

FORGIVING
My Father,
FORGIVING
Myself

*An Invitation to the
Miracle of Forgiveness*

RUTH GRAHAM
with Cindy Lambert



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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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*For my children, Noelle, Graham,
and Windsor, whose forgiveness is unmeasured.*

The most influential person in your life is the
one you have not forgiven.

Anonymous

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ONE

Beyond the Prison Walls

If we cooperate with Him in loving obedience, God will manifest Himself to us, and that manifestation will be the difference between a nominal Christian life and a life radiant with the light of His face.

A. W. Tozer

“Can I sing you a song?” the young man said, his eager brown eyes meeting mine with a gentleness that took me by surprise. The thought of music in the dismal setting of death row at Angola Prison in Louisiana seemed incongruous but was also a welcome relief. I doubt if he knew how nervous I was, but his kindness and openness helped put me at ease. I had intended to be the one to bring a measure of comfort and encouragement to him, but he seemed to be reversing our roles.

“Yes, thank you, Michael.” I knew only his first name and that he was awaiting his upcoming execution. I didn’t know

the crime or crimes that brought him here. I didn't know his story, nor did he know mine other than that I was a daughter of Billy Graham, visiting his prison with a ministry team. We'd met only moments before over a handshake, his small brown hand extended through the bars between us.

Michael, maybe in his thirties, was short, with dark hair and an open face. He stepped closer to the bars, took a deep breath, and with eyes warm and kind he began to sing a cappella.

"When peace, like a river, attendeth my way," he began.¹

His rich baritone voice filled the austere confines of his cell and echoed down the concrete hallway behind me. Tears filled my eyes. Though I knew the words well, I'd never heard them sung by a man condemned to soon die.

"It is well . . ." He began the chorus softly, like a gentle whisper. "With my soul." He held the note, his voice strong and steady, then, as if he were releasing all the passion in his heart, his voice opened wide and full. "It is well, it is well, with my soul."

And I knew it was.

The conviction in his voice, the peace on his face, told me all was well in the soul of this man. I could not speak. I was overwhelmed by the powerful grace of God. Michael and I both knew that in spite of the steel and concrete between him and the outside world, in spite of the execution date looming before him, he was at peace with his God. Whatever had brought him here had been forgiven. This man's spirit was free and secure in his redemption. He was my brother in Christ. When he finished he stepped back with a soft smile.

My time with him was short. I had only a few minutes with each prisoner. I suggested we pray together, and then came another surprise.

“Before you go, I have something I’d like to give you,” he said. Again, I felt our roles had been reversed. What gift could this imprisoned man possibly have for me? His barren cell had nothing but a bed with a thin mattress, a pillow, and a small unit that provided a metal toilet and sink. He walked over to his bed, reached beneath the covers, and pulled out something small. He stepped back toward me, took my hand through the bars, and placed in my palm a small woven cloth cross. “I wove this from threads of my bedsheets. I’d like you to have it.”

I saw how fine the threads were, how intricately hand-woven, and wondered how many hours it had taken him to make it. The gift touched my heart. Tears were so close it was difficult to speak.

“It’s a precious gift, Michael. Thank you.” We held hands, prayed together, and said goodbye. I was sad our time was so brief. I would have loved to visit with him longer, but I had to move on, so I stepped away, on to the next cell, feeling I’d just been on holy ground. I knew I’d never see Michael again and assumed the story of our brief encounter had ended.

I never dreamed that Michael’s story and mine had another chapter to come, a chapter that would challenge me to begin to rethink what I thought I knew about forgiveness.

Living Condemned, Yet Free

Angola Prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary where each prisoner is serving a life sentence, seems an unlikely place to spark new thoughts and a deeper understanding of forgiveness. It is, after all, a place where every prisoner has to pay

the earthly consequences of their crimes. Every one of the over six thousand inmates (except in a few very rare exceptions) would die within its confines—some by execution, others by old age or illness or injury.

Burl Cain, the warden, had invited Ruth Graham & Friends, the ministry God had given to me, to minister to the inmates on this particular weekend and had allowed the press to chronicle our visit. I had accepted the invitation to the swamp-surrounded prison grounds months before, with confidence the gospel of Jesus Christ could make a huge difference in the lives of the inmates. I confess that before meeting Michael, as I passed all the razor wire and walked the long concrete corridor to death row, my footsteps echoing in the stifling atmosphere, I worried that I was inadequate for the job. After all, what did I—a middle-aged homemaker and grandmother—have to say that could make a difference in the lives of what I assumed were hardened criminals? In fact, in the moment I first heard the great steel gates clang shut behind me upon entering death row that day, my only thought was a sick feeling of inadequacy and anxiety that embarrassed me. I tried to quiet my rattled emotions by reminding myself that I was safe, and my stay was only temporary. I was acutely aware that such thoughts were not the stuff of a victorious spiritual moment.

My nervousness made me all the more grateful for my traveling companions—the wonderful team of dedicated men and women who shared in the ministry of Ruth Graham & Friends. We were used to traveling together to minister all over the country and beyond, from an ice-hockey stadium in Canada to city auditoriums, churches, and retreat centers—wherever the Lord opened doors for us to cover topics that

often weren't discussed in many churches. Each member of the team had an area of expertise: a psychologist who spoke on depression, another on domestic abuse, a minister who spoke of his experience recovering from addiction to pornography, a woman who shared her recovery from abortion and another her recovery from drug addiction. All of them had more experience in prison ministry than me, but none of us were prison ministry experts.

When we reached death row, our team split up so we could go cell to cell and speak individually with as many prisoners as possible. I was uneasy. I have always reacted negatively to the idea of people in cages. As a young woman, I went as part of a church ministry team to a local prison. The sight of lovely young women behind bars haunted me. I talked and laughed with them, related to them, and prayed with them. Later I found out that the woman I'd seemed to connect with the most was a murderer, and I promptly decided I was probably not called to prison ministry! Clearly, as I now stood on death row, God was causing me to rethink that conclusion, showing me that it was His power and presence, not mine, that made a difference in hearts and souls.

After meeting Michael, I heard others' stories through ears newly opened to the reality that we weren't bringing God with us but rather were meeting Him already there, at work in powerful ways. No longer concerned about my inadequacy, I was able to see God's power at work—something so evident that day. I met men at every level of faith: some who wanted nothing to do with us and turned their backs, some curious about God, some hungry to hear of God's love for them, some eager to share their faith stories with me, and some men of great faith, humbled by brokenness

yet who appeared healed and whole. When we led worship with the inmates, we were overwhelmed with the power of thanksgiving and rejoicing we witnessed. So many of these prisoners were living in true freedom.

How had they done it? How had they accepted God's forgiveness for the wrongs they had done? (I had trouble doing that for myself.) How had they forgiven themselves? (A major struggle for me.) How had they forgiven the many who had wronged them along their painful journeys? (My journey paled in comparison to the pain many of them had known.) I couldn't imagine. When we left, I took those questions with me, determined to seek answers from God. My moments with Michael, in particular, stayed on my heart. He'd left me with the powerful image of a man whose soul was well and whose spirit was free.

Michael's Reunion

Some months after my visit to Angola Prison, I received an email from a man who had read on the internet about our team's visit to death row. He asked me if I had met a prisoner there named Michael. He gave a last name as well, but I'd not been given the last names of any of the prisoners. Our team had met with many men. I had no idea how many Michaels may have been among them.

He wrote that the Michael of interest to him was scheduled to die, and he wanted to know if he was a believer. Did he know Jesus? He didn't tell me his own story or why he wanted to know, but I hoped he meant the young man who sang so movingly. The only way to know was for me to call the warden.

So I called Burl Cain, who told me that, indeed, it was the same man.

“He’s scheduled for execution at the end of this month, Ruth,” he said. “Michael has professed his faith in Jesus and is assured of his salvation.” Such a mix of sadness and joy stirred in me. I was sad that Michael’s death was near but joyful that eternity with Jesus awaited him.

I emailed the man to assure him that Michael’s relationship with Christ was secure. “May I ask,” I wrote, “why you are interested in this particular young man?”

He wrote back that Michael had murdered his young grandson in a horrific way. He went on to explain that he had forgiven Michael years ago and had been praying for his salvation ever since. He said he took no pleasure in the young man’s impending execution and wanted to make sure he was going to heaven. Then he told me he was a missionary in Nepal.

Over eight thousand miles away! I marveled at the grace of God at work through the technology that allowed this missionary in Nepal to know about my visit to a particular murderer in Louisiana. But more, I marveled at this missionary’s forgiveness.

I was a grandmother myself and shuddered at the thought of one of my precious grandchildren being brutally murdered. I was amazed that this man cared about his grandson’s murderer so much that he was compelled to reach out in love across the years and the continents.

Forgiveness broke the power of the evil deed. Forgiveness broke down the distance and the time. Forgiveness overcame his sorrow. It penetrated the cement walls and prison bars into death row, and it celebrated that Michael’s eternal

judgment and penalty for murder had been paid by Jesus. Michael was a man society had forgotten and written off, but neither God nor this grandfather of a murdered child had forgotten him or written him off. He was redeemed by the blood of Jesus. He would be welcomed into heaven with joy! And his story would live on to have a lasting impact.

This is far more than a touching story to me. It is personal. For not only had I walked death row and heard the sweet voice of this imprisoned brother in Christ raised in song but I had a handwoven cross hanging in my home as a reminder that I'd witnessed the power of forgiveness that had penetrated the prison walls of Angola and transformed a once-hardened heart. I wanted that power to penetrate my own life in new ways. I wanted to personally experience *that* depth of freedom that comes with forgiveness. For when it came to grace and forgiveness, both Michael and the missionary in Nepal knew a freedom I longed for in my own life.

Michael was executed later that month, but I'm sure that, as he stepped into heaven, a little boy was there to greet him. They had a reunion, not as victim and murderer but as sons of the living God. And I rejoice that this boy's grandfather one day will join them with a song in his heart. Three souls will gather in heaven as forgiven saints redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Only forgiveness by God's grace can do that! And that, to me, is miraculous, for such life transformation can only take place by the power of God.

Could I have done the same as this grandfather? I'll be honest—it is hard to imagine. Certainly not in my own power. I have suffered wrongs far less tragic and devastating and have found it a struggle to forgive so completely. Forgiveness has not come easily to me, in spite of my resolute

desire to exercise it. I've struggled to forgive those who have wounded me. I've struggled even more to forgive myself. And I confess I've even struggled—and this is not pretty—with the question of forgiving God for seemingly failing to meet some of my own personal expectations. I've paid a price for my lack of forgiveness. I've tasted bitterness and the desire for revenge. I've lost sleep and relationships. I've sacrificed peace and my own well-being. I've run up against the narrow limits of my love and found myself feeling anything but patient and kind and filled with grace. I've wanted to punish myself; I've wanted to see others punished. Need I go on?

I know I am not alone in my struggle with forgiveness.

As I travel to minister on the topics of betrayal, abuse, loss, and suffering, I hear the heart cries of so many who want to find their way through anger, bitterness, and resentment to the freedom of forgiveness. Countless numbers of believers know firsthand the hard struggle of trying to forgive, only to be knocked down by emotions and memories. They are confronted by anger, revenge, bitterness, judgment, or the self-condemnation of shame. I know what it is to believe I have forgiven only to be surprised when my wounds are triggered and I am left to fight the battle all over again.

But I *want* forgiveness to rule in my heart! I want, like that missionary in Nepal, to pray wholeheartedly for the life and well-being and eternal peace and goodness of those who have wronged me. I want to look in the mirror and see a woman at peace with life and those around her, one who sees herself standing before God clothed in Jesus's righteousness and therefore blameless. I want to look at those who have wronged me and see not what wrongs they have

committed but see them as God sees them: covered by His love and grace. The same way He sees me! I want to look to my heavenly Father and see not my unmet expectations and disappointments but His perfect loving will at work in my life. I want to trust Him so fully that I rest in His power and love, knowing that He chooses only the very best for my life, even when I cannot yet comprehend it.

From Knowledge to Transformation

There are so many books on the subject of forgiveness already on the market—some classic, some practical, some psychological, some theological. My library shelves are filled with them. Many are excellent. Why, then, do I believe we need another book on the subject? Because forgiveness is the very heart of God—it is the very reason that Jesus came to earth. For those of us who wrestle to have our *head knowledge* about forgiveness transformed into the *life-changing experience* of forgiveness, the subject is worthy of our continued exploration.

Different books touch different lives for different reasons. I'm grateful for the many books that have helped shape my understanding and my experience of forgiveness. I've been challenged, informed, surprised, and influenced by so many—even maddened, frustrated, and ultimately convicted by some. One thing I discovered is that, for me, pat answers didn't cut it. I wanted to work through the subject with someone who knew what I was experiencing, someone who would be transparent enough to tell it like it is—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I needed someone to be real about the struggle and personal journey they experienced. I came to

a point where I didn't need a forgiveness handbook nor a sermon nor a biblical treatise. I wanted to know how others handled it and to learn if my struggle was a valid one. I wanted some company on my journey so that I could know I was not alone. I couldn't seem to find that book, so I've written it.

In my very deliberate and intentional journey toward forgiveness, I have had some profound experiences—both giving and receiving it. I fought hard through the concept, wrestling with God every step of the way. I had to face up to the fact that sometimes I didn't want to forgive. I thought by forgiving I was letting “them” off the hook. My wounds were deep. My pain was real. Forgiveness was a gift I thought some didn't deserve, and it seemed it required me to pay for it whether I forgave or not. Like the sign in the store, “If you break it you buy it,” I felt I had to pay the price of giving forgiveness even if I wasn't the one who “broke it.” I also had to be honest that at times I wanted “them” to hurt as much as I did or to feel the same level of pain they had inflicted on me. Like a wounded animal, more than once I even lashed out and hurt those who tried to help.

I have also argued with God over the idea of asking others for forgiveness. I didn't want to do it. Wasn't I justified in what I did? Didn't they deserve what they got? Why should I ask their forgiveness? What if they used it against me? I wasn't the one who did wrong, was I? Did I really have to go to them? Isn't it better just to let it go? But I discovered it didn't let *me* go!

And then there are the wounds buried deep inside, long forgotten until something triggers a memory and they come roaring back, front and center. Such memories can throw

us for a loop and leave us either sorting through emotions we don't want to feel or scrambling to rebury them. What would it be like to face them head-on and have forgiveness win the day?

At times my pain was visceral. I couldn't even look at the pain to examine it. I just wanted out of it. But that was not going to happen. I had to go through the suffering. I could go through it my way and end up bitter and hardened, or I could do it God's way, being molded more into Jesus's image. Did I trust God enough to push through the pain?

Do you?

My ultimate goal in all my wrestling with forgiveness is to be more like Him. Taking my wounds to Jesus is the only way I can accomplish it.

In this book, you will read some of my journey through forgiveness—it isn't neat or tidy or smooth. Far from it. Neither is this a “tell-all” of any kind. But it is my personal and honest story, telling how God has been with me the whole way. Now that I've emerged with a far richer experience of forgiveness, I don't want to keep it to myself. I want to share it! I want to come alongside others who also struggle and let them know that they are not alone. There is hope. There is freedom.

Do I have it down? No. Not by a long shot. But I hope in these pages to challenge misunderstandings of the nature of forgiveness, to stimulate deeper longings for authentic forgiveness, and to help break through roadblocks that keep us trapped in the broken cycles of unforgiveness. I want to invite you to experience the miracle that occurs when forgiveness pours from the heart of God and washes over you and through you. Let's refuse to surrender on forgiveness until

we, like Michael, are no longer held prisoner but are free to enjoy all that forgiveness has to offer.

One thing I have learned that is absolutely true: such forgiveness is a *process*. A *lifelong* process. I won't have it buttoned up until I am in heaven. Until then, I keep going through the process while leaning on God's outrageous grace.

Lean with me.