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## CHAPTER 1

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# The Power to Set You Free

*“To forgive is to set a prisoner free  
and discover that the prisoner was you.”*

LEWIS B. SMEDES

**F**orgiveness is one of those rare subjects that affects every person, every relationship, every marriage, every family, every one of us.

Whenever I teach on forgiveness to any size crowd, I often start by asking two simple questions:

1. Have you ever been hurt by someone you needed to forgive?
2. Have you ever hurt someone and needed to seek their forgiveness?

If you answered yes to either of those questions, this book is for you.

When I refer to forgiveness, it's not so much about forgiving the rude person who took your place in line at the store, the guy who cut you off on the freeway, or the inconsiderate couple who talked too loud at the theater while you were trying to watch a

movie. That's more about extending common grace that we all need, because let's be honest, sometimes that person is us.

But all of us have experienced some level of offense or personal violation that requires more than just common grace. Often these painful experiences are so personal, so hurtful, and so grievous that they tattoo themselves on our hearts and leave indelible scars on our souls. If left unresolved, they ingrain themselves into every fabric of our lives and affect the way we think, how we feel, what we choose to believe as true, and ultimately how we live every day.

Unfortunately this often leads to more sorrow than was perpetrated on us when the offense first occurred. It impacts our quality of life, how we feel about ourselves, our choices, our work, our relationships, our marriage, our children, our family, and future generations. So much of the misery we needlessly carry offers nothing but dysfunction and heartache. And no amount of denial or avoidance can heal our hearts or give us the freedom we desire.

The antidote is forgiveness. To experience life to its fullest, extending and receiving forgiveness must be an ongoing practice for our spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Since none of us is perfect, simply put, there is nothing we need *more than forgiveness*.

How do I know this is true?

Though I've done an enormous amount of study on the subject, most of what I know about forgiveness is not based on abstract theories or lessons I've learned in a classroom. Since 1976 I have been involved in full-time Christian ministry, and during that time I have seen the miraculous transformation that happens when people forgive. I have also seen the terrible devastation when people refuse to forgive. But my passion for helping people forgive their way to freedom has been most shaped by my own experiences.

## A Deep Wound Healed

One afternoon in the early spring of 2002, I received a phone call from my oldest sister, Sue. She was calling to tell me our dad was dying. He had been fighting cancer for the past year, and it now appeared his days were numbered. At the time, I was living in Los Angeles, almost two thousand miles away from St. Louis, where my dad lived. She wanted to know if I would make the trip back home for Dad's funeral.

After a short pause I calmly replied, "What would be the point?"

There was no bitterness or anger coloring my response, just indifference. I didn't have a relationship with my dad, and we hadn't spoken for more than a decade. I was just thirteen when he and my mother divorced, after nearly twenty-five years of a difficult marriage. While his departure from our home was sad, it also brought relief from the constant rage and tension that had become unbearable. Our home was already broken; this just made it official.

I had tried to give my dad a lot of grace over the years and believed he was doing the best he knew how. Raising eleven children—I was number seven—on a maintenance man's salary in a twelve-hundred-square-foot house would test the soul of any man. I'm sure many of the mistakes he made in raising his children were modeled for him by his own father, whom I never knew but of whom I heard tales that he was given to fits of rage, abuse, and violence, and likely went back several generations. However, I also believe that each of us can choose whether to break away from our painful pasts or to continue the cycle of abuse, rejection, and abandonment. As for Dad, let me just say he did not choose well.

My relationship with my dad was shaped almost entirely by fear. When he wasn't angry, he made it clear he had little interest in our daily lives. As a child, I reasoned that my siblings and I

must be really bad kids to have a dad so angry, disappointed, and disengaged.

The one anomaly was when he took me to a St. Louis Cardinals game with some free tickets he got from work. During

*Ten years had passed since then, and he was about to die. And I didn't care.*

the bus ride, he told me stories of his service as a medic in training during World War II, which I had never heard before. And as we crossed the busy street, he actually held my hand, the one and only time he ever did. All the sights, sounds, and smells of this experience—even the taste of the soda pop—are still etched in

my mind. For one memorable evening, I got to experience what normal felt like with my dad.

I played football throughout high school, but my dad never saw a game. At one game, I scored the winning touchdown as the clock ran out, and as all the other players' fathers were cheering for me, I wished my own dad had been there to see it. He didn't come to my high school graduation, and on my wedding day, he called to say he had to work and wouldn't make it. As I began raising my own family, I drifted from my father completely.

I experienced occasional reminders of this loss, especially when I saw a father and son close together. Men's spiritual retreats or large rallies were always tough for me since it seemed speaker after speaker raved about the godly heritage of their saintly fathers. Sometimes I resented this. *That's nice for you*, I thought, *but what about the rest of us?* I knew lots of men like me must struggle in life in large part because of their dysfunctional dads.

Choosing a card for Father's Day was an annual challenge. Usually I found a blank card and wrote a personal note. However, one Father's Day I decided to go all out. I created and framed a small poster entitled, "Seven Treasures I Learned from My

Father,” which highlighted qualities such as honesty, integrity, strong work ethic, morality, and other important lessons. I sent it to my dad, but never heard back from him. I wasn’t even sure if he got it. That was the last time I tried reaching out to him.

Ten years had passed since then, and he was about to die. And I didn’t care.

I still held deep pain in my heart that hadn’t healed, but I was prepared to manage with the tough scabs that had grown over my wounds. As much as I would have loved to reconcile with my dad, it seemed impossible. The last thing I wanted was to reopen those wounds by going to see him before he died, only to have it turn out badly. Besides, I couldn’t imagine what I would say in my final words to him. “I love you”? “Thanks for being my dad”? Everything I could say seemed disingenuous.

I decided to let him die without talking to him, and I was okay with that. But over the next few days, God convicted me that I was making the wrong choice. As this conviction grew, I told God I would see my dad on three conditions. I believed these things were impossible, so I felt confident I’d be off the hook.

First, I wanted my grown son, Jamie, to accompany me. Since he lived four hours away from his grandfather and barely knew him, I assumed he would have no interest in making the trip.

Second, I told God I wanted to look my dad in the eye and tell him I forgave him. However, I was sure this would make my dad defensive, and our final meeting would not go well.

Third, I wanted my father to look me in the eye and tell me he loved me. Since he had never done this, I had no expectation that he would do it on his deathbed.

I felt safe making this bargain with God, so I asked my son if he wanted to go with me. I was certain he’d decline, and then I wouldn’t have to go. My heart sank when he jumped at the chance. I was moving toward the point of no return, and a little more than a month later I flew to St. Louis.

The night before my visit, I decided to call my dad to let him know I wanted to see him. This call would break more than ten years of silence, and I found myself wondering how he would respond. Would he take my call? Would he agree to a visit? What would I say to him?

“Hello?” His voice sounded weak.

“Hi, Dad. This is Gilbert.” (I’m still Gilbert when I’m in trouble or when I visit home.)

“Yeah.”

His cool reception threw me off, but I continued. “Well, Dad, I’m in Missouri, and Jamie and I would like to come and see you tomorrow. Would that be okay?”

“Sure, if you want to come.”

“Yes, we’d like to come. When can we see you?”

“I have to go to therapy at eleven thirty. Why don’t you come at ten thirty?”

I was taken aback by his suggestion. One hour? I hadn’t seen him in more than ten years, and he was suggesting that we visit for just an hour? “How about if we come at ten o’clock to give us a little more time to visit?” I said, fighting back my disappointment.

“Well, that’s up to you.”

“Okay, we’ll see you tomorrow morning at ten.”

“Okay then, see you tomorrow.”

I hung up, feeling hurt and let down by my dad’s reaction. “I knew this would happen,” I told God angrily. “I knew if I opened my heart and took this chance, I would be disappointed. Why would I want to go see him if he doesn’t care to see me? It’s such a waste!” My anger soon turned to self-pity, and a flood of tears escaped from me. “Why is it so hard for my father to love me?”

In the darkness of my room as the tears and pain flowed out of me, God drew near to comfort me, and I thought of an unmistakable truth from Psalm 27:10: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.” God sweetly reminded me

that He is my Father and that He loves me with all His being. My anger and fear were soon replaced with an incredible peace, and I fell into the deepest sleep I'd had in a long time.

Early the next morning, Jamie arrived and we headed to see my dad. I felt thankful to have my son with me, but still my heart was pounding. Before we entered the facility, I called my wife, Patricia, and asked her to pray for me.

It was time to see Dad for our last meeting. As we approached the front door, my son put his hand on my shoulder and asked if I was okay.

"No, I'm not okay," I told him. "I'm terrified because I don't know how this is all going to play out. But I want you to know something, Son. There's no one in the world I'd rather have going in there with me than you." With that, we walked arm-in-arm through the door.

My dad's roommate greeted us. He smiled a big toothless grin and said, "You must be Gilbert!" Then he gestured toward a wheelchair and like a game show host, announced, "*Heeeeere's* your dad!"

And there he was. The only man I have ever feared was frail, sitting in a wheelchair. My father certainly didn't look scary now. He was weak, helpless, and too thin. He was so different from the big, strong man with the booming voice I had remembered as a child. I dutifully walked over and gave him a hug, as did Jamie. We then wheeled him into a crowded reception room where we sat and engaged in small talk.

Our conversation was slow and awkward at first. I wondered how we would transition to the kind of serious talk I wanted to have as I realized our visiting time was going by quickly. Since we obviously couldn't have a meaningful exchange in this crowded area, I asked my dad if we could go back to his room.

As we got settled in his room, I took the time to look around. All that was left of his life were some old clothes, a few pairs

of shoes, and some Southern Gospel CDs. On the wall, to the right of his bed, hung his most prized possessions: a photo of his daughters and one of his sons. Then my eyes landed on something familiar. Next to the pictures hung an old framed poster that read “Seven Treasures I Learned from My Father.”

I felt conflicted. I was glad he had not only received the poster I made for him, but obviously he cherished it. But I also felt sad and confused. *Why didn't he ever tell me he got it?* I wondered. *Why am I just now discovering how much it meant to him, as he's about to die?*

Jamie sat on the bed while I pulled up a chair in front of my dad's wheelchair. To my surprise, Dad appeared to cower as I stood over him. I was now the big man. I was the one in control. He must have dreaded whatever he thought was coming, misinterpreting my strong look of resolve. But when I sat down, tears began to flow down my cheeks.

I took his big hands, which had been instruments of remarkable genius and devastating pain, and kissed them gently. I placed his hands on my face so he could feel my tears. After a few moments of silence, I took a deep breath and said, “After today I'm never going to see you again.”

He paused at the weight of that statement, then said, “If what the doctors are telling me is true, then yes, this will be our last visit.”

Unsure where to start, I finally asked, “Dad, what do you think of me?”

Another pause. “Well . . . I think highly of all my children. There's Sue, Virginia, Jim—”

“No, I didn't ask what you thought of all your children. I want to know what you think of me, Gilbert.”

Again he paused. “Uh . . . I know you're a hard worker. And I know you've been in the ministry a long time.” He smiled as if he hoped he had passed the test and this would be enough to satisfy me.

“I didn’t ask you about what I’ve done. I want to know what you think of me.”

His face tightened, as though he was stumped, and he sat back in his wheelchair without responding.

I swallowed hard and prayed for boldness. “Dad, last week I turned forty-five years old, and I’ve never once heard you say you love me.”

He looked down as I let him digest that statement. He cleared his throat and said, “You know, my dad never told me he loved me. In fact, it wasn’t until the last week of her life that my mother said she loved me.”

Once again I felt conflicted. How terribly sad that my father would go through life without

hearing his parents say they loved him. I felt genuine compassion, yet I also felt resentment. *Because you didn’t get it, I don’t get it either?* I thought. *Not getting it is no excuse for not giving it.* But I kept these thoughts to myself and instead said, “Dad, because I never heard you say you love me, I have struggled so much in my life. I concluded I was not loveable.”

*I looked him in the eyes and said simply, “I forgive you, Dad.”*

He leaned forward slightly and groaned. I knew this was painful for both of us. He put his frail hands on my cheeks and wiped away my tears, but I still had more to say.

“I’ve had many people say kind things about me throughout my life, but no one’s approval means more to me than yours.” This was the most honest and transparent I had ever been with my dad.

He looked down at his lap, as though moved by what I had just said. “Son, I realize I have failed you as a father. Looking back, I wish I had done things differently—”

That was all I needed to hear. I interrupted him again, gently this time, and said something I had thought would be impossible, words I had waited forty-five years to say. I looked him in the eyes and said simply, “I forgive you, Dad.”

And I felt free. Truly free for the first time.

My dad wasn't defensive. He wasn't upset. With that simple pronouncement, he was set free too.

Then he looked up, looked me in the eyes, and told me what I had waited forty-five years to hear: "I love you, Son."

We immediately embraced and began to weep. Jamie stood and put his arms around both of us as we all wept together. This scene signified something far more profound than three men hugging and crying. This was the moment a father, son, and grandson together broke a generational curse that had hung over our family for far too long.

I don't remember how long we embraced or what else we said. But there was such a tremendous sense of victory in that room. God had done the impossible—just as He had promised. For me, this would be a watershed event, forever resolving so much inner conflict and pain, and I knew I could now leave my dad in peace.

As we said our final goodbyes, I was struck by the bittersweet sight of my son talking and laughing with his grandpa. Bitter because of all the wasted time and lost opportunities with my dad. But also remarkably sweet because this was one moment we did not let escape. I knew I would always remember this experience.

I held out my hand to him. "Goodbye, Dad."

He took my hand and pulled me close to him so he could look in my face. He gently smiled. "Always remember that I love you."

I kissed him on the head. "I promise, I will never forget."

Outside, I leaned against a fence and cried harder than I had in many years. Jamie came over to me and we held each other in a long embrace.

"Dad, I know you love me."

I didn't expect those words, and I stepped back and put my hands on his shoulders. "Do you, Son? Do you know how much I love you?"

"Of course I do," he said. "I've always known you love me."

“Jamie, you just heard your grandfather say that his dad never told him that he loved him. And probably your great-grandfather’s dad made the same mistake. This generational curse ends here and now with you and me! Promise me that when you have your own children, you will tell them over and over how much they are loved.”

He promised. What an amazing, healing journey.

My dad succumbed to his cancer shortly after our visit. I have never forgotten his final words to me, and I

repeat them constantly to my own grandchildren. How I delight in telling them they are smart, funny, kindhearted, and most of all, loved. I enjoy taking them places and buying them things, but perhaps my greatest gift is in knowing they will never be touched by the scars of their grandfather. That curse was forever lifted, the day I forgave my dad. With God’s help, I chose to forgive my way to freedom.

With God’s help, you can forgive your way to freedom too.

*The reason forgiveness has so much power is because when we forgive, we are most like God!*

## **The Power of Forgiveness**

When the subject of forgiveness comes up, many people become uncomfortable and even defensive because this may represent unfinished business in their lives. They recognize that forgiveness may require opening old wounds or dealing with people they are trying to avoid or forget. Still others have dismissed the possibility of forgiveness entirely and feel justified to remain in their anger, bitterness, and resentment because of the pain that was once inflicted on them.

I want to encourage you to think about forgiveness in an entirely different way. I want you to consider the power it has

to revolutionize your life. You and I have access to enormous power when we forgive. The Bible says that “God is able to do far more than we could ever ask for or imagine. He does everything by his power that is working in us” (Eph. 3:20 NIV). Reflect for a moment on the magnitude and power of forgiveness. Forgiveness

- lets you experience God’s presence like never before
- transforms your entire life
- removes obstacles to joy, peace, and freedom
- improves your spiritual, emotional, and physical health
- restores broken relationships
- reconciles bad marriages
- heals hurting families
- unites divided companies or churches
- rebuilds crumbling nations
- changes the whole world

And the reason it has so much power is because when we forgive, we are most like God!

## **Unleash the Power God Has Already Given You**

When Jesus was teaching the disciples about forgiveness, they asked that He increase their faith. He told them, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you” (Luke 17:6). Everyone has the faith of a tiny mustard seed. Jesus is telling us that we don’t need more faith to forgive; we need to use the faith we already have. In the same way, we don’t need more of God’s power to forgive; we need to unleash the power He has already given to us!

Acts 1:8 says, “You will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:7, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of *power* and of love and of a sound mind” (NKJV). You already have the *power* within you to forgive your way to freedom, and this book will show you how to unleash it.

It is my honor to walk with you step-by-step for a full and complete understanding of forgiveness, to help you resolve your pain of the past once and for all, to have peace now, and to experience the amazing benefits and rewards that are yours as you rediscover your purpose and hope for the future.

Are you ready to forgive your way to freedom?



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### Forgiveness Prayer

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*Dear God, thank You for the amazing gift of forgiveness made possible through Your Son, Jesus. Help me have a complete understanding and appreciation of this issue and to make it a part of my life each day. Give me a soft heart and an open mind to learn how to forgive. Help me as I take these next steps to become more like You by practicing what is closest to Your heart.*

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### Reflect and Discuss

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1. How has this chapter caused you to think differently about forgiveness?
2. Alexander Pope once said, “To err is human, to forgive, divine.” How is forgiveness divine, and how does forgiving make us most like God?

3. What are the things in your life that are defusing your power to forgive your way to freedom?
4. How are you using the power that is already yours?

### Your Turn: Apply What You're Learning

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Specifically identify the person(s) you may need to forgive or seek forgiveness from. This will allow you to apply everything you'll be learning to your personal situation. Acknowledge this person and situation to God. Pastor and author Rick Warren often says, "Revealing is the beginning of healing." After acknowledging, ask God to help you in this process. Also seek out a trusted friend or family member who you can talk to and who will help you navigate the forgiveness process. Don't take this journey alone.