

## UPROOTING BITTERNESS (ii) through Forgiveness

What do Nelson Mandela, Wilma Derksen and Corrie Ten Boom have in common? They were once at, where many of us are familiar with; - a place of dire pain and afflictions. Like us, they did not deserve to suffer. Life dealt them an unjust blow.

Nelson Mandela was a political activist. He was tortured and locked up many times for fighting against discrimination of the Blacks. His family outside was not spared.

Wilma Derksen suffered dire distress when her 13 year-old daughter disappeared one evening. Her dead body was found weeks later. She was tied up, sexually assaulted and left in the cold.

Corrie's family hid Jewish children from the Nazis. They were betrayed. Corrie and her sister ended up in a Concentration Camp. Her sister died from torture before Corrie's release.

What else do they have in common? They had felt victimised, embittered and broken by their circumstances. Their despair, unforgiveness, scepticism and self-pity could have driven them to form unhealthy beliefs about themselves and others. They could have become judgemental and worse still, allow the negative emotions to evolve into unhelpful inner-vows that bondage them. Or they might have, but, they got out of them. What saved them from spiralling down to that abyss?



At some point, they decided to let go and forgive. This brought about breakthroughs in their being and their situations. There are precious lessons we can learn from each of them.

The last time that Nelson M. was out of prison, he was asked, 'was he still angry with the people who put him in prison?' He replied, "I walk out a free-man today. If I continue to harbour unforgiveness and anger, I will remain a prisoner of my own mind."

Whether we are conscious of it or not, unforgiveness keeps us in torment and captivity. Forgiveness liberates our soul.

To Wilma D., forgiveness is a 'virtue' in a fallen world. Forgiveness is introducing light into the darkness. It is 'a counterintuitive mind-set'. Our natural response when we are hurt is to punish, take revenge, and demand justice. After all, when we

are hurt, we have the right to be angry, demand apology and insist on justice. Forgiveness is 'unnatural'. Wilma discovered that forgiveness is about giving up these rights. It is sacrificing our IOUs in exchange for our freedom.

Someone wisely says, "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison yourself and expecting the other person to die." In our bitterness, we think; - 'How can I let him go after what he made me go through.' We believe that by holding on to our unforgiveness and bitterness, we have bonded the person. But, actually we are the ones being held bonded. Whether we forgive or not, the other person has moved on. We are the ones stuck. Forgiveness is not for the offender. Forgiveness is for us, for our own freedom. When we forgive, the bondages to our bitterness, pain, etc., are cut off. We are then free to move on.

From Corrie Ten Boom, we learn that forgiveness is not an emotion. When Corrie ran into one of the guards years later, he asked for her forgiveness. Corrie could not at first. Seeing him brought back memories and opened the floodgates of rage and bitterness. She was to share later about that encounter. It taught her that forgiveness is an *act of the will*. She did not feel like forgiving him but she wanted to do the right thing. So she exercised her free-will to choose to forgive him. She did. She encountered a breakthrough.

**Forgiveness is letting go of my self-pity and the right to feel sorry for myself. (Wilma Derksen – The Way of Letting Go)**

Practising forgiveness is hard. What makes it harder is having misconceptions about what forgiveness is and is not.

People often wonder; 'Why do I still feel pain although I have forgiven!' Forgiveness is not a one-off thing. It is a process. We may have to forgive over and over again. The deeper the hurt, the longer it takes to heal.

Some may say, "It happened so long ago. I have forgotten the details. I cannot even remember the face. I don't feel anything anymore. I must have forgiven." Forgetting is neither forgiving nor vice-versa. Even if we do not remember the details, we need to forgive. And when we forgive, we may not forget. We will still remember, but with lesser and lesser pain as we go through the process.

It is hard to forgive if we think that forgiving means excusing the offender of the offence, or that it means to agree to accept the behaviour as non-offensive. Forgiveness has nothing to do with the seriousness of the offence. Forgiveness is also not condoning the offence.

Forgiving the person who offends us also does not mean that the person does not have to suffer the consequence of her action. If she has to go to jail, it does not mean that if we forgive her, we have to bail her out. She has to still face the consequence of her actions.

Forgiving the offender does not mean giving him the right to offend us continually. If we forgive someone who cheats us of money, it does not mean that we are now obliged to lend him money the next time he asks. A forgiven person does not automatically make him a trustworthy person. The person has to earn our trust all over again.

When we are deeply hurt, it is natural for us to say "I will forgive if the person apologises, when she mends her ways or asks for my forgiveness." It is human to want to have some degree of control over our situations. It would be good if that comes about. But what if the apology, the compensation, remorse and change do not come? And usually they do not. Then it calls for forgiveness to be unconditional. We give up our right of control. We do not forgive 'only ...', 'if ...' or 'when ...' We forgive 'despite', 'regardless of'



and even if the offender continues to be unremorseful and undeserving of our forgiveness.

Forgiving is also not just saying 'ok, ok I forgive you' and not meaning it. Forgiveness has to come from our heart for it to be effective.

When we have not completely forgiven, we may continue to harbour subtle signs of unforgiveness. What are these? Avoiding eye-contact and not wanting to be near the person are signs. Then there is indication that we continue to bear grudges against the offender when our stomach tightens at the mention of the person's name or the incident.

Some of us may be struggling with unforgiveness and bitterness towards, perhaps, our parents, spouses, children, employers or even of ourselves. Like us, Nelson, Wilma and Corrie did not arrive at the place of being able to forgive, easily. They suffered and they fought. In their struggles, they understood the power of forgiveness. They knew that there is no middle-ground. If they did not choose forgiveness, they would by default, hold on to unforgiveness. They realised that '*bitterness is how we punish ourselves for other people's sins*'. (Matshona Dhliwayo) They experienced how unforgiveness and bitterness feed on each other. They wanted bitterness uprooted from their lives. They wanted to be free from the bondage. Because of the evident changes in their life situations after their gracious acts of forgiveness, their names are now synonymous with 'forgiveness'.

The lives of Nelson, Wilma and Corrie are our guiding light and inspiration. We need to find whatever it takes to step into their tracks, make a deliberate choice to release forgiveness, one small step at a time. Only then will we be able to live freely, like them.

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