



OFFERING HOPE & A NEW BEGINNING

The Power of Forgiveness

One of the most difficult things as a Christian is forgiving those who have hurt us. I'm not referring to the petty slights or mild annoyances, such as the person who cuts you off in traffic; for those hurts, Christians should learn to 'forbear and forgive.'

I'm talking about painful, life-altering hurts, such as abuse, betrayal, trauma, and injustice. How can we possibly forgive those who have deeply wronged us? We can't of ourselves, and sometimes we don't want to, but forgiveness is the way of Jesus that leads to peace and freedom.

Joseph knew all about betrayal and injustice. The favourite son in a dysfunctional family, he grew up surrounded by bitterness, jealousy, violence, conspiracies to kill him, and being trafficked as a slave to Egypt. Years later when he became a powerful leader and there was a famine in his home country, his brothers came in need of food. He could have taken his revenge on those who had caused him so much pain and suffering. Instead, he said, '*you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*' (Gen 50:20).

While he recognised that God had been with him in the pit, on the bumpy ride to Egypt, in the prison after being falsely accused, and in his rise to power, Joseph wasn't skating over what had happened. We often talk about forgiving and forgetting, but do you think Joseph forgot what his own brothers did to him? Do you think he said, 'Remember those times you lied about me and ruined my life that I totally forgot them?' No, their actions had deeply



hurt him, but true forgiveness recognises the depravity of evil and that God is sovereign in all things.

Joseph didn't excuse, ignore, or minimise what his siblings did; rather he recognised the 'sinfulness of sin,' for when he looked his brothers in the eye he said, '*what you intended was evil.*' Then he makes this remarkable statement: '*but God superintended it for good!*' Joseph could forgive because he knew and believed that God was sovereign and that He would bring good out of evil, not just for himself but also for others. That realisation gave Joseph comfort.

And it gives us comfort, that despite the wrongs done to us, God is in charge. He is working the worst things out for our good and for His glory.

Reflection

You didn't deserve what happened to you. It cannot be brushed under the carpet. But God will use it for good in your life and for other people's benefit. Considering that, and because Jesus showed us how to forgive and glorify God, we're also called to forgive. Who comes to mind? Who do you need to forgive?

Seeing Others Through God's Eyes

While going to college to become a qualified Counsellor I volunteered with a few different organisations. I have always felt that my goal was to support children and young people who have experienced childhood trauma. Having been sexually abused as a child I felt I would be able to empathise with young people who have had a similar experience and be equipped to support them. The Lord however had a different plan!

One evening I was searching through the Prison Fellowship NI website. I applied to volunteer and met with Grace shortly afterwards. She talked me through the various roles within PF, and I knew the Sycamore Tree programme was where I was meant to be.

When I learned that the first group of prisoners I would be working with would include sex offenders, I felt nervous and unsure if this was really what God wanted me to do. I prayed for courage and strength, but mostly that I would be able to see the men as Jesus sees them and not as the world does.

Not only did the Lord give me compassion for the men, but He also showed me what true forgiveness is.



On week six, the men attending the course shared an act of restitution. Some read out letters to their victims. These were so open and honest that I felt emotional. Afterwards, I thanked the men for allowing me to go on this journey alongside them. I shared that I was abused as a child and for over 30 years people like them had been my 'bogey man'. But in helping with the course, they enabled me to understand what true forgiveness looks like, and that they are not 'monsters,' but men who were genuinely remorseful for their actions.

My prayer is that each man on that Sycamore Tree course and future ones will be able to find forgiveness in Christ and within themselves.

Is Time a Healer?

For those who have committed a crime, forgiveness weighs like an eternal anchor. The path that should have been is now no longer. Instead, an unfamiliar road must be forged. The only companions are the memories of what were and can never be again.

After losing a young family, a wife, and a home, self-forgiveness seems like a mirage. 'Give it time,' they say. 'God has forgiven you, now you need to forgive yourself. Remember, time heals all wounds.' What if those wounds are self-inflicted? Or they have lacerated heart and soul?

I have always believed that forgiveness requires a response from both parties: the one asking for forgiveness and the one who has the power to forgive. When those entities are one and the same it becomes a more difficult prospect, especially as the grief never truly heals.

I used to love hearing testimonies of how God has saved a wretched soul from sin's grip. God redeemed them and now they are free. Today, I would ask them how they fare a year later? Do they still wear the same beaming smile?



Or does the guilt linger? After all, John says 'if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36).

Like 99% of promises in the Bible, this assurance of freedom comes with a condition. Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples' (vs 31). God does not magically flick a switch and everything's okay again. We need to hold to His teaching. That includes self-sacrifice and taking up our cross and following Christ (Matthew 16:24). Freedom relates to eternity and to the life God has promised those who know Him. But does the promise apply to today where grief often shadows one's every step?

I find it difficult to forgive myself. My sinful actions have hurt the ones I love. That never disappears. I thank God that He has forgiven me and that He loves me, I truly do, but can I ever love myself again? Perhaps, over time.

Instilling Hope

In March, a Women's Aftercare group called *Instilling Hope* was set up to provide a welcoming space for female ex-prisoners to meet on a regular basis. 'It's based,' says Lynne our Aftercare worker, 'on Romans 15:3 "May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope." Lynne and Debbie join with the women with a united purpose: to instil hope, confidence, and provide physical and spiritual care.

For those who attend it's a big step, as some of the women share:

'I look forward to the wee group each month. It has helped me a lot with the death of my nephew and my daughter's best friend who took her own life; both so young. It's great to hear everyone's story and what we have all achieved. I am fighting my own battles at the moment with my health but hopefully I will get there.'

'It gives me an opportunity to meet new friends. No one judges me. I can share my worries and people listen and give advice if they can. I also like the Christian side, no one can have enough prayers! I love the warm welcome and the leaders go above and beyond to ensure we have a lovely evening.'



'*Instilling Hope* brings women of different walks of life together. We encourage and love each other. We do not judge, and we listen to each other's stories. It is a place of calm and reflection: reflection on our lives and also of God, how He loves us, and how much we mean to Him. I was in a lonely place before this group, but now I have found friends, new hope, and a renewed sense of worth.

We might be a small group, but we are important, as being together and growing is where life-changes happen. I've seen it work. It really is staggering how many life-issues become manageable when you're surrounded by people who love you and want God's best for you.'

Thank you, Stuart

On a damp day in December 2013, Robin and I met Ben Matson and Stuart Nelson in a Belfast café. Jokingly, we blame Chris Thompson, a staff member at the time, for recommending his two friends from law school when we were looking for new board members. However, we were immediately impressed! Their clear, decisive feedback has helped PFNI throughout the years since.

Ben stepped down from his involvement in PF in 2016, but his contributions and guidance were much appreciated, and are still often referred to in board meetings.

Stuart was with the board until March 2023, but he remains a very much loved and admired part of the PFNI family. He checked contracts, gave legal advice, ran a leg of the marathon, and even played football at Hydebank Wood College.

I remember a letter he wrote on behalf of the board to the President and CEO of Prison Fellowship International. He went straight to the point and pulled no punches, leaving the reader in no doubt of our point of view, it was even a little scary!



Stuart has been an important member of the PFNI board. God has used him and blessed the work as a result of his involvement. We are sad to see him leave, but at the same time glad that he remains available to us for advice and guidance. We wish him and his family every blessing in the future.

The work of PFNI has a way of getting under your skin, like Hotel California, The Eagles' song from my youth, "you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."