

# THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS

---

This morning, I would like you to consider something that we Christians sometimes take for granted. But, it is one of the most wonderful things that you could ever receive. It is something that we call “forgiveness.” There was a famous Pulitzer Prize winning photograph taken during the Vietnam War that provides a starting point to understanding forgiveness. Of course, being a photograph it is not three dimensional. But, that isn’t the case with forgiveness because forgiveness does, in fact, have three sides.

In this photograph, it shows children running down a road in the direction of the camera. And there was absolute terror on their faces. And the reason that they were so terrified was that their village had just been hit by a misdirected South Vietnamese air strike. One little girl in the photo was 9-year-old Kim Phuc (pronounced “fuke”). Although you cannot see it from the camera angle, her back was terribly burned from the flames of the napalm bombs that had been dropped on her home. She suffered life-threatening third degree burns and would carry those scars for a very long time. But there was someone else who was scarred by that attack. He was miles away at the time, but that same napalm burned him for years to come in a very different way. The wounds that this man experienced would be a long time healing.

His name was John Plummer and he eventually became the minister of Bethany United Methodist church in Purcellville, Virginia. In 1972, he was the U. S. military officer who was responsible for authorizing the air strike that destroyed that village, burned that little girl named Kim Phuc and killed four villagers, including two of her cousins. Before issuing the order that sent those bombers flying, his intelligence reports had assured him that there were no civilians in the area. But, of course, as it turned out, those reports were horribly wrong. And for the next 20+ years, Rev. Plummer carried the wounds of a broken heart.

And then in June of 1996, he heard that that same little girl had not only survived those third degree burns, but that Kim Phuc was now a grown woman living in Toronto, Canada. Not only that, she was scheduled to appear as the speaker at the upcoming Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C. So, Rev. Plummer made arrangements to attend this event. As he sat there in the audience, he wondered what she might say. Would she mention the people responsible for all the pain she’d experienced as a result of that errant air strike? In his imagination, he could almost visualize her pointing an accusing finger at him from the podium. As it turns out, Rev. Plummer was able to get word to her that he wanted to meet her after she had finished speaking. And when he did meet her, he

confessed his role in the bombing of her village all those many years ago. Rev. Plummer's heart pounded as he awaited her response. And then Kim Phuc said something that the Reverend never expected. In an article that he later wrote in the Virginia Advocate, Rev. Plummer explained. "She saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow. She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was, 'I'm sorry; I'm so sorry,' over and over again. At the same time she was saying, 'It's all right; it's all right; I forgive; I forgive.' " And finally, Rev. Plummer was set free by these soothing, comforting words from Kim Phuc.

And yet, he was absolutely amazed! How could someone that he'd caused so much pain and sorrow ***forgive him***? He felt that she would have been totally justified in hating him—so how could this be? This is how Kim Phuc explained it: "Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope and forgiveness."<sup>1</sup> Now that might sound impossible. And for many years after the bombing incident, that act of forgiveness ***was*** something impossible for Kim Phuc to do. But, ten years after her village was destroyed, at the age of 20, she experienced something that made her forgiveness possible. You see, it was then that Kim Phuc gave her life to Jesus Christ. As she grew in Christian character, her hatred melted and gave way to forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

What an amazing story of the transforming power of God's love. It is a story that shows us some important things about forgiveness—something about the three dimensions of forgiveness that I mentioned earlier. And unless we experience all three sides to forgiveness, we can never fully appreciate what forgiveness is all about. So briefly, let's consider each side.

First and foremost, each and every one of us needs God's forgiveness—because we have all disappointed Him through our sins. Kim Phuc realized this as she was becoming a Christian, and we can see this throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew language does not use any one particular word to describe ***forgiveness***. Rather, we see a number of images that begin to flesh out what God's forgiveness is all about. For example, God's forgiveness of us is sometimes described in terms of ***"atonement"*** for our sins.<sup>3</sup> The idea is like the payment of a ransom.<sup>4</sup> Other times, God's forgiveness is expressed in terms of ***"pardoning"*** our sins.<sup>5</sup> In the Old Testament this was achieved by something that served as a scapegoat for us. It was generally satisfied through animal sacrifices<sup>6</sup>—e.g. lambs were slain at the altar and their blood covered our sins—paid for them in a sense. But this was changed with Jesus' sacrifice for us on the Cross. Isaiah points to this when he says: <sup>8</sup> "He [referring to Jesus] was arrested and sentenced and led off to die, and no one cared about his fate. He was put to

death for the sins of our people. . .<sup>10</sup> The LORD says, ‘It was my will that he should suffer; his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness.’” Isaiah 53:8, 10 (TEV) In this way, Jesus Christ paid the ransom to purchase us from our sinful fate.<sup>7</sup> That is why when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper at the end of this service, we will repeat Jesus words found in Matthew’s Gospel: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Matthew 26:28 (NIV) This is the primary forgiveness that we seek—the forgiveness that we receive from God when we repent of our sins and follow Christ.

And for those who commit themselves to Christ, a second dimension of forgiveness becomes possible. It is one of the things that Jesus speaks of in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12 (NIV) It is quite interesting how Jesus compares our forgiving other people of the wrongs that they have done to us by using a financial term like “debt”. This second dimension of forgiveness is clearly demonstrated by the actions of Kim Phuc when she forgave Rev. Plummer. I suspect that before becoming a Christian, she may well have lacked the capacity to offer such forgiveness. Like many people, her spiritual bank account was in the red, and her willingness to forgive such a debt may have been quite deficient. That’s true for just about everyone who doesn’t know Jesus as Lord. Without Jesus Christ in our lives, our ability to forgive others remains in a sorry state. Without Christ, our spiritual wealth is bankrupt. But when we allow Jesus into our heart, all of that changes. He fills us with a vast reservoir of spiritual capital that we can draw upon when others lash out and hurt. Rather than lashing back at them, we are empowered through Him to forgive.<sup>8</sup> It almost seems impossible that someone like Kim Phuc could offer forgiveness after all that she had been through. But with Jesus, the impossible becomes a reality for those who trust in Him.

And finally, we can begin to understand the third dimension of forgiveness in light of the grievous times that Rev. Plummer went through during all those years after the Vietnam War had ended. For over 20 years, Rev. Plummer carried the heavy burden of guilt in his heart for authorizing an air strike that caused death and suffering to all those non-combatants—men, women and children. He may have asked himself a thousand times why he didn’t gather more intelligence before sending out those planes with their napalm bombs. Now, even a man of God like Rev. Plummer can make mistakes. His mistake—like so many of us—was failing to let go of his past. We should regret our past sins—that’s for sure. But, we need to make certain that we don’t let our guilt from the past weigh us down like a mill stone around our necks. The problem is this—You cannot experience the joy that comes with God’s forgiveness unless you forgive yourself. Let go of the guilt and the shame of past wrongs that you may have done. Lay those burdens at Jesus’ feet. Sometimes we are so ashamed of our past sins that we let them become a barrier to accepting the love Jesus has to offer. But there is no reason to let that barrier

exist—because after you give your life to Christ, you are not the same person that you once were. Jesus says that you must be “***born again***”<sup>9</sup>, and there is a great truth in that because, through Him, you become a “***new creation***”. The Scriptures are clear on this: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)

And because of that, it does not make sense to hate yourself because you are no longer that person who committed such terrible wrongs in your former life—the life you lived ***before*** you accepted Jesus into your heart. When you allow yourself to experience God’s true gift of forgiveness, you learn to stop hating yourself. But, if you languish in the guilt of past sins ***after*** being born again, you do Jesus a disservice because it indicates a lack of confidence in Jesus’ capacity to forgive. Didn’t Jesus say that we must ***believe*** in Him?—Of course He did!<sup>10</sup> If we ***believe*** in Him, then we cannot continue to linger under the shadow of sins that He has put behind us. Do not chain yourself to the guilt of your past sins—have absolute confidence in Christ’s capacity to cast away your sins.

It appears that even Rev. Plummer failed to remember this important truth. For all those years following the Vietnam War, he hated himself for what he had done in connection with destroying that village. Finally, he let that hatred go when he heard Kim Phuc said, “I forgive you”—for he believed that what she said was true, and his burdens were lifted. How is it then that we cannot believe Jesus when He tells us that we are forgiven—is His word no less true than Kim Phuc’s?

Now having said that, we should, of course, try to seek out those that we have mistreated and ask for their forgiveness if that is possible. But all of us are not as fortunate as Rev. Plummer was in finding the “Kim Phuc’s” in our lives. Sometimes circumstances happen in such a way that we cannot always locate the person to ask for their personal forgiveness. Maybe we have lost track of them and they are nowhere to be found. Maybe they have passed away. Any number of reasons can make it impossible to directly ask for their personal forgiveness. Or, sometimes the case may be that we do find them, but they withhold forgiveness. What do you do then? That very same thing could have happened to Rev. Plummer if Kim Phuc had not been a Christian. But even if that had been the case, it would not have justified him in clinging to his guilt for all those years. Why?—because once we seek God’s forgiveness with a truly repentant heart and are forgiven by Him, our forgiveness is not dependent upon anyone or anything else. For as Jesus said, when He sets us free from the wrongs of our past life, we are free indeed.<sup>11</sup>

A Stanford University psychologist tells us, “Holding on to hurts and nursing grudges wears you down physically and emotionally. Forgiving someone can be a powerful antidote.” Sometimes that

person can be ***yourself***. Forgiving others is a sign of being a Christian. Forgiving yourself is a sign of trusting Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

So that's what ***complete three dimensional*** forgiveness entails: The forgiveness of others, the forgiveness of self, all within the grace of God's forgiveness of you.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
February 4, 2018  
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2018

---

<sup>1</sup> Kim Phúc, NPR in 2008, Ian K. Smith (April 1, 2010). "South Vietnam, June 9, 1972, Nick Ut". New Statesman. From Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan\\_Thi\\_Kim\\_Phuc#cite\\_note-20](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Thi_Kim_Phuc#cite_note-20).

<sup>2</sup> Photo by Huynh Cong Ut (also known as Nick Ut) of the Associated Press, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick\\_Ut](http://www.elenaphotograph.com/). This version available <http://www.elenaphotograph.com/>. News story from: Evangelical Press News cited in Beacon (4/97). Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 4. Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today's Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "FORGIVENESS".

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6:7 (NIV) “. . . your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

<sup>4</sup> David J. Montgomery, *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-To-Z Guide To Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life*, ed. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), s.v. "FORGIVENESS," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

<sup>5</sup> Micah 7:18 (NIV) Who is a God like you, who ***pardons sin*** and ***forgives the transgression*** of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 16:20-21 (NIV) <sup>20</sup> "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. <sup>21</sup> He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites--all their sins--and put them on the goat's head.

<sup>7</sup> David J. Montgomery, *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-To-Z Guide To Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life*, ed. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), s.v. "FORGIVENESS," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

<sup>8</sup> Jim L. Wilson, *Fresh Illustrations*, (Austin, TX: WORDsearch, 2004), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "FORGIVENESS".

<sup>9</sup> John 3:7 (NIV) You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."

<sup>10</sup> John 11:25 (NASB) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies . . ."

<sup>11</sup> John 8:36 (NIV) So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

<sup>12</sup> Reader's Digest, March 2002, p. 173 Illustration by Jim L. Wilson. Jim L. Wilson, *Fresh Illustrations – Fresh Illustrations: Forgiveness & Reconciliation*, (Austin, Texas: WORDsearch, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 8.