Forgive Myself?

Have you ever been told how important it is to forgive yourself?

I know Christians who have struggled with doing this, some for several years, unable to get a handle on it. There's good reason for that—scripture never even mentions forgiving ourselves, much less commanding it. I understand the idea of giving oneself forgiveness comes from humanistic psychology; doctors know that experiencing forgiveness is an essential part of mental health, but where do you find forgiveness when God, the source of forgiveness, has been excluded from the big picture?

You forgive yourself. At least, that's the way it should work in principle. When God is "Xed out." But, as many have learned, just deciding to forgive yourself sounds easier than actually doing it. On what basis do you forgive yourself? Just because? How many times do you need to beat yourself up before it's time for forgive yourself? What if you forgive yourself prematurely, before you've beaten yourself up enough?

What a mess.

I've also heard Christians say, "I know God has forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself." It sounds quite humble, but in reality, this is upside-down pride. The underlying message is, "God may have forgiven me, but my own standards of what constitutes forgiveness are higher than God's, and my standard is what counts."

So what do we do when we're still keeping ourselves on the hook for past sins?

First, by faith receive the forgiveness that God has already granted. This has nothing to do with *feeling* forgiven and everything to do with choosing to trust that God keeps His

word: “But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God has already forgiven every sin we have ever committed and ever will. He waits for us to gratefully choose to receive His amazing grace of forgiveness. *“Lord Jesus, thank You for paying my debt for my sin and restoring me to relationship with the Father. Thank You for forgiving me. By faith, and in Your strength, I receive Your forgiveness and cleansing.”*

Second (if necessary), we choose to take ourselves off the hook and release ourselves from being our own prisoners. We remind ourselves that Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be really free” (John 8:36). We remind ourselves that His last words on the Cross were “It is finished.” His work of freeing us from our sin and making forgiveness possible is finished. Done. Over and out. Which means we can take ourselves off the hook for something Jesus already paid for.

Recently I was teaching on forgiveness and painted a word picture of being handcuffed to the person who had offended us or hurt us. Forgiveness means unlocking the cuff from around our own wrist and snapping it on Jesus’ wrist, giving Him custody of our offender, releasing them into His care. Several people told me, “I realized my prisoner was ME! And Jesus was inviting me to take the handcuffs off myself!” They did, and they were free.

I love the sound of chains falling off and people being set free from their strongholds!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/forgive-myself/_ on March 13, 2012.

35 Years and Counting

Yesterday (August 3, 2009), Ray and I celebrated 35 years of marriage. My good friend and fellow Engage blogger Gwynne Johnsons wrote on my Facebook, “Congratulations . . . got you beat by 15 years :) …Good guys are the BEST of God’s gifts . . .” Amen to that!

We’ve been privileged to walk through almost all those years with our dear friends and fellow Probe Ministries staff Kerby and Susanne Anderson (whom you may recognize from the national radio show Point of View), who were married the same day. Last night, as we visited together, I asked the Andersons and Ray what they had learned over our 35 years, and we were all in agreement about the basics.

The non-negotiable part of a successful marriage is to continually love, accept and forgive the other. That starts with the absolute commitment to mean and to live out our wedding vows. It’s a covenant, a “promise on steroids,” that goes far beyond “I promise to be here as long as love shall last.”

I’ve been thinking about what I’ve learned for sure over 35 years.

As one of our pastors once said, “The AIDS of marriage is justified self-centeredness.” Selfishness is a oneness-killer. God intends to use our spouse to shape us and mold us and give us daily opportunities to crucify our flesh, our self-centeredness, as He forms us into the people He intends us to be.

It’s helpful to see marriage as two “forgiven forgivers.” Extending forgiveness as we have received it from God, as

quickly as possible, keeps the oneness and intimacy flowing.

We need to keep a balance between what we overlook and let go from a heart of grace, and what we need to address because it is big enough to cause us to withdraw from the other. Godly conflict resolution is essential for living well with another sinner.

Cultivating an "attitude of gratitude" and verbally expressing gratitude for the small things the other does to serve and love us, goes a long way.

There is no substitute for creating habits of kindness toward our spouse. And we are just as pleasant and courteous to each others as we are to strangers, which is simply a habit as well as a character issue.

Learning about communication skills truly enhances the marriage relationship. The most powerful tools I've ever come across, and which we have made a part of how we live with each other, are:
1. Don't interrupt the other person.
2. Tell the other what you heard to make sure you understood them right.
3. Avoid being a WENI (sounds like "weenie"): **W**ithdrawing, **E**scalating when arguing, **N**egatively interpreting what the other is saying, and **I**nvalidating the other.

God has been good, and we thank Him for His blessing of a great friendship and relationship with each other!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/35_years_and_counting

“I Need Help Resolving Past Stuff In My Life”

I need help resolving past stuff in my life. I’m stuck and I don’t know where to go or what to. Can you help?

I can tell you that from my study over the years, as well as personal experience, I believe the key to emotional healing (which is what resolving past stuff is about) is a two-pronged effort: grieving and forgiving. That said, the overarching, “big picture goal” is what David realized in Psalm 51:6 when He told the Lord, “I know that You desire truth in my inmost parts.” God brings freedom and healing when we allow Him to show us the lies we have believed about what we’ve experienced and the conclusions we have come to about Him, about life, about other people and about ourselves. When we renounce the lies and embrace the truth, we actually experience Jesus’ promise in John 8:32, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” But it needs to be more than an intellectual assent to the truth; we also need to open our hearts to the freeing power of truth.

It’s important to face our losses and our woundings, inviting Jesus into the process (absolutely essential), so that we give Him access to those places in our hearts that need healing. In fact, one of my mentors calls Christian denial “the refusal to give God access to the hurts He wants to heal for His glory and our benefit.” Instead of going digging, it’s much better to ask the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Counselor, to shine His light on which wounds and losses He wants to address, since He knows the best order for untangling our messes. As He brings memories to the surface, we ask for grace in facing them, experiencing the feelings again but this time in a redemptive way because we are giving them to God to heal, and grieving the ungrieved feelings we haven’t yet dealt with. This means tears, and sometimes screams. (The best definition

I've ever heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the emotional debilitation that can follow an emotional trauma such as sexual abuse, or war, or observing something horrific like the workers who cleaned up the aftermath of 9/11, is "failure to scream.") Journaling is one of the most important tools in grieving because there is something therapeutic about the layers of sensory experience in writing on paper: holding the pen, feeling the paper, smelling the ink and the paper, hearing the sounds of pen on paper. And somehow, the Holy Spirit seems to be able to direct our thoughts and our feelings in the process of writing out what's in our hearts, and He dislodges the shards and splinters of lies that are embedded in our souls so that we can recognize them, renounce them, and embrace the truth He shows us.

One of the things God has shown me about grieving is that there is a finite amount of grief for each wound and loss. He knows how many tears are attached to each wound, and once they're out of us, they are gone forever, collected by God Himself in His tear-bottle (Ps. 56:8). (Consider this: if you think about a childhood loss or painful experience that caused tears, have you cried about it lately? Probably not, because you finished grieving it years ago. There were a finite number of tears over losing a beloved pet in fourth grade, for example. And also consider that since there will be no sorrow or crying or pain in heaven for the believer (Rev. 21:4), all our grieving has a time limit.

The other part of healing is forgiving, where we face the wrongs done to us and choose to let go of them into God's hands for Him to deal with. There are good resources on understanding forgiveness and how to forgive (two of the best are *Total Forgiveness* by R.T Kendall and *I Should Forgive, But…* by Chuck Lynch), but bottom line, we forgive because the only one we hurt by refusing to forgive is ourselves. It's like someone tosses us a hot potato, and we clutch it to our chest exclaiming with pain, all the while continuing to hold

it to ourselves. Forgiving means letting go of the hot potato so it no longer hurts us. When we forgive the people who caused us pain, we release them into God's hands for HIM to deal with them as He sees fit. Louis Smedes said that when we forgive someone, we set a prisoner free, and we discover that the prisoner was us.

Refusing to forgive has terrible repercussions. Unforgiveness is a bitter, corrosive poison that consumes a person's soul and diminishes their spirit. I watched a family member grow increasingly invalid and weak with the years of holding onto grudges and insults, whether real or perceived, as if they were treasures. By the time she died, all of her life and vitality was drained out, and there was nothing but a brittle shell of who she used to be. But failing to grieve also has painful consequences: uncried tears heighten stress and cause all kinds of physical diseases and maladies. Because we are a unit of body, soul and spirit, our bodies hold onto soulish pain and it comes out as physical pain and illness. This is why James 5 "connects the dots" between physical illness, confession of sins, and the need for prayer.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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"How Do I Recover From My Husband's Adultery with

Prostitutes?”

I have only been married four short years this December. I just learned my husband committed adultery on at least 2 occasions with a prostitute. He says he is sorry and wants to salvage the marriage. I have conflicting emotions from moment to moment. If we as Christians are supposed to forgive others for their sins, why does God allow for divorce when a spouse is unfaithful? I find it hard to believe that a marriage can survive infidelity and I am wondering how one ever trusts their spouse again after this type of betrayal? We are both Christians. He was saved three years ago, no religious upbringing. We do not have a Church home and share no Christian friends. We sought counsel from a Christian and that counselor told me that I had approximately 30 days from discovery to either remain, forgive and never speak of the adultery again or divorce. He says that the 30 days is biblical. I have never heard of this nor have I read it in the Bible. I think if I choose to stay within the marriage it should be based on my spouses behavior. I appreciate any information you may have and I thank you for your time.

I am so very, very sorry for the pain you are experiencing. Your conflicting emotions are totally normal and to be expected.

The biggest thing you need to know is that there is a difference between forgiving someone and trusting him again. They are not the same. When we forgive, we release the other person from our desire to exact revenge on them for hurting us. We let go of their sin against us into God’s hands so that He can deal with them. But broken trust is another matter; it needs to be earned back, and that takes time. A good amount of time, consisting of one faithful, responsible, caring choice after another.

In order to understand God’s allowance for divorce, consider

what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 19:8–"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." The Lord allows for divorce as a matter of love and grace for the one being hurt by a hard-hearted spouse. In the case of infidelity, when a spouse is repentant and truly wants to mend the marriage, God's desire is that He glorify Himself in the marriage by demonstrating His power and grace in the relationship.

There are many spouses who will attest to the fact that there is indeed trust after betrayal if the unfaithful one truly repents and commits to faithfulness. But it takes time, like I said. Probably close to a year minimum.

I disagree with the 30-day ultimatum. I see nothing in the Bible that says that. I do agree that if you choose to stay in the marriage it would depend on whether your husband shows remorse, demonstrates repentance, seeks accountability and is willing for his whereabouts to be checked on at all times. People who are hiding nothing have nothing to fear from accountability.

Here is a link to the Midlife Dimensions website, which offers help and resources for dealing with an affair: www.midlife.com/html/resources/articles/category_affairs.htm. I am concerned that you two are not plugged into a church home and therefore do not have any support system. This is going to make recovery unnecessarily difficult. I would hope that one way your husband could show you he's serious about mending your marriage is to find a church home and get connected to other people who will help support your marriage. God never intended for us to be "Lone Ranger Christians." His intent is for us to be knitted into the body of Christ for support and as a way to receive His various kinds of grace. You are cheating yourself and yourselves to not be connected to an important source of life and strength. I want to strongly suggest that you make this a priority.

I hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

P.S. You might also poke around the New Life website (www.newlife.com) and educate yourself on sex addiction. If it were me, I would want to know what drove my husband to a prostitute. I would also want to know if my actions played any part in it. (For example, this is one reason the apostle Paul tells married people not to deprive each other sexually.) It sounds like you have an opportunity to each look at your own "stuff" and see what you can both do to build the marriage, as long as he's serious about it.

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"How Do We Repent If Those We Hurt Are Dead or Far Away"

If we are asked to make up to those we may have offended, ask for their forgiveness—before prayers are answered or before coming to God, how do we possibly repent if those we hurt are no longer alive, or if many years have passed and they are now married, have good jobs? If we hurt people in the past by our very attitude daily—and everyone, really, we came in contact with for any length of time through negativity and criticism—how can such a lifelong sin be forgiven? How to ask repentence of so many? A very kind woman is praying for me today, and I don't want to get too close, or mislead her, but her prayers are so BIG I almost think I can begin again after many, many years away from life. Don't mean to sound self-pitying. I really do just want to make sure I don't weaken another good person again.

What wonderful questions!! I can sense that God is answering your friend’s prayers by opening your mind to a new way of thinking.

Repenting means to change the way we think and to turn 180 degrees around, a U-turn, in our behavior. Repenting of our bad thinking and behaving patterns is the first step. Then comes the step of asking for forgiveness, which is necessary for there to be any reconciliation. They are two separate steps.

If the person we hurt is no longer alive, then we can’t ask for forgiveness. We can receive God’s forgiveness, but that’s where that process ends. The next step may be to grieve the loss of that relationship and the loss of the ability to be reconciled. You just have to leave that in God’s hands.

If the person we hurt is still around, then we need to pray and ask God if HE is the one telling us to contact the other person and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. (In some situations, that would cause even more pain and it’s best left in His hands.) As you continue to pray about each person you have hurt, God will give you direction about what you should do concerning each one. The best way to handle it is often through a letter because it gives the other person the opportunity to think about what you’ve said before replying. And it even gives them the opportunity to decline to reply at all. So you honor that person in several ways.

Your “lifelong sin” can and WAS forgiven in one moment (the moment you trusted Christ—I am assuming you have made that decision) because Jesus paid for it. His love is stronger than your sin, and His blood is more powerful than your sin. He wiped out the penalty for it. You may not have the forgiveness of those whom you offended, but you DO have God’s total and unconditional forgiveness. God doesn’t command you to secure the forgiveness of everyone (you don’t have that kind of power), He tells you to do what is within your power to do.

That is, acknowledge and confess your sin, and ask for forgiveness. That's why Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." If someone doesn't grant the forgiveness you humbly ask for, you can't be reconciled with them, but at that point it's not your fault.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

M.I.T. Dean's Pants on Fire

George Washington, call your agent. America needs your "I cannot tell a lie" message. A national lecture circuit slot just became available.

A popular dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has resigned after admitting resume padding and living a 28-year lie. Ouch. Her sad story is filled with irony—lots of fresh material for your speeches.

Marilee Jones says, "I have resigned as MIT's Dean of Admissions because very regrettably, I misled the Institute about my academic credentials. I misrepresented my academic degrees when I first applied to MIT 28 years ago and did not have the courage to correct my resume when I applied for my current job or at any time since.

"I am deeply sorry for this," she continues, "and for disappointing so many in the MIT community and beyond who supported me, believed in me, and who have given me extraordinary opportunities." {1}

The Boston Globe reports that her resume claimed degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and two other New York institutions, but that she has degrees from none of them. RPI says she attended as a part-time student for about nine months but earned no degree. The other two say they have no record of her attending.{2}

Ironically, as *The New York Times* notes, Jones was widely admired, almost revered, for her humor, outspokenness and common sense. {3} She had won prestigious MIT awards{4} and earned a national reputation as a champion for reducing college admissions pressure on students and parents.

It gets worse. She coauthored the book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*. On integrity, it says, "Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners. But just remember that what goes around comes around, meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out." {5}

Doesn't it.

Lots of people lie. Some get caught. The US military reportedly distorted Pat Tillman's and Jessica Lynch's stories, allegedly to boost war efforts. Enron executives cooked books for personal gain.

Employees falsify expense accounts or call in sick. Kids disavow breaking windows. Adults tell fish stories. Wandering spouses work late at the office.

Distorting the truth can bring esteem, opportunity, money, thrills. One innocent lie can require cover-ups. Soon the web becomes complex.

We've all made mistakes. As a teen, I valued my reputation for honesty but made some poor choices, lied about them, and nearly was expelled from school. My confronters forgave me and

offered me another chance. The episode helped point me to personal faith. I learned that Moses, the great Jewish liberator, warned his compatriots against violating divine prescription: "Be sure your sin will find you out."{6}

Mine found me out. Marilee Jones deceit found her out, as readers from *The Times* of London to *The Times of India* now know.

Jones likely needs privacy—as she has requested—plus good friends, close counsel, and lots of prayers. Perhaps, after recovery, she can help others resist similar temptations.

So, President Washington, what lessons from this episode will your lecture tour emphasize? How about these: Tell the truth. It may be painful but it's the right thing to do. It's easier to remember. You'll sleep better and enhance society.

Pack your saddle bags, Mr. President. Crank up the PowerPoint. Be sure to include a Pinocchio cartoon and some slides of cherry trees.

Oh, but sir, we understand that the cherry tree story might be mere legend. We suggest you explain that to your audiences and give plenty of real-life illustrations.

Notes

1. Statement by Marilee Jones, MIT News, April 26, 2007, web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2007/admissions-jones.html, accessed April 27, 2007.
2. Marcella Bombardieri and Tracy Jan, MIT dean quits over fabricated credentials, *The Boston Globe*, April 27, 2007, tinyurl.com/3ynyhv, accessed April 27, 2007.
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4. MIT Admissions Web site profile,

www.mitadmissions.org/Marilee.shtml, accessed April 27, 2007.
5. Lewin, loc. cit.
6. Numbers 32:23 NASB.

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"Mistakes Were Made"

If you're the nation's top cop, you know it's a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales' ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We're investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We'll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don't want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I'll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an "astonishingly

maladroit…Nixonian…dodge."{1} Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake's press agent announced back then, "I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance."{2} Jackson told a press conference, "If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention."{3} William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: "the past exonerative."{4}

True Confessions

What did Gonzales mean? I don't know; I'm still watching. But the "mistakes were made" flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I'm sorry; please forgive me?

That's seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: "I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician."{5} Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, "Never apologize, never explain."{6} Literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, "No sensible person ever made an apology."{7}

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he'd ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn't."

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

Plastic Buckets

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to … [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.{8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Notes

1. "Politics, Pure and Cynical," (Editorial), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/yvnjyd, accessed March 18, 2007.
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3. Robert J. Bliwise, "We Apologize: The Sorry State of Remorse," *Duke Magazine* 90:3 May-June 2004; http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/050604/apologi

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5. Bliwise, loc. cit.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid. It is unclear from the text whether Munger or Bliwise supplied the Emerson quotation.
8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."{1} He played a significant

role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.{2} My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I

pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." {12} Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of

the truth of Jesus' message and his own need for it. "I was no longer an atheist," he writes. "I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man."{15}

Newton discovered that the "new man" would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we'll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.{17}

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. I concluded that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and

human slavery were irreconcilable."{18}

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.{19}

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.{21}

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.{22} Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.{23} His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and

spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.{24}

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.{25} During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."{26}

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."{27} His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.{28} Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"{30} Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."{31}

Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.{32}

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he

was nearly impaled in a riding accident.{33} Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.{34} A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.{35} He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."{36}

Notes

1. From Olney Hymns, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.

2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.

3. Aitken, op. cit.

4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

10. Newton, op. cit., 60.

11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.

12. Newton, op. cit., 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.

14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.

16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.

17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.

18. Ibid., 112.

19. Ibid., 125-126.

20. Ibid., 127-137.

21. Ibid., 140-141.

22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.

23. Ibid., 304.

24. Ibid., 299-308.

25. Ibid., 310 ff.

26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce’s thoughts about quitting.

27. Ibid., 319.

28. Ibid., 319-328.

29. Ibid., 319.

30. Ibid., 243.

31. Ibid., 347.

32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.

33. Newton, op. cit., 23.

34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

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Spanish Feedback: "I Regret My Abortion, We Must Fight It"

Translated Spanish Q & A:

Dear Sirs:

I support the points you make in your article about abortion. It is true…I'm telling you this because I had one. The abortion happened when I was 21 years old and now I really regret doing this. I have 2 children that show me how beautiful it is to be a mother. When I think of what I did, I feel very sad.

We definitely have to fight against abortion. ("Definitivamente hay que luchar contra el aborto.")

Dear friend,

I am so sorry to hear of your pain over your abortion. Do you know that Jesus Christ offers you forgiveness and cleansing for your sin? He cannot take away your choice, but He can take away the guilt and the pain. The Bible tells us, If we confess

our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for all of your sins, including abortion, and then God raised Him from the dead. He is alive today and wants to have a warm, love-filled relationship with you. For more information, please see this article on The Most Important Decision of Your Life at www.ministeriosprobe.org/docs/decision_mas_importante.html

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin

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"Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?" – Did My Sin Re-crucify Christ?

Please help–I'm really worried Jesus won't forgive me. I regressed and viewed a pornographic image. While praying for forgiveness a voice in my mind said it hurt like nails and that I had re-crucified Christ and that there was no sacrifice left for me. I'd heard of this verse but now I'm really worried is there any hope of forgiveness for me. Please, I'm worried really bad.

Sounds to me like you were hearing from a demon who was sending what scripture calls a "fiery dart" at you. Yes, your sin hurt the Lord. (Sometimes the Enemy throws some truth into the midst of his lies.) No, you did not crucify Christ because if you recall, His last words on the cross before He died were

“it is finished,” or actually more accurately, “it is paid in full.” Lord Jesus fully paid for your sin of looking at porn 2000 years ago.

And no, it is not true that there is no sacrifice left for you. The verse you are thinking of is Hebrews 10:26, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.” But consider that equally true is the promise of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

When a born-again Christian sins, God promises to forgive us. What you are exhibiting is the regret and remorse that shows God is continuing to give you the grace of repentance. The people Jesus doesnt forgive are the hard-hearted ones who refuse to ask for it.

Concerning Hebrews 10:26, listen to what theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem says about this verse:

> *“A person who rejects Christ’s salvation and ‘has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him’ (Hebrews 10:29) deserves eternal punishment. This again is a strong warning against falling away, but it should not be taken as proof that someone who has truly been born again can lose his or her salvation. When the author talks about the blood of the covenant ‘that sanctified him, ‘the word sanctified is used simply to refer to ‘external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God’s people.’ The passage does not talk about someone who is genuinely saved, but someone who has received some beneficial moral influence through contact with the church.” (Bible Doctrine, p 343.)*

Be encouraged, brother. Receive Gods forgiveness and cleansing according to the riches in Christ, which he has lavished on you (Eph. 1:8).

Blessings, Sue

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