

Forgiveness is the most powerful word...

Some pictures will probably be indelibly printed on the walls of our minds until we take our last breath. I'll always remember my feelings of horror as I watched the jets striking the Twin Towers. Young people today will long remember masks and gloves, and no school from the spring of 2020.

Though I was just a young man when the picture was taken, I'll always remember the photo of a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl running naked down the road, jellied napalm searing her skin after a bomb attack of her village in 1972. Her little arms are stretched out in desperation, her young face contorted in a scream of pain and terror.

That image earned the photographer a Pulitzer Prize and helped turn America against the war. That little girl's name was Phan Thi Kim Phuc. She was rushed a hospital by the photographer, where she was treated for 3rd-degree burns. Her wounds were so severe that every time they were cleaned and dressed, the pain caused her to lose consciousness.

After the fall of Saigon, the Communist government of Vietnam discovered that she was the "girl in the picture" and paraded her endlessly in anti-American propaganda. She was forced to pull up her sleeves and exhibit the deeply ridged scarred skin to visitors from around the globe.

But then, as an adult, her life changed dramatically. A group of believers introduced her to the joy of new life in Christ. Eventually, she went to Cuba where she met a young Vietnamese man who shared her faith. They married and on their honeymoon, the young couple defected to Canada.

Getting off the plane in a strange country, without money, without family, and without friends, Kim Phuc was buoyed up only by her intense faith. "God guided me...I go by faith," she told a NPR interviewer. Today the couple lives in Ontario, Canada with their two sons.

A few years ago Vietnam veteran pilot, John Plummer, was consumed with guilt after bombing that village in 1972. That famous photograph became a horrible reminder to him. Later, he related that he was so horrified by the photograph he told almost no one of his own involvement in the bombing, though hardly a day went by without his thinking of that little screaming girl. In the ensuing years his life began to fall apart as he encountered numerous personal problems, including alcoholism and a divorce. But in June of 1996, 24 years after the bombing, John Plummer was shocked to see a news feature telling the story of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the girl in the photograph, and the terrible suffering that she'd endured.

Having become a Christian and eventually involved in ministry, he intensely wanted to ask her directly for forgiveness, but he assumed that he'd never have that opportunity. Then, miraculously, through a reunion of former Vietnam War pilots, John Plummer met a poet who knew her. A few weeks later the poet called him to announce that Kim Phuc would be visiting the Vietnam Memorial in DC on Veterans Day.

"I was flabbergasted," John Plummer said, "but I also knew I had to see her." When the day arrived, John Plummer with the support of other pilots and their families waited at the Vietnam Memorial all morning. From the introduction that preceded her speech, he learned that two of her brothers had also died in the attack.

"I began to shake all over as wracking sobs were torn from my body," he later said. "I felt like I was going to scream at the revelation that not only was I responsible for Kim's burns but that I had also killed her two brothers." At that point, John's friends surrounded and embraced him in silence.

Kim Phuc stood up to speak, unaware of John Plummer's presence. She said that if she ever met the pilot of the plane who bombed her village she'd tell him she forgave him, for they could not change the past, but she hoped they could work together to build the future.

She was approaching the police vehicle that was to escort her away from the area, when Kim Phuc was told that the man she wanted to meet, and who so desperately wanted to meet her, was right behind her.

"She saw my grief, my pain, and my sorrow," Plummer wrote. "She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry' over and over again. At the same time she was saying, 'It's all right, it's all right; I forgive, I forgive.'"

FORGIVENESS! That's the most powerful word in all of human language! FORGIVENESS! is the message of Easter! If Easter does not mean forgiveness, then this service, this day – even our church have absolutely no meaning. We can literally say that Forgiveness is synonymous with Easter.

I couldn't count how many times I've had someone ask me, "*Scott, can God ever forgive me?*" And I always answer, "*Yes. I know that He can forgive you.*" That's the message of the Cross. Those things that you've done, that I've done, those past deeds that we'd literally rather die than have exposed, the deeds...the failures that people attempt to drown with sex or booze or drugs, can all be forgiven.

Let me share some wonderful news that possibly you've never heard before. Let me share with you on this Easter morning God's great news of forgiveness!

1. What is forgiveness? The word "*forgive*" is an interesting word. The main part of the word is "give." When you forgive someone, you're giving up any and all claim for payment. To forgive means you no longer require words, or money or deeds. You're giving that person release from the wrong they've done to you. Forgiveness means "*to let go, to set it free.*"

Suppose that you and I are friends, but you cheat me out of a \$1,000.00. I have the right to collect the money. But instead I forgive you and in forgiving you, I give you total release from what you owe me. It's the same as if I would give you \$1,000.00.

Please understand that my forgiving you doesn't mean that what you did was right. When you cheated me, you did something wrong. Legally and morally, you should repay me, but I've chosen to release you from the debt. When I do that, it's the same thing as saying, "I cancel the debt!"

When God forgives you and me, He releases us from the wrong we have done. Because He's pardoned us, He won't punish us. He treats us just as if we'd never done anything wrong. Let me share then...

2. Three Vital Insights about God's Plan of Forgiveness.

a. God's plan of Forgiveness is complete. An old man named Joe was dying. Realizing that time was running out for him, he wanted to straighten out his affairs and take care of unfinished business. For years he'd been at odds with a man named, Bill. At one time though he and Bill had been best friends, but they'd gotten into an argument and had not spoken to one another for years. Joe, not wanting to die, with that matter unresolved, sent for his estranged friend, Bill, who graciously consented to visit him.

When Bill arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with bad feelings between them and wanted to make things right. Then he looked up at Bill and said, "I forgive you; will you forgive me?" Bill said that he would and everything, after years of bad feelings, seemed to be cleared up. But just as Bill was leaving, however, Joe shouted after him, "But remember, Bill, if I get better, this doesn't count!"

Have you ever had someone tell you, "*I forgive you, but I'm never going to forget it*"? That's totally foreign to God's plan of Forgiveness. **God's plan of Forgiveness is Complete.**

That means that whatever you have done, no matter how vile or horrible, God has promised to forgive you. It doesn't matter if you're a child molester, adulterer, thief, liar, addict, alcoholic, abuser or whatever. There are wonderful promises from the God who cannot lie for you and me. Let me share just two of them today.

In **Hebrews 8:12** God says, "***For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.***" When God forgives, He forgets. God never gets *historical*. As far God is concerned, it never happened. There's no longer a record of it in the courts of heaven! It's as if the tape was recorded over; the computer file had been deleted; the page torn from the book. *Why?* Because when God forgives, He forgets.

Later in that same book of the Bible, Hebrews 11, there is a list of people who God considers great. Included is a prostitute, a murderer, a drunkard, a few liars, and a rage-aholic. Do you know why they are listed in God's Hall of the Faithful? Because when God forgives, He forgets!

The second one, **Psalms 103:11-12**, has one of the most beautiful pictures of God's complete forgiveness. This passage is so wonderful it always sends chills up my spine each time I read it because it so powerfully describes God's complete forgiveness. The psalmist writes, "*For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.*" The wording God chose here is so important. Notice He doesn't say, *as far as the north is from the south.*" but says "*as far as the east is from the west.*"

Let me illustrate that. If you and I were to stand back to back, and if you were to head due South and I were to head due North. As soon though as I hit the North Pole, I'm then heading South and as soon as you hit, the South Pole, then you're immediately then heading North.

But the verse says, "*as far as the east is from the west.*" **Why?** Because if you and I were to stand back to back, and if you were to head due East and I were to head due West, as our paths would cross as we came around the equator, **but** you'd still be heading East and I would be still heading West.

And if we crossed paths 10 times or a 10,000 times, that fact would never change. East and West never meet! That's what God is telling you. His forgiveness is so complete that once He forgives – you and your guilt will never meet again as far as God is concerned.

b. God's plan of Forgiveness is costly. Just because something is free, we often assume that it's also cheap. Though God's forgiveness is free, it's not cheap! It cost God everything. Ephesians 1:7, "*In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.*"

Our forgiveness of sin cost God the Father the life of His own precious Son. Though God is loving, though He wants to forgive; God is also holy and just. Romans 6 says that the cost of sin is death. Sin is a capital offense. It demands that the guilty pay with their lives, eternal lives.

We live in a world that's lost a grip on justice. But even in a world with a distorted value system, can you just imagine the outcry there would be if a child molester was arrested, then completely forgiven...and set free? People would scream, "That's not justice!" Justice demands that someone pay the penalty. The penalty for sin is death and because God is just His justice demands then that someone must pay the penalty!

That's the Easter story. That's exactly what Jesus did for us when He died on the Cross. He died in our place. He died so that we could live.

Jesus Christ was sinless. Even His enemies could find nothing He'd done wrong to accuse Him with. God paid the ultimate price for us by sacrificing His Son to fulfill our sentence! It's how God can be just and forgive at the same time. **God's plan of Forgiveness is complete. God's plan of Forgiveness is costly.** It cost God the Father the life of His own Son.

c. God's plan of Forgiveness requires confession. A Sunday School teacher asked her class, "What must we do to accept the forgiveness of God?" A little fellow piped up from the back, "Well, first we gotta sin."

All of us have sinned and do sin. But we must also confess to a Holy God that we've sinned and need His forgiveness. God can't forgive us until we first confess that we're in need of His divine forgiveness.

The Wall Street Journal carried an article a few years back entitled, "When Forgiveness is a Sin." In it Dennis Prager writes, "The bodies of the three teen-age girls shot dead last December by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, KY were not yet cold before some of their schoolmates hung a sign announcing, 'We forgive you, Mike!' They were referring to Michael Carneal, 14, the killer."

Prager then insightfully continues, "Over the past generation, many Christians have adopted the idea that they should forgive...whether or not the evildoer repents...forgiveness is contingent upon the sinner repenting."

Jesus' last words on the cross were, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" But the book of Acts clearly indicates that most of them were never forgiven, because though forgiveness was readily available and had been offered – they rejected it. Instead of accepting Christ's offer of forgiveness, the Jewish leaders sought to deny the Resurrection and persecuted the early church.

To receive God's forgiveness, we must first admit that we're guilty sinners, deserving God's wrath and judgment but asking for His grace and forgiveness – because of Christ's death on Calvary. When you and I admit that we're sinners and in need of God's forgiveness and mercy, then we can claim the promise of Romans 10:13, "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*"

To have God's forgiveness, we must cry out as the tax collector cried out to God in Luke 18, "*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*" We all know that we're sinners. If we're honest, we know that we're not good people. My friend, have you also asked God to forgive you? Have you asked Him to be your Lord and Savior?

Conclusion: God the Father gave His Son for you and me. That's the Easter message. God the Father longs to forgive you. He's waiting for you to come to Him. Won't you come Home to the Father today?

The word *gospel* means "good news." There's good news for everyone today – anyone and everyone can be forgiven. There's no sin too great, no vile deed too horrible. Jesus already died and paid for it! The good news is that means that there's hope for everyone. The good news is that you can be saved; you can be forgiven no matter how bad you've been.

Someone wrote this little verse: "*Upon a life I did not live, Upon a death I did not die, I risk my whole eternity.*" It's what it means to be a Christian. It means trusting in Jesus Christ so much that you risk your eternity on what He did for you on the Cross. Trusting Jesus for salvation means to trust Him so completely that if He can't take you to heaven, you're not going to go there.

Are you willing and ready to do that? Perhaps it'd help you to form your words into a simple prayer. Even while I encourage you to pray this prayer, I caution you that saying words alone won't save you. Prayer doesn't save, only Jesus can save. Prayer though is a means of reaching out to the Lord in true saving faith. If you pray this prayer sincerely trusting God, Christ will save you. You can be sure of that:

"Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept You out of my life. I know I'm a sinner and that I can't save myself. No longer will I close the door of my life when I hear You knocking. By faith I gratefully receive Your free gift of salvation. I'm ready to trust You as my Lord and Savior. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. I believe that You're the Son of God who

died on the Cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the 3rd day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true. Come into my life, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. Amen."

In the end I can't believe for you and you can't believe for me. Jesus said, "*Come unto me.*" Will you come to Jesus? Come see for yourself. Come and discover how Christ can transform your life. If you're fearful, put your heart at ease. Jesus won't turn you away. God invites you. But still you must come. Don't hesitate or procrastinate. *Tomorrow* can be a dangerous word. Please stop making excuses.

God loves you and wants to forgive you but you have to let Him. Please give up the foolish notion that you can somehow earn His love or be good enough to go to heaven.

How could any of us do enough "good things" to pay God the Father back for His Son? Please come to Christ and be saved. Trust in Him and your new life will begin!