

“How I Forgave my Dad”

by Nick Watts

“But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

“Write down the ten most traumatic memories from your childhood.”

That’s what my counselor, David Rosenthal, asked me to do at the conclusion of our first session together.

“Do I have to stop at ten?” I thought. What would I do with all the rest? And does David possibly know what I’ll have to go through emotionally to retrieve those memories?

“I refuse to go back there,” I thought to myself. “But I have to. God, why are You forcing me to open that door – that door that leads to that dark, emotional corner of my life that I’d just as soon not revisit?”

It was a Saturday morning in early September, 1997, when David gave me this “assignment.” I had never been in counseling before (I was also certain I didn’t need any) and didn’t know what to expect. To be quite honest, I was scared.

Only a month earlier, August 26th, I received a note during the morning worship service at my church that my youngest sister, Cindy, was in critical condition at University Medical Center in Lubbock. I was not overly concerned. Over the years, I’d received numerous phone calls regarding my, then 29 year old sister, that could be described as “urgent,” most of which were late at night. She had been on her own since she was fourteen, and turned alcoholic shortly thereafter. And, on those rare occasions when I heard from her, she either needed to get out of jail, had been beaten up by a boyfriend, or was stranded on a street corner somewhere and needed some money.

But, this day would prove urgent in the genuine definition of the word. The day before, Aug. 25th, Cindy and a couple of her friends got off the night shift where they worked, went and shot some pool, then returned to her apartment to shoot up with heroin. By the time Cindy regained consciousness, one of her friends was dead, and she and the other individual were dying. I was later told by a Lubbock police officer that the heroin they got a hold of went by the street name of “white china,” sort of an “A+” heroin, which is lethal.

Because she lay unconscious for eight hours before calling 911, the left side of her body was one solid, black bruise caused by the heroin shutting down her respiratory system. The bruise abscessed and caused permanent nerve damage in her left foot. My wife, Michelle, and I arrived at the hospital shortly after we received the note. I will never

forget what I saw and the way I felt when I walked into the hospital room that day. Cindy's small frame was bloated up 50 lbs. over her normal weight. She was suffering from renal failure, congestive heart failure, and respiratory failure. Unconscious and breathing heavily, she hung on by a thread. The doctors gave us little hope.

I simply walked over by her bed, sat down, held her hand, and wept bitterly. This is not the way I wanted to say "good-bye" to my sister.

After a few moments at Cindy's bedside, a darkness began to grip my heart. That darkness, fueled by rage, was unlike anything I had ever felt before in my life. The hidden hate that had been boiling in my soul for so long finally erupted – not for Cindy – but for my father.

My father had been an alcoholic for literally as long as I could remember. But, unlike the "funny drunks" on television shows, Dad, when he was drunk, was very cruel, hateful and physically abusive.

As a young child, I watched him strangle my mother, pull her by the hair across the floor, and throw furniture across the room. He embarrassed me throughout my high school athletic career, being thrown out of stadiums for public intoxication and profanity. I've watched him wield both a knife and a gun in front of me during my teenage years wondering, "Is this going to be the time he doesn't stop himself and kill us all?" We lived in perpetual fear because that's all we knew. Finally, in August of 1979, when I was a sophomore in high school, he beat my mother repeatedly with the buckle end of a belt leaving large, black, swollen welts all over her back. Mom took my sisters and me the next day and we hid out in a friend's home through the night. Mom filed for divorce shortly thereafter.

Probably my most traumatic memory took place only days after I'd turned sixteen years of age, in July, 1980. It was Sunday night and I had just returned home from church only to find that familiar look of terror in the eyes of my mom and Susan and Cindy, my two younger sisters. I knew Dad had called. "He's really mad," they told me as they were crying. The next thing I knew, there was what sounded like someone hitting our front door with a sledge hammer. I hurried Susan and Cindy to the hallway and put my arms around them. I was the only protection my family had. With the door still chained, my mom opened the door and asked Dad what he wanted. He said, "Give me the kids." She told him no.

What happened next is, to this day, somewhat of a blur. From where I stood in the hallway, I saw my mom fly backwards across the television set. My dad had kicked our front door so hard the frame came out of the sheet rock pinning my mother underneath it. Instinctively, I ran toward my dad and hit him as hard as I could. He flew backward and we fought on the front porch as neighbors began to come out of their homes to see what was going on. My mom ran to the phone to call the Abilene Police Dept., but Dad left before the police arrived. We spent the night in different friends' homes because we didn't have a front door. I still believe had I not been home Dad would have killed my mom that night.

On Aug. 26th, 1997, walking out of Cindy's hospital room, as a then 34 year old man with a wife and three children of my own, all of the rage came rushing back like a flood. All I

knew is that I wanted to hurt my father. He deserved to hurt the way he had made us hurt. I thought to myself, "Cindy is dying and it's his fault. It's time for him to pay."

I quickly fell into deep depression and my life began unraveling. David Wilson, my friend and pastor, lovingly encouraged me to get counseling as soon as possible.

That's where my dear friend, David Rosenthal, comes in.

During our initial session, I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. David then took me through a relatively new type of therapy called "EMDR," or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro, the same therapy used on Viet Nam Veterans and rape victims. The first thing David told me, in beginning the therapy, was "Write down the ten most traumatic memories from your childhood."

I was upset for having to do so, but little did I know what God was about to do.

As a vocational minister going on, at that time, sixteen years of full-time ministry, I had always told people that I had forgiven my dad and that I loved him. But the Holy Spirit confronted me during that first counseling session with this question: "How can you say you've forgiven someone for whom you have so much hate?" For the first time in my life I was asking myself, "Could it be that I've never forgiven Dad?" *More than that, could it be that I've never understood forgiveness as the Bible defines forgiveness?* God, knowing how vulnerable I was at that moment, began to gently open my eyes to the fact that the hate I had for my dad was neither hurting him nor protecting me. It was, instead, eating me alive – slowly destroying me.

The lie satan spins is that hate will make you strong and protected. All it does, though, is hurt you and those you love most.

"Why do you continue to hate your dad?" David asked.

"I guess it's because hate is my armor. It protects me from being hurt all over again." I replied.

"What will happen, Nick, if you give God your hate and forgive your Dad?"

"Then, I'll have no armor. I'll become weak."

Then the Holy Spirit lowered the boom.

David asked, "What did Paul say?"

By this time I was sobbing so heavily I couldn't even answer. So David quoted 2 Corinthians 12:10, "...when I am weak, then am I strong."

"Nick," David asked gently, "what do you think you need to do?"

I answered, "I need to forgive my dad."

The session ended. It was Saturday, September 20th, 1997. I wrestled with it all week. I had never been able to trust my earthly father with my weakness. Could I really trust my heavenly Father with it?

Wednesday, September 24th, I was getting ready to teach our mid-week, youth Bible study, when the Holy Spirit convicted my heart and, in essence, said, "I'm not going to let this go away." I said, "God, what if I forgive him and he doesn't change?" God replied, *"My child, this is not about changing your dad. This is about changing you."*

So, as best as I knew how, I prayed, "God, I choose to trust you with my heart. Today I choose to become weak. Today, I forgive my dad."

There were no fireworks, no angels singing the Hallelujah Chorus, no tingling feeling down my spine. But, this I know: I was transformed that day.

After I prayed that prayer, I walked into my house, fell into my wife's arms and cried like a baby. For the first time in two decades my heart was now unprotected by the callous the years of hate had created. With one breath of a prayer the grace of Jesus Christ gave me the strength to forgive my dad. All the hate in my life had never given me that kind of strength, only bondage.

Author and professor, Lewis Smedes, writes, "When we forgive someone, it's as though a prisoner has been set free. And then we realize that the prisoner was us."

So much of my life has changed as a result of that encounter with the grace of God. I came to realize that, through the years, because I had focused my entire life on not becoming like my dad, I had in many ways become just like him. God's grace broke the cycle.

Cindy lived. Forty days following her overdose we were finally given hope by the doctors that she was going to make it. She was released from UMC 45 days after she had been admitted and spent another 45 days in in-patient drug rehabilitation. She still suffers from nerve damage in her left foot.

But what about my relationship with my dad?

It had been well over twelve years since I'd had any semblance of a relationship with him. More than that, we had not seen each other for ten of those years. He'd never met, nor seen for that matter, any of my three children. Do I recklessly jump back into a relationship with him? No. But, I did begin to pray about what to do. Frustration now filled my heart because, by that time, Dad suffered from alcohol-induced dementia. I didn't know if he could understand the magnitude of what God had done for me. But, I desperately wanted to tell him I loved him and had forgiven him. I just didn't know if that day would ever come.

That day came.

My granddad, my father's dad, passed away on November 20th, 1998. On Nov. 22nd, the day of the funeral, my dad was the first one we saw. Although only 55 years old, the alcohol had taken its toll on his face, body and mind. He was penniless and had no permanent residence. I learned that, over the past several years, he had lived both in a

car and in Lubbock, TX, at the Salvation Army. The grace of God was so strong that day that, not only did I have the opportunity to introduce Dad to my children for the very first time, but because of the fact that he was abnormally coherent, I took the opportunity to tell him what God had done.

I said, "Dad, all my life I believed you hated me."

"Why?" he asked incredulously.

What would normally have been easy in bringing up the past was now difficult to do. By "deleting" the hate in my soul, the traumatic memories of my childhood were not as easy to remember anymore. But, I didn't want to focus on the past anyway. *Because today I was there not to condemn, but to forgive.*

"Dad, for all the things you did to Mom, Susan and Cindy, and myself, I forgive you – I really forgive you. It's a done deal. I no longer hold any of it against you." His head was lowered the whole time I spoke so I said, "Dad, look at me." He slowly lifted his head. I continued, "I love you. And I want you to know something else. I'm proud of you." Never in my life had I told him I was proud of him. Obviously, I wasn't proud of what he'd done. But, I wasn't referring to that. Author, Philip Yancey, writes, "Grace helps us see others not as they are, but as God intended for them to be."

Hate never gave me the strength to do that. Only God's grace could.

We embraced and my wife took the first picture of me and my dad together since the day I graduated college 11 and a half years earlier. The picture we took that day of me, my dad, and his three grandchildren stands proudly in my office and in my home. Not so much because it's a picture of me and my dad. But, because it is a picture of the power of God.

I once read, "Forgiveness, we discover, is harder than the sermons make it out to be....because behind every act of forgiveness lies a wound of betrayal, and the pain of being betrayed does not easily fade away."

Holocaust survivor, Corrie Ten Boom, said, "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

To once again quote Philip Yancey, when I forgave my dad "the hurt did not disappear, but the burden of being his judge fell away." God has been true to His promise to protect my heart. I am so glad I chose to trust Him.

Since Sept. of '97, I've had the opportunity to participate in a project produced and sponsored by *HealthNet*, a part of the *Texas Tech Health Science Center*, on the topic of EMDR. I was interviewed in a video that was sent to over a hundred hospitals and military bases around the world.

I used to share a testimony of abuse. Today, I share a testimony of God's grace. To quote the 18th century hymn writer, John Newton, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...."

Epilogue: Dad is free, now, from alcoholism. On November 8, 2000, I received a call and was told that he'd been found dead. The pain of losing him was tremendous. But, not near as painful as it would have been had I not made the decision to forgive him, allowing God to set me free, as well.