

**Forgiveness as Taught by Sudanese Youth in a city of North Africa – Tamba David.**

*"But Joseph said to (his brothers), "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives", Genesis 50:19-20.*

Andrew pours himself out tirelessly serving thousands of Sudanese people in a city in North Africa. Self taught in music, he leads worship with guitar or keyboards and has formed a zealous worship group. One night he approached a dark area near one of the churches where Sudanese youth congregate. It is also where one of fifty gangs has its turf. Being mistaken as another gang member, Andrew was seized and his face sliced open. Blood poured down over his shirt and trousers. As the gang members left him, his emotions flared and he became very, very angry.

Being a former gang member himself, he thought, "I could go out and get a big knife right now. Or, I could choose to forgive". What should Andrew do?

As he prayed his heart cried out, "Lord help me to forgive." Andrew then chose to forgive his attackers. He began to pray for the people who had done this to him.

One day there was a sports programme by the Refuge North Africa office in a section of the city with many refugees from Sudan. A young man strutted up to Andrew and said, "Do you remember me?" As it was extremely hard to see in the dark exactly who it was, Andrew told him, "No". "I'm the one who did this line on your face for you," he said smugly. He was referring to the long scar that still runs down the side of Andrew's face. "It's okay. I forgive you and I pray for you," said Andrew. Shock covered the assailant's face. He began to call Andrew, "Uncle" and went on to apologise profusely. Then everything became normal in their relationship as he realised that Andrew meant what he said. Probably for the first time in this man's life, he experienced the forgiveness of a Christian, reflecting the love of Jesus Christ.

One night Andrew shared this personal testimony (above) with the youth group after hearing the story of Joseph. He told them that he realised all this had happened so that these gang members could have good relationships with him and with others. That which had happened was allowed by God because God wanted to do something in their young lives. He ended by saying, "Forgive, even though it's expensive, it's very painful. . . to chose to forgive. Forgive, because if you do not you will join evil."<sup>1</sup>

**"Forgiveness is agreeing to live with the consequences of another person's sin."<sup>2</sup>**

This definition helped the youth to better understand Andrew's experience. Certain of those present listening were actually involved in gangs and they heard the wonderful Bible story of Joseph that evening.<sup>3</sup> Andrew's powerful life experience was a window through which they could see the message. Neil Anderson's phrase (above) poignantly reiterates what Jesus said from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," Luke 23:34.

Do we realise that when the words "I forgive you" pass from our lips, we are actually agreeing, yes, even accepting, to bear the consequences of another's sin against us?

For sure this might slow us, caution us against glibly and thoughtlessly allowing these words to come out of our mouths! We don't have options if we want to reflect the Lord who we are loved by, and the One we are called to "Follow".<sup>4</sup> Jesus accepted to bear the consequences of our sin in His own body on the cross.<sup>5</sup> And when God forgave us it was just and perfect forgiveness because He bore the pain. He has every right to say, "I forgive you",

1 John 1:8-9.

### **Gangs in the City**

The Non Governmental Organisation (N.G.O.) we are volunteering with has a great youth department. It has been reaching out and taking risks to love the gang members of the city for

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<sup>1</sup> Consider Matthew 6:14-15; Matthew 18:21-22; Colossians 3:12-14.

<sup>2</sup> Neil T. Anderson The Bondage Breaker (Eugene OR: Harvest House ) 1993, p.196.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis chapters 37-50.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 2:24.

several years. Involvement with youth takes many forms. There is chronological Bible storying with rap and hip-hop music, for instance, where the divine message is shared in simplicity. We include the message of forgiveness shared above. It is able to be heard and understood by the youth on the streets of the city. There are conferences held for rival gangs to come together on one conference ground. They learn that peace is possible when the Prince of Peace is present and at the head of the programme. Weekly youth recreation like football and classes to learn English, with other forms of training, are all saying to the youth that they are important to the Lord. Youth know there are people who love them and want them to choose another life path besides the one involving violence arising out of heart of non-forgiveness.<sup>6</sup> The hearts of these youth are full of pain. This drew us to serve alongside Andrew to help in anyway possible.<sup>7</sup>

Gangs were born here partially as the result of the terrible experiences of their families in Southern Sudan added to the inescapable experiences of discrimination against darker-skinned people living in North Africa. There are negative stereotypes regarding who the Sudanese are which affect how they are treated. There is much for the refugees to be angry about, so forgiveness must become a vital part of their way of life.

As many peoples have learned while they have dealt with their experience of suffering injustice at the hands of others, and as Andrew put it, forgiveness is as an act of the will not the feelings.<sup>8</sup> Forgive or "join evil." Some have expressed this in this way. If we do not forgive we become like the ones who are doing evil against us.<sup>9</sup>

A young Dinka man told me how his mother was taken into the hospital for a supposedly necessary surgery. He said that when the surgery was finished, it was discovered that her kidney had been removed "unnecessarily". After this, and as a result of this, she died. The anger and pain he felt from this experience, now several years past, still remain as an issue

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>8</sup> Colossians 3:13.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-5, especially verse 3; Psalm 130:3-4.

for my friend. He deals with this by his music and by the input he receives from the Bible stories. Now he has just left to return to his home area in Dinka land.

This kind of pain and evil cannot be met or coped with in our human strength alone. I work with the Dinka in the city every week and have been so deeply impressed by their community and spiritual lives. Yet the power to forgive is not found in any people apart from Jesus Christ living in our hearts empowering us to forgive.<sup>10</sup>

This young Dinka man appreciated so much the story of Cain and Abel. God had warned Cain about the danger of anger. But Cain did not listen and murdered his brother, the first murder in human history.<sup>11</sup> My friend also learned from the comments in the youth group as we processed this story. We dare not follow the path of Cain, jealousy—hatred—murder. This dangerous progression of sin is possible in any heart.

Yet there is an opposite path just as real and just as possible *by our choice*. Prayer for the enemy or person sinning against us—forgiveness—love. The choice is ours.<sup>12</sup> The will is the strongest part of our being as God has made us. Body, soul, and spirit, we are composed to reflect our triune God. And in our souls we are mind, emotions and will. The power of the Spirit of God is released into the level of the will *as we chose and yield*. This eliminates striving or depending on our weak humanity for God-sized tasks like forgiving people who knife us, or who take our own mother's life by treachery. Only God in us can empower us to respond with these beautiful attitudes. It is simply not in us to forgive like this.<sup>13</sup>

Within the past few years, another group of people from Sudan have joined the other tens and hundreds of thousands of refugees from Sudan in North Africa. They are from Darfur. And for some, they have found that there is no way to remain loyal to a religious ideology that allows what they have borne—systematic extermination of their people and theft of all that is theirs by people from another ethnic group. Some have come into a relationship with the God

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<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 4:1-16.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:43-45.

<sup>13</sup> Philippians 2:12-13.

of love. And for them as well, the path is exactly the same. Prayer—forgiveness—love, not anger-hatred-revenge. There is no other choice.

On the level of government and military organisation for defence, there is Romans 13:1-5 to consider. It states that the sword is to be used rightly for justice—not injustice. Where there is gross injustice, in this kind of political situation, it may be that defence of and reorganisation of a people for survival may be necessary. But on the level of the individual disciple, and in day to day life, all that is shared here is the only path to internal peace. Jesus is the role-model. He asks his followers to forgive as He forgave.<sup>14</sup>

### **Personal Experience in Sudan**

God had put it on our hearts for years to pray for Sudan. Serving in another country of Africa at the time we had rallied our believers to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters, and they had joyfully and zealously risen to the occasion by prayer. Never did we imagine we would actually set foot in Sudan ourselves.

But two years after watching busloads of Sudanese refugees go past our home and having the privilege of serving them in their camp, the day came to enter Sudan.

Yet after four short months there, the very brothers who we had begun to love and serve betrayed us. Suddenly we found ourselves without the required letter of invitation for our Sudanese visas. We felt displaced as a result, and ended up like Joseph in Egypt involuntarily.

God in his grace opened new vistas of work for us. God's mercy we were not anticipating flooded our lives. Within days of arriving we visited an N.G.O. ministry working with refugees. As we walked in the gate the huge courtyard was filled with Sudanese. We were

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 11:25; Matthew 6:12-15.

welcomed into the director's offices shortly after this. The invitation to work together opened the widest of doors to us. We were given back our chance to love and work with Sudanese.

Opportunities to work with Dinka youth and Darfur peoples all came our way. As Joseph told his brothers in Egypt, "What was intended by the enemy for one thing was turned around by God for quite another".<sup>15</sup> Joseph's words and Andrew's very similar words were proven true in our own lives and experience. God intended it all for good. We have forgiven our brothers who betrayed us and we are at peace. It is true for us, as Andrew once said, "There is nothing—all is normal again in relationships".

My brother or sister from Sudan, if you are not at peace as you read these stories of forgiveness, and if something is stirred up in you—may I encourage you to walk with Jesus down the path of forgiveness. It truly leads to peace and it turns on the flow of love. It revives the life of prayer we all need so desperately.<sup>16</sup>

Cain, Joseph's brothers, gang members in a dark alley in the city waiting for a rival gang member, church leaders needing affirmation, and many, many others have chosen a path that is evil and sinful. They keep hold of anger, hatred, bitterness, looking for the chance of revenge. The Lord offers to them something more powerful following his own humility and self-less love. We need to say to those who offend us, "I accept to bear the consequences of your sin". They may never actually hear those words come out of our mouths, but Jesus does! He hears and knows our hearts. When we walk down this path we will never be alone. Our Lord Jesus is in front of us, walking beside us, and He is with us all along the way.<sup>17</sup>

## **Discussion guide**

*Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:*

1. Share why you find it hard to forgive someone who has wronged you.

"Forgiveness is a God-sized task". True or false? Why?

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 50:20.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 66:18-20.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 28:18-20; John 14:15-21.

2. Describe the battle a person goes through in choosing to forgive someone.

Why is it a battle? Is this good or bad?

3. Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14-15 follow Him giving "The Lord's prayer", verses 9-13.

Why do you think He explains verse 12, forgiveness, and not the other themes?

4. Explain what it means to "accept on yourself the consequences of another's sin".

Why should a Christian do this?

Illustrate the phrase (in question 4) from the lives of Joseph and the Lord Jesus.

Genesis 37-50; Luke 23:34.

5. What are some of the results of not offering forgiveness?

Matthew 6:14-15; Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 6:35-37; Luke 17:1-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

6. Why is forgiveness an act of the will and not feelings?

Colossians 3:13 gives a governing principle. What is it?