

A TRUE STORY OF FORGIVENESS

**If anyone has reason to hate God, it's Sue
(Not her real name)**

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PHYSICALLY VIOLATED
ALSO FOR ALL WHO ARE STRUGGLING WITH:
BITTERNESS,
NOT FORGIVING THOSE WHO HAVE HURT YOU, OR
SUFFERING OF ANY KIND

A horror story (graphic details omitted) with an amazing ending.

From when she was a tender three years old, right through to her mid-teens, Sue's father shamefully treated her sexually. Where was the God of love, as year after year this innocent suffered unspeakable agonies? Yet as great a reason as that might seem for Sue hating God, her reasons had hardly begun.

While attending a private school, Sue gradually came to believe that God and the Bible are real. Then at age 16 that faith disintegrated. Then a priest molested her. The spiritual implications left Sue so devastated that she completely abandoned Christianity. For the next 12 years her anger raged.

But her deepest reason for hating God and nurturing bitterness had yet to appear.

She writes:

My life seemed just fine without relying on God and following hypocritical church rules. I didn't need God. I could succeed on my own.

After college, I went to law school. As part of an internship, I had to visit a criminal defendant in prison. I assumed I would be safe. After all, that's what those steel bars and guards are for, right? Well, I got caught in a incident where I ended up cut off from the guards and on the wrong side of the bars with a group of inmates. I was terrified. After a few minutes of watching me cry and pace and generally fall to pieces, my client, who had apparently become a Christian in prison, shook his head and said, "Girl, where is your faith?" It was then I realized how misplaced my faith had been. I had assumed that the guards and the bars would protect me. They did not. But it hit me that God could protect me. And He did. It dawned that 12 years earlier I had made a similar mistake of misplaced faith. I had put my faith in the institutional church and in some of its people, but not in Christ. It was they, not God, who had let me down. I had judged Christ by those who use his name, and because they failed me I turned my back on the One who could never fail me. After this realization, I was ready (once again) to turn my life back into God's hands.

So Sue gave herself to God, having no idea of the nightmare that lay ahead.

After about eight years, Sue was so captivated by Jesus that she traveled half way around the world at her own expense on a short-term mission trip to tell strangers about the God she thought was the answer to her every need. One day, while the rest of the team went out, Sue selflessly volunteered to stay back at the church and pray for their efforts. As she prayed, two men entered, held a gun to her head and threatened to rape her unless she renounced Christ. She bravely refused. They carried out their threat, all the while taunting her that ‘her’ God was powerless to stop them despite her cries and prayers.

Several weeks later, Sue wrote. As you would expect, she was tormented by waves of anger towards the God who had failed to protect her even though she was so devotedly serving him. And as if the horrors she had already suffered weren’t enough, the Almighty had not even protected her from a nasty spider bite that had now developed into a staph infection. “It is being treated aggressively with antibiotics,” wrote Sue, “but my doctor says if it does not improve soon and markedly, he will place me in the hospital for intravenous treatment.” Hadn’t this dear woman endured enough indignities and traumas? Must she also be hooked up in a hospital bed like a chained animal with medical staff prodding and gawking at her?

“I guess I assumed that since I had committed my life to Christ, and sought to grow in my faith, and spread the gospel, things like rape wouldn’t happen to me,” she wrote. Then came an astounding statement from this woman whose suffering seemed to know no end: “Obviously, I still need to grow in my faith, since the Bible is clear that Christians will be persecuted.”

In addition to this turmoil, Sue was on a roller coaster of anger towards her rapists, sometimes restraining herself, sometimes not. “I don’t want my spiritual welfare to be at risk. If my inability to forgive is a hurdle I need to cross, then I want to cross it. After all, it seems such a small hurdle compared to Jesus’ cross.”

Deeply moved, we offered all the support we could but we weren’t prepared for her next letter:

I can joyfully announce that I have survived my spider attack, thanks to three days off work, a huge quantity of antibiotics and fervent prayer. I stayed out of the hospital, praise God!

*I took advantage of the time at home to really wrestle in prayer with the Lord and finally I achieved what I consider to be a spiritual breakthrough. I prayed earnestly for the salvation of my two rapists, and I also forgave them. It seems so simple, but it felt so BIG. **Afterward, the stillness was astonishing. And amazing. And peaceful. So I prayed some more. And the stillness grew. And grew. And I felt a whole lot better, emotionally and spiritually.***

For the first time in the nine weeks since the rape, I was able to sing in Church today in the praise team. (I was tired and a bit shaky from the spider bite, but I really felt the Lord’s hand on me.) You know what? I’m going to be okay. God is in control. He still walks on water. He still heals. And He still saves.

To most of us, Sue's action seems so off the planet that we feel like rejecting it out of hand. Before doing so, let's consider how many other things in life initially seem impossible and were for countless generations rejected as laughable by millions of people. Here's just two obvious examples from a deep pool of possibilities:

Earth is a sphere and not only do people on the bottom not fall off, everything feels to them just like it does to those on the top.

Cutting people open—surgery—heals them.

There are indeed many things that vast numbers of people dismiss as ridiculous and yet they work. Since Sue's breakthrough had such a remarkable and beautiful effect on her, let's delve deeper into her experience even if our first reaction is to think it ludicrous or unworkable.

Miraculous Purity

Let's start with how Sue found perfect peace with a troublesome conscience. Of course there were times when she temporarily slipped back into old thinking, but Sue found being God-centered was the most liberating experience she had ever known. Until handing control of her life over to Christ several years ago, Sue had been constantly mud-wrestling with guilt. When guilt got the upper hand she was almost strangled with feelings of being nearly the most wicked person on earth. Her only way of fighting back was to think ugly, hateful thoughts about her abusers. The more she despised those perverts, the better she felt about herself. No matter how good anyone gets at mud-slinging, however, one is still groveling in mud. Irrespective of her innocence regarding sexual crime, and no matter how much she tried to suppress it, there were other areas where she, like all of us, had morally failed. Guilt is such a ghastly affliction that, like most of humanity, she tried to live in denial. It was a dreadful ordeal, constantly trying to lie to herself that she was near enough to moral perfection, when deep down she knew that she, like the rest of us, stood guilty before a holy God.

Everything changed, however, when she looked to Jesus. Relative to the dazzling perfection of his life, everyone is so morally ruined that it is pointless trying to guess who is worse. And yet her spiritual union with Christ meant that an astounding exchange took place, whereby her shame vanished, having been absorbed by Christ's abused body as his life agonizingly ebbed away. Then, completing the exchange with yet another mind-boggling miracle, Christ's eternal honor became hers. In heaven's eyes, Sue suddenly had the exquisite purity and matchless beauty of Christ's moral perfection. She didn't have to fight for it, put others down for it, lie to herself about it; it was simply, effortlessly hers. Sue could finally relax and face reality because her past no longer dominated her. Her entire past had been washed clean. Every sordid speck was washed away. She was spotless.

“God's forgiveness of my sins was a miraculous, instantaneous thing,” comments Sue. *“My forgiving myself, however, took very much longer.”*

Where was God when she needed him?

Sue's abusers stabbed God's heart. As a mother looking at her hurting baby often feels more pain than her darling, God's heart broke, his pain was immense and his fury at her abusers' cruelty was so intense that no-one but the Almighty himself could restrain such emotion. Whatever reason God had for restraining himself, it was a good one—so good that when it all is revealed Sue will spend the rest of eternity praising God for it.

God is resolutely and unselfishly devoted to our long term good, but this must not be confused with short term ease that ultimately turns us soft and robs us of eternal glory. Perhaps you are presently in so much pain that even that statement makes you angry. The Bible calls trials birth pangs. Many a woman immediately after childbirth is convinced she will never allow herself to have another baby. She's certain nothing could be worth that much agony. And yet the time comes when she is happily planning another child. Why? Because the pain is lavishly compensated by the rewards. And those compensations are like purgatory relative to the rich rewards awaiting Sue.

Sue knew that Jesus had not let her down by allowing her to be raped. Jesus himself was violated until dead at the hands of sinful men, and he specifically said that his followers could expect to be treated just as he had been treated. Over and over the Bible warns that Christians will suffer in this life. In fact, a sizable portion of the Bible was written by Paul, who with agonizing regularity was shipwrecked, stoned, flogged, beaten up and imprisoned (2 Corinthians 11:23-29). Other New Testament writers and early Christians likewise had encounters with God so powerfully real that they reveled in the incomprehensible vastness of God's love, while they and their loved ones suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of people opposed to God.

Significantly, Paul himself only became a Christian because God had let him torture and kill Christians until he finally came to his senses and yielded to Christ. Who would ever have guessed that God's tolerance of this hate-crazed bigot would eventually lead to the transformation of countless thousands of people throughout the rest of human history?

The Bible's only promises regarding ill-treatment are that in this life we can expect to be on the receiving end and that the temporary pain will eventually be swallowed up by the eternal reward.

It's as if Sue trusted a financial consultant, investing her entire life's savings by following his advice to the letter. Her investment keeps building and building, then suddenly nose-dives. Panic-stricken, Sue runs to her consultant angrily accusing him. "Don't you remember?" he replies, taken aback, "I specifically said there is no guarantee there will never be downward fluctuations. We agreed this was a mid-to-long-term investment. My guarantee has always been that in the long term you'll be thrilled with the result."

It's silly to have the attitude that if God does not offer an iron-clad guarantee of total physical protection on earth we'll choose to throw our lives away and spend an eternity of agony in hell. That's like condemning yourself to lifelong loneliness because marriage does not prevent pimples. It's like refusing surgery on a deadly tumor because cutting your toenails is not included

in the operation. No one else offers total physical protection, realized Sue, so why deny herself all the unique comfort God offers?

Physically and emotionally, Sue's attack was horrific, and yet there is a sense in which it was not a low point in her life, but her moment of glory. She had proved beyond doubt to herself and to every evil spiritual power the genuineness of her love for God. Until then, the accusation could have been made that she was a Christian only because of her insecurities. That accusation might have been false, but it was untested. Sue had proved to herself and to everyone that she had not run to God simply to avoid hardship. She was fiercely devoted to him, willing to risk all for his sake. So much for those who accuse Christians of escapism.

Where was God when she needed him?

Reeling in agony with her.

Proudly planning her reward.

Ensuring that through either Plan A (repentance leading to salvation) or Plan B (hell) her abusers would regret their action for all eternity.

How could any sane person forgive like Sue did?

Sue initially recoiled from the thought of forgiveness. She confided that what caused her reaction was a mistaken idea of what forgiving involved. *"I thought it meant I had to give up the truth that I was hurt and that I had been wronged, rather than merely giving up the right to want revenge,"* she said. *"Forgiving people is not the same as excusing their behavior. It does not make what they did right. It is acknowledging that a wrong was done."*

This makes sense. If nothing wrong has been done, there would be nothing to forgive. Sue's forgiveness did nothing to condone her attackers' offense, nor did it make them less worthy of severe punishment. It said nothing about *their* morality except that they were guilty, but it spoke volumes about *Sue's* morality.

Connie, a friend of mine who has suffered immensely from sexual abuse, pointed out that forgiving was much easier for Sue than for many. Sue was a mature Christian, practiced in forgiving, and had experienced the miracle of being filled with God's love. Even so, reaching the point where Sue could forgive her attackers still took a painfully long nine week struggle. And I could almost guarantee that further struggles with forgiving those lecherous fiends lay ahead. If anyone imagines that the length of this battle reflects badly on Sue, they know nothing. It's like an epic battle against formidable odds. The tougher the battle—the longer it rages—the greater the victory. Had for Sue forgiving been a two minute victory, it would not have been the great moral achievement that it was. Finally breaking through after such a struggle proved Sue to be someone who is truly following in the steps of Christ. Reaching the point of forgiveness set Sue apart from all the hypocrites who try to feel good about themselves by feeling superior to sadists and others whose moral failures are obvious. Sue forgave those who violated her because, unlike many of us, she had the guts to face the awful truth that sin makes each of us guilty of violating Christ's body and his purity. It was for her sins that Christ's body was violated. Those sins—and

mine, and yours—were laid on Christ, stripping him of his purity as he hung on the cross, the object of shame and public ridicule.

When we face our Maker, one aspect of his judgment will be to apply to us the kindness or harshness which we applied on earth to those who wronged us. **Sue had the spiritual insight to realize it would be blatant hypocrisy to ask God to forgive the shameful things her sin did to Christ if she were unwilling to forgive those who did shameful things to her.**

Suppose a new nation formed, with a brand new legal system. Before the courts are its first two cases. A man will be tried for stealing from you your wedding ring at knife-point. The next case will also involve you, but this time you will be the accused, on trial for the armed robbery of \$50,000 cash. In the first case, the defendant is found guilty. As the crime victim, your input is sought regarding the setting of the penalty. Here's your chance to influence the court and help set a legal precedent for the penalty of armed robbery. Would it be smart for you, whose court case is next, to angrily tell the court that having one's life threatened and being robbed is the most awful experience and deserves the severest penalty? What if you were so blinded by the pain of what you suffered at the hands of your attacker that you could not see the similarity between the two offenses? You're convinced that a knife held to the throat is far scarier than a gun, and that the theft of a cheap wedding ring, with its great sentimental value, is infinitely worse than stealing a large sum of cash. "You should chop off his hands," you argue. "Then whip him till his life hangs by a thread. Then chain him up, toss him into the cruelest prison earth has ever seen and throw away the key." How dangerously short-sighted that attitude would be!

Jesus taught that we each find ourselves in a situation very similar to this one. We will one day stand before Almighty God, on trial for every sin we have ever committed. In our self-righteousness we might have achieved total blindness to our sin, but the Judge sees all. We will desperately want our offenses pardoned. And a major factor in the Judge's decision will be his intimate knowledge of our attitude towards the offenses of others. What a tragedy if the great pain we have suffered at the hands of wicked men so blinds us to the magnitude of our offenses against God that our judgment of others renders us liable to God's severest judgment. "Judge not, lest you be judged," pleaded Jesus. Each of us are so hardened to our own sin that we cannot conceive how depraved we are. None of us deserves a divine pardon. God's forgiveness of us, taught Jesus, hinges on whether we forgive those don't deserve our forgiveness.

Why?

An abused person has been deeply wronged. Sue explained it brilliantly when she said it is like acknowledging that a debt is owed, and yet choosing to write it off.

But why would anyone write off a debt?

In the business world, this is considered best practice when an honest assessment reveals that the possible returns are simply not worth the expenditure of time and effort required to attempt to extract payment. This is certainly true with resentment. The spiritual and emotional costs—even the health costs—of resentment are far worse than is commonly realized, and people enslaved by bitterness typically greatly underestimate the joys and rich rewards of a resentment-free life.

There is a more pressing reason, however. It is as if we ourselves owe far more money than is owed to us and our willingness to write off the debt owed to us will inspire our creditors to do the same with our debt. Jesus taught that if, for argument's sake, we think of the person who has wronged us as being \$100,000 in our debt, we owe our creditor (God) \$50 billion. (It's mind-boggling to think the magnitude of our offense against God is of that order, relative to how much we have been hurt, and yet that is the proportion that the world's greatest Teacher used. An unwillingness on our behalf to write off the debt owed to us, emphasized Jesus, would undermine the correctness of God's decision to write off our \$50 billion debt. The Judge would be compelled to revise his assessment.

But it's so hard . . .

Those thugs violated not only Sue's body but her spirit. It is as if they forced highly addictive pills down her throat. As awful as the physical violation was, it eventually came to an end, but the nagging itch of bitterness, the addiction to rage and the insatiable craving for revenge threatened to go on and on. As much as Sue longed to be free, and at times even thought she was free, those horrid feelings kept plaguing her. Like overcoming any addiction—alcoholism, smoking, drugs, or whatever—forgiveness is rarely an instantaneous victory. The gnawing ache returns. Especially in the initial stages, forgiving someone is often like dressing in freshly laundered clothes. Just hours later, the clothes begin to soil and before long they need washing again. But people don't let this fact of life so discourage them that they languish in filthy clothes for the rest of their lives. They simply wash as often as needed and get on with life; fresh and clean and unashamed. Likewise, when negative feelings begin to surface, an abuse survivor just comes again to Jesus and lets him wash away those defiling thoughts.

Whoever persistently looks to Jesus and keeps trying, wins. They break through to peace and healing and carry with them for the rest of their lives spiritual strength and Christlikeness far beyond anything they would have ever known had they had an easier life.

Later Sue wrote:

I once again thanked the Lord for sparing my life. I prayed again for the salvation of my attackers and again forgave them in my heart. My plan is to do this daily for a while.

A little later she wrote:

Since you have heard what Satan did on the mission trip, it is only fitting that you hear about what the Lord has done. On the one day we had off on the mission (the day before I was raped) I traveled on a train with two friends. On the way home, four drunks tried to pick up my two friends (both happily married, thank you). Then one persistent man, a pub owner named Kevin, plopped himself down next to me and made the mistake of asking me what a nice girl from America was doing in his country. I told him about Jesus. For some unfathomable reason, I gave him my business card.

When I returned to the U.S. he started phoning me, long-distance. What I had shared with him kept bothering him, he said, so he went to four different stores until he found a Bible. He

then wanted to know which parts to read first. He kept calling (at 3 am and with a really hard-to-understand accent) and he kept reading. Eventually, Kevin committed his life to the Lord. He shared his experience with his three other drinking buddies from the train. They all committed their lives to the Lord as also did his wife. The most amazing thing about this is that through your prayers the Lord gave me the grace to keep sharing the Gospel message with Kevin on the phone, even after the rape, even in the middle of traumatic, sleepless nights, because God wanted to bless and transform Kevin, his family, and his friends. Kevin has now been baptized and shares—with great enthusiasm, no doubt—about Jesus with his very many acquaintances.

What makes Sue tick?

Sue knew she needed divine help to be freed from the stranglehold of anger and bitterness. She achieved because she both fought with all her strength and persistently called out to God for supernatural help. She understood that although anger was a natural reaction, it was only ruining her peace and spoiling her intimacy with the one Person who truly understood her pain and longed to comfort her.

Sue was eternally thankful that God so loved her that he had allowed her to rage against him for so many years. That same God, she realized, likewise loved her rapists, even though their abominable treatment of her enraged and grieved him. The Lord longed to give them more chances to find God's forgiveness, before it was eternally too late, just as he had spared Sue and given her more chances and just as he had done for the apostle Paul and countless others throughout history.

She knew that Jesus let his own body be violated for her and that he would do *anything* to protect her if it were truly best for everyone directly and indirectly of all involved. But the Lord lovingly focuses on the eternal good of everyone, unlike a fallible human who would selfishly seek the short-term pleasure of his favorites. We often think if we were God we'd act differently to him. What we really mean, however, is that we would not act like God if we had his power, but still had our own selfishness, short-sightedness, limited intellect, and other flaws. If we were truly God—endowed with full knowledge of all the facts, knowing the intricate chains of events set off by every action, able to see the eternal picture including heaven and hell, had not a speck of hypocrisy and were perfect in justice and wisdom—we would make the same decisions that God does.

Forgiving

Forgiving someone who has both hurt us deeply and doesn't deserve forgiveness is an enormous challenge. It can be the spiritual equivalent of conquering Mt. Everest, not only in regard to difficulty, but in the great honor to the person who finally makes it to the top. The honor is largely reserved for the next life, of course, where people will better understand the enormity of your personal struggle, and where great honor can be bestowed without the danger of destroying the person through pride. If the person you forgive had afflicted you with shame, forgiving actually transforms that short-lived shame into endless glory.

Since forgiveness really is a Mt. Everest, I long to give you all the support I possibly can. So here are some additional thoughts.

Sue's breakthrough came from praying for her rapists' salvation. I suggested this to her partly because of the wonderful evangelist's heart that she has, but this approach (or praying a blessing upon the person if he/she is already a Christian) works so powerfully because it begins to line our heart up with the heart of God. This invites the Lord to do what he has always longed to do—to use us as a connecting link between his love and the life of the person we are struggling to forgive. Once the link is established, God's love will flow through us to the person. That flow of love through us brings us great healing.

Here are two thoughts that make easier praying for the salvation of people who have hurt you.

Salvation involves a personality transformation so radical that they would be filled with regret for what they had done to you. In the case of Sue's rapists, for instance, they would loathe themselves for all their previous offenses and for the rest of their existence they would long to be kind, gentle, and sexually pure.

A big factor in the conversion of the apostle Paul was most likely his role in stoning Stephen, the first Christian martyr, while Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of those killing him. Paul went on to become the person who, next to Jesus, has probably been used to spiritually help more people than any other human being. Who knows how much poorer today's church might be had Stephen harbored bitterness in his heart and not interceded on behalf of those participating in his murder?

Connie, who, as mentioned earlier has suffered enormously because of childhood sexual abuse, draws on her deep personal experience to share some valuable thoughts:

Forgiveness does more for the person offering forgiveness than it does for the person needing forgiveness. Until I decide to forgive, I cannot get rid of the hatred and anger that inflames my pain.

*Forgiveness does not mean I will never hurt again over what was done to me. Abuse is always wrong and damaging. But with forgiveness comes a lessening of the pain. Forgiveness will not make me forget what happened. We cannot **literally** forgive and forget. But forgiveness allows us to go on with life and not be held captive by the memories and feelings associated with the abuse.*

I do not have the ability to forgive the great injustice done to me, but God has the ability I need. My part is to be willing to forgive. I tell God I am choosing to forgive and to be obedient to the wisdom of his Word which tells me to forgive those who spitefully use me. As I share with him my pain and fear and anger and ask him to take it away, the forgiving process begins. I call it a process because there is still much healing to be done within me before I get to the place where I feel and know in my heart that I have truly forgiven my offender.

God understands your pain. He is patient. He longs to heal you, but your forgiving is an inseparable part of the process. As you reach out the tiny bit that you can towards forgiving, God will heal you the little that your tiny move allows. That small healing then enables you to reach a little further towards forgiveness, which will result in more healing. Unless at some point you put the brakes on, this cycle will go on and on until your healing is complete.

What God has done in Sue's life from the time she finally opened up to him is so wonderful that she counted it worth while traveling half way around the world at her own expense and being raped by two thugs, if through that others might have the spiritual experience that transformed her own life. You, too, can have such a thrilling, satisfying relationship with God, that it makes the costliest sacrifice shrivel to almost nothing.

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