

My Life And The Importance Of Forgiving – Especially Your Parents

My mother dropped out of school to marry her first husband when she was 16. She proceeded to have three husbands and numerous other partners over the next 15 years or so. She had nine children that I know of, and I was number eight, from a partner between husband two and three. There would be one child after me, on the record.

She had trouble parenting the three children she had not lost yet, between her sex, alcohol and drug addictions. Just before the age of two, my sister and I were taken by the state child welfare system because she failed to return from her night out, and the high school baby sitter had to go home. After a few months of attempts of the state trying to rehabilitate my mother, she dropped out of the picture and my sister and I were placed in foster care. I would not find out until I was eighteen that a couple years later (when I was four, and she was 34), she was murdered. Her case was never solved.

My sister and I spent a couple years in a foster home, and the memories are spotty. We were adopted by a farming husband and wife with a young son at home when I was four years old, the day after Christmas.

At first glance, it seemed a dream come true. We had found a family, and the home was Norman Rockwell-ish. Our new dad was an agriculture and cattle farmer, and our new mom stayed at home to care for the farm and the children.

I honestly don't remember how long it took for me to acclimate to the environment there. It seemed I could do nothing right, our brother could do no wrong, and there were a lot of spoken

and unspoken rules and expectations I was having trouble getting right. I probably did plenty wrong, though I can't recall just what all of my offenses were. My mother had decided early on that I was a liar, so it didn't matter what I said, in my mother's mind it was a lie. My actions, motives and words were questioned nonstop, and there was never a benefit of the doubt for me.

The details are too much to get into right here, but a few key memories will give you an idea of the environment. When I was seven or eight I awoke to my parents waking me up. It was dark, but I had no concept of the time. I shared a room with my sister, and my parents motioned for me to be quiet and get my house robe on and go downstairs. When I got to the kitchen, I had to squint because the lights were on and my eyes were adjusting. There was a large box in the center of the floor and I was told to put my favorite toys in it. After filling it, I was told to put my shoes on. I walked with my parents outside as my dad carried the box. We walked past the clothesline to the burn barrel, where they put the box and lit it on fire. I don't remember what I did to warrant this punishment. They may have told me, but I don't recall. When I awoke the next morning I tried to remember if it was a dream or real. I went to the toy box and looked for the items I remembered putting in the box, but they weren't there.

If that was an isolated memory, I would be inclined to shrug it off as a false memory. But there were several times I wet my pants and my mom clothes-pinned my soiled underwear to my nose and I was made to carry on my day like that. There was the time my mom stood my sister and me up in the kitchen and with an angry face and wagging finger told us, "Don't ever tell me you love me. Don't write it in a card or on a paper, and don't speak it in words. You don't love me and you cannot tell me you do." I was six; my sister was seven.

There was the night I was made to stand in a corner all night with my nose pressed to the corner, under threat of more

severe punishment if I moved. I fell asleep sometime in the wee hours of the morning and fell over. I hopped up back into the corner and my entire body trembled with fear for what felt like hours at the thought that maybe my mom heard me move and would be coming. I was "released" from the corner the next day sometime mid-morning. I was nine. I don't remember what I did wrong there either.

I was constantly threatened with being shipped to an all-girls boarding school, a military school, back to the state, and later a mental hospital. The details of my childhood could fill a book (and I have written it), but what I learned was emotions were not to be expressed, truth was subjective, and authority was absolute. I had no voice, no identity, and no one I could trust. The rules constantly changed, the expectations were altered by the mood of my mother, and I became very, very good at reading body language, tone, and circumstances. I was not allowed to talk on the phone, have friends over or go to friends' homes, or socialize apart from parental supervision. School and nature were my only escapes. I dared not tell anyone of my life at home. As far as they knew, we had a perfectly normal family. Until I started running away in high school...

My parents were swift to hospitalize me in a mental institution, where my anger hit boiling. By this time, some concerned adults in my life had started to work to help me, but it would take years for help to manifest. In the meantime, some unique circumstances led to me being locked out of my home when I was sixteen. I had only the clothes on my back, no car, no money, no job, not even a driver's license. This continued for a few months until my parents took me to court to terminate their parental rights, which was granted and I became a ward of the state one more time.

This is an abbreviated nutshell of my formative years. Before I was a legal adult, I had come to the conclusion love was conditional, (if it was real at all); people cannot be

trusted; my merit had to be earned and even then could be stripped away; and a host of other “lesser” things.

I had found God in the Midwestern landscape. I saw Him in the sky, in the fields, and especially in the thunderstorms. I talked with Him constantly through high school, and though I never heard Him, still knew He was there. I don't remember ever thinking it was His fault suffering was in my life. As I grew older the charades at home grew more and more difficult to navigate. I wanted something true, something real. I was tired, and tired of being afraid. I pulled out a Bible and began reading it. My mom made fun of me if I read it, so I began reading it at night by the outdoor light at my window, when everyone else had gone to sleep. I asked a friend at school that I knew to be a Christian how to get right with God. I was looking for a list of rules, as that is all I knew. She explained to me Christ's sacrifice and I was in utter disbelief that I had to do nothing to receive pardon from God! I finally made the decision to put my faith in this Man who died for me. Shortly thereafter my whole world hit the crescendo and the end of life as I knew it, and I was left alone, without a family, and no idea what to do.

Though I would stumble and fail miserably over the next few years, including a failed marriage, I started ministering to high school youth from a sincere desire to in some way help someone else through what had been tumultuous years for me. In the meantime, I was building my own faith.

You've heard me tell some of my favorite stories. You know about the time I drove to Denver and fell asleep while the sun was still up, but woke up sixteen miles out of Denver, in the dark, with the car driving on the road and my lights on. I had been asleep for almost two hours. Or the time I had to move to Texas but had only \$60 to my name, and no credit card. I was moving in a U-Haul that got 10mpg AND a personal car, and was driving 583 miles with BOTH cars. I reckoned that if God could multiply loaves and fish, He could multiply

gas as well, and He did. At my final destination I had exactly $\frac{1}{4}$ tank of gas in each tank and no money.

Or how He challenged my trust 23 years ago and asked me, "Who made your body?" When I replied that He did, He asked me, "Don't you think if I can make your body I can wake it?" The challenge was to trust Him at a time I didn't have an alarm clock to wake me. I trusted Him and He was faithful, and then I threw my alarm clocks away and have not used one once in 23 years. He has never failed to wake me, whether I needed to be up at 4 am, 8 am or anything in between.

I told you how He has been faithful to physically heal our family of various illnesses over the last 22 years, without prescriptions. How He even healed our St. Bernard of West Nile Virus when we anointed her with oil and declared her healing. You know He has healed ear infections, throat infections, skin infections, and sprained ankles, because I've told you.

I've told you how He has healed my heart, how He was faithful to bring me freedom and healing from childhood loss, pain, abuse and traumas.

I told you how He brought me my husband and then gave me a clear sign with His own voice that this is who I was supposed to be with. I've let you know how He delivered me from perpetuating abuse to my daughter, and healed our relationship from the damage of my own sins.

I have not hidden His miracles in my life from you, nor have I shielded you from my disappointments, struggles finding God, and my failures. I have been forthright with you that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the Son of God, that He died on the Cross for humanity to procure salvation and be reconciled to God, and that He rose from the dead in victory over death so we can too. I've challenged each of you to consider that Good News and respond. But I didn't stop there. Why?

Because I know that the Israelites forgot God after He parted the Red Sea and sent supernatural plagues upon Egypt but saved Israel out of it. I know that the Israelites forgot God after He brought water from a rock and bread from Heaven. I know that the Israelites forgot God after He gave them an abundant land full of provision and blessing. I know that the Israelites forgot God after Elijah called fire down from Heaven in the midst of hundreds of witnesses. I know that Judas betrayed the Son of God after he saw Him heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and feed the multitudes.

The human heart is short-sighted and shallow. We forget the good our friend has done for years when our friend hurts us today. We are fixated on how we feel right now, and we are woefully short on gratitude. We're inclined to forget a God our human eyes can't see, especially when there's so much in front of our eyes to bedazzle us constantly. We choose the golden calf that can't think, feel or speak, when our God has been too long getting back to us. I know that God is worthy of our worship if He NEVER does a thing for us because He is God and there is no one higher than He. We should want to worship our Creator simply because He is God, even if He never does a thing for us. Even if I died in the dysfunction of my childhood home, He would be worthy of my worship. Even if He never healed one thing I asked, or saved me from an accident, or never supernaturally provided a thing for me.

But I know that we don't do that well or easily. I know that God being God is simply not enough for our humanity left to itself to reconcile. And so I have shown you that He is not only God, but He became my Father. And if that weren't enough, I showed you that He is not only my God and my Father, but He has become my Friend. So that you would know that God loves us. God loves you. He is perfect and faithful and true, and He is worthy of your love, your admiration, your worship, your life. It is enough that He created us, but He also saved us when we needed saving. And it's enough that He

saved us, but He has called us who have received Him His sons and daughters. And if all that wasn't enough, He also can be our Friend.

So I urge you to know this amazing God yourself. Love God for who He is, not what He does, and realize He still does good, good things for us. Be faithful in a faithless world. Live your life in such a way that Heaven knows your name when you get there.

I hang up my "youth leader" hat with Acts 20:24-35:

But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it's not my fault, for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders. I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or fine clothes. You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. And I

have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

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If you've made the decision to follow God, and have placed your faith and trust in Christ who died for your salvation, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Heed the words of Paul to guard yourself and your faith. Recognize that there is treachery within the church and without. Follow God, not man.

Release and forgive your parents for their failures, most of them did the best they could with what they had and meant well. If they didn't, forgive them anyway. Look to God for your healing, your deliverance, your salvation. When you've trusted Him as Savior, trust God as Father, and learn to know them both as Friend. Your life won't be easier or simpler, and you won't have abundant wealth just because you walk in faith. You may face increased tribulation, suffering or trials. Trust your Maker and let Him teach you and grow you into maturity. Care more about what God thinks than anyone else, (even yourself). Love God and keep the faith.

I leave you with more of Paul's words and pray you heed them. Do not live for yourself and refuse to obey the truth. Keep on doing good. Seek after the glory, honor and immortality God offers us.

Romans 2:4-11 (emphasis my own)

Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?

But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin,

*you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will judge everyone according to what they have done. **He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers.** But he will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness. There will be trouble and calamity for everyone who keeps on doing what is evil—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. But there will be glory and honor and peace from God for all who do good—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.*

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