loves. 7 In him [your name] have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on [your name]. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to [your name] the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. 11 In him [your name] was also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that [your name], who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And [your name] also were included in Christ when [your name] heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When [your name] believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing [your name] inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Now some people are afraid to allow themselves to be redefined. They say, "This thing has so marked me..." This death, this trauma, this hurt that if you let it go, you might be afraid that you will go with it. If I let go of this wound, will a part of me go with it, Jesus? Or another slice at this would be, "If I let go of my outrage; if I let go of my grief; if I cover over this loss; will I somehow dishonor my loved one who was hurt or who

died?" If I don't visit the file of my pain regarding the loss of my loved one, am I somehow dishonoring them? Am I killing them again in my memory?

And I hear Jesus saying to me and to you the same question that he asked that man who was an invalid and who was lying by the pool in Bethesda for 38 years. We read in John 5.6 these words:

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

And I feel like Jesus asks that question of everyone of us who allows ourselves to be defined by our past sins, or defined by the wounds caused to us, or defined by our loss: Do you want to get well?

Painful memories are like a splinter in your finger, or a grain of sand in your eye. Taking out the splinter or removing the grain of sand doesn't damage you; it frees you to be the person God intends you to be.

You won't lose you in the process of getting well. You will discover you. God will redefine you in Christ. You will not lose a loved one in the process of releasing your outrage or your grief, or not revisiting the file of your pain over and over again. You will not lose your loved one. You will find them. You will find and rediscover all that made them a blessing to you, all the good things about them, all the love that you shared. You never lose yourself. You never lose a loved one when you practice forgiveness and non-remembrance. You drive out painful memories by remembering who you are. You have a new identity, if you are a follower of Jesus.

You drive out painful memories by remembering what God has done.

Remember what God has done

You know, you cannot be a Christian or a Jew without practicing remembrance – not remembrance of your pain; not remembrance of your sin; remembrance of what God has done. Forgetfulness regarding what God has done is seen in the Bible as one of the great spiritual problems for all of humanity. This is what we read in Psalm 103.2, "Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits"

In other words, practice counting your blessings. Don't forget what God has done in your life. While you are in pain, count all of your blessings. In fact, not remembering what God has done led the children of Israel to walk away from God. So, we read in Judges 3:7,

Judges 3:7

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

And in order to keep us from forgetting God and forgetting all of his benefits, God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament called his people to set up memorials. Yad Vashem, the memorial in Jerusalem that remembers the places and names of those who died in the Holocaust, God in the Old Testament and the New Testament says to all of his people, I want you to set up a memorial. A memorial is not a building; it is not a monument, in both the Old and New Testaments the memorial that God wants to set up is a meal. The meal in the Old Testament is the Passover. The meal in the New Testament is communion.

But in both cases, God uses all of our senses – our taste, our smell, our vision, our touch, our hearing in order to call us to remember what he has done for us. Total sensory involvement so that we remember.

So, in the Passover Seder, a meal that I have done 51 times in my 51 years of life, dinner uses food and drink and symbols and prayers and readings and songs and stories with one over goal: to take each person who is at the Seder dinner back to Egypt and to reenact what God did in delivering his people out of slavery so that every single person who is at the dinner could feel as if he or she had been saved from Egypt. The words of the Talmud:

In each and every generation, each person can regard himself as though he has emerged from Egypt.

The same is true whenever we take communion. We Christians celebrate communion by reading scripture and telling the story of Christ week after week. We pray; we eat the bread; we drink the cup. We not only recall that Christ died for our sins, but we get caught up in the story. We are so intimately involved that we get united to that event. Week by week when we take communion and we hear the words of the apostles in 1 Cor. 11:23-25:

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

We recognize that this meal has something to do with our capacity to forgive and to forget. As I eat the bits of bread and take the little cup, I picture in my mind’s eye the cross of Jesus Christ. And I know by faith that at the cross God laid all my sins on Christ. I look at him and I recognize that he, Jesus, was pierced for my transgressions. He was bruised for my iniquities. The punishment that brought me peace was upon him and by his wounds I am healed. When I look at the cross of Jesus Christ in my mind’s eye as I take communion, I recognize that God has separated me from my sins. And he has put those sins at the bottom of the sea.

This is what it says in Micah 7:19,

Micah 7:19

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

When you look at the cross, and you confess your sins to Christ, who died on the cross for you, believe that God has separated you from your sins and taken your sins and hurled them into the depths of the sea. And as Corrie ten Boom, that Dutch woman who survived a German concentration camp so wisely put it in one of her books,

God throws our sins into the depths of the sea and then he posts a sign saying “no fishing allowed.”

We aren’t supposed to go back and try to retrieve those sins that God has hurled to the bottom of the sea. You leave them down there lost in the grace of God.

When I take communion and I look at the cross, it is not only that God has separated me from my sins, but at the cross, God has also separated the person who has hurt me from their sins.

Sometimes I picture myself kneeling at the altar and the person that betrayed me, the person who hurt my loved one, comes into the church and kneels beside me at the altar. Jesus not only gives me communion, to share in his body and his blood, but he gives this other person communion. Or even more, Jesus asks me to share some of the communion that I have with them. When I take the communion, I remember what Christ has done for me and that Christ lives now in me and wants to love and forgive through me. It drives out all the dark memories of what has been done to me by others.

Sojourner Truth, who was an abolitionist and women’s rights advocate in the 19th century, preached a message once called “When I Found Jesus.” Here is what Sojourner Truth said:

Praise, praise, praise to the Lord! An’ I begun to feel such a love in my soul as I never felt before – for all of God’s creatures. An’ then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an’ I said, “Dar’s de white folks dat have abused you, an’ beat you, an’ abused your people – think o’ them!” But then there came another rush of Love through my soul, an’ I cried out loud – “Lord, I can love even de White folks!”

That’s what happens when you embrace the full meaning of communion. The Lord nurtures your soul so that you can love even that person who hurt and abused you. God enables you and me at the communion table to forgive and forget.

You remember who you are; you remember what God has done; and you remember what your future will be like. How do I deal with painful memories? How do I deal with

traumatic memories? I remember something more compelling than those things, more attractive, and I let my heart and mind be dominated by these new memories. I remember what my future will be.

Your life is not defined by your past sin. Your life is not defined by your wounds. Your life is not defined by anything that happened to you in the past. Your life is defined by the promise of God. You are becoming in the words of C.S. Lewis, my favorite Christian author,

A creature that is so beautiful that if people were to see what you will be in the eternal kingdom of God, we would be tempted to fall down and worship you.

If you are a follower of Jesus, God's love and light is shining in an increasing way through you so that in the end when you are resurrected from the dead, you will be dazzling beautiful. And when God's kingdom comes, will we remember the hurts done to us, or the wrongs we have done? I don't believe heaven's joys will be marred at all by the memory of past sins or past offenses. There won't be any sadness, any grief at all. There will be no need to hold onto painful memories in the Kingdom of God. We will not need to protect ourselves any more because we will have perfect safety and security. We will not need to hold onto painful memories because justice will be fully done and every injustice will be repaid.

And in the kingdom of God why would we want to hold onto painful memories? Because we will see the face of him who is perfect love and we will want that love for ourselves and for every creature under heaven.

This is the way it works, friends. Imagine that you have a dear friend or a spouse or a sibling or a parent or a child who hurt you deeply. And they come to you and they are absolutely broken up about what they've done. They are really distraught that they've hurt you. They beg your forgiveness. You want to have a fully restored relationship with them. And you believe that they won't do it again. So you forgive them. And you not only forgive them, but you put the past behind you. Could you access that file in your memory? You could, but why would you want to? This reconciliation with a dear friend or loved one is just a little foretaste of what is coming for you and me in the future. Because in the world to come, you and I will completely and thoroughly do what we can only do imperfectly and partially now. In the world to come, we will be able to forgive and to forget.

What Does It Mean To Forgive And Forget?

Rich Nathan

September 29-30, 2007

Finding Freedom From Your Past (Forgiveness)

Jeremiah 31:34

I. What Should We Do With Painful Memories?

II. Must We Remember In Order To Forgive and Forget?

III. Can We Forgive and Forget ? (Jer. 31.34; 1 Cor. 13.5)

IV. What Should We Remember?

A. Remember Who You Are (Eph. 1.1-14)

B. Remember What God Has Done

1. Passover (Dt. 16.3)

2. Communion (1 Cor. 11.25)

V. Remember What Your Future Will Be Like (1 Co 15:51)