



BRF Lent Book

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R.T. Kendall

The
Living **Cross**
Exploring God's gift of forgiveness and new life

Amy Boucher Pye
Foreword by Richard Chartres

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Exploring God's gift of forgiveness and new life

Amy Boucher Pye



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Foreword

How many times have we said those familiar words as our Lord has commanded and taught us: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'? Christ's message of forgiveness and reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. His finished work upon the cross signals a new relationship with God and with one another, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

These 47 reflections carry us from Ash Wednesday and the fall in the garden of Eden, to Easter Day and the commissioning of a forgiven Peter. The stories and illustrations bring home the message of hope and of a forgiving God who so loved the world that he was generous and gave himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Again and again, as Amy Boucher Pye takes us through scripture and the experiences of the saints of God, she reminds us that Jesus comes to us just as we are. The Spirit of God searches us and knows us better than we know ourselves, and accepts us, as we are, behind the various disguises that we wear. The apostle Paul rejoices that by the grace of God we are 'accepted in the Beloved'. That is why, at confirmation, we are anointed, as ancient kings and priests were anointed, with the oil of gladness and the words, 'Shine in the world as one of God's chosen ones, beloved and accepted in Jesus Christ our Lord.'

I trust and pray that you will have a blessed and holy Lent and that as you follow our Lord through the steps of his passion, you may come to rejoice with all the saints who find the living cross none other than the gate of heaven.

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Remember us, O God, and shape our history,
form our inward eyes
to see the shadow of the life-giving cross
in the turbulence of our time;
for his sake who died for all,
Christ our Lord.

Common Worship Psalm 136, prayer of response

The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dr Richard Chartres, Bishop of London

Introduction

The gift of forgiveness

The extraordinary scene, recounted years later by a then Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, captures our attention:

‘I know,’ muttered the sick man, ‘that at this moment thousands of men are dying. Death is everywhere. It is neither infrequent nor extraordinary. I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. Otherwise I cannot die in peace.’¹

Speaking was an SS officer to the prisoner, who had been made to work near the hospital where the officer lay dying and had been summoned into the sickroom, not knowing why. The man with a bandaged head breathed with a rattle and said that he had to speak of something dreadful and inhuman. ‘I must tell you of this horrible deed—tell you because... you are a Jew.’

The prisoner didn’t know what to think, wondering if this was a trap or if the German soldiers for whom he was working would realise he had left his post and punish him accordingly. He longed to leave the room, sitting ‘like a cat on hot bricks’ as he tried to release his hand from the officer’s. Several times he tried to leave, but the officer asked him to stay as he detailed how he had volunteered for the Hitler Youth and had become involved in the SS.

Then the dying man started to share about the deed weighing on his conscience. He and some other soldiers had been ordered to gather up some 200 Jewish people into a small house. Once they had herded them into this dwelling, the soldiers were ordered to throw grenades in through the open windows: ‘We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor...’

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The story was all too familiar to the prisoner, a man who had become immune to death as he witnessed it daily. Still, he felt horror at the officer's words and tried to leave, but again the officer begged him to stay, saying:

I cannot die... without coming clean. This must be my confession... I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him... I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.

The prisoner writes:

What a contrast between the glorious sunshine outside and the showdown of this bestial age here in the death chamber! Here lay a man in bed who wished to die in peace—but he could not, because the memory of his terrible crime gave him no rest. And by him sat a man also doomed to die—but who did not want to die because he yearned to see the end of all the horror that blighted the world.

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction... At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

The prisoner wasn't able or willing to forgive, but afterwards he couldn't stop wondering if he should have done. His friends in the camp had differing opinions, and he ends his book by asking the provocative question, 'What would you have done?'

We'll look at the answer to that question this Lent in varying forms as we explore the gift of forgiveness, and how at the cross of Christ we can

find freedom and new life. As we ponder the question of whether or not we can forgive, we realise that forgiveness itself is radical: not everyone avails themselves of this gift. But through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross we can be free, for no longer does sin need to cloud our lives and twist our relationships.

Christians have been so schooled in the idea of forgiveness—it is, after all, a basic tenet of our faith—that we can become complacent. Through negligence or disuse we may avoid modelling forgiveness to our neighbour and become weighed down by the arguments, recriminations and hurts we inflict and receive. But God through his Son and Spirit wants to release us from an enslavement to sin, hurt and bitterness.

Lent is traditionally a time of self-examination and thus an opportune moment to delve into God's stories of forgiveness. As we move from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day we will engage with biblical characters from both the Old Testament and the New, as well as modern-day accounts of sin and forgiveness.² Through the reading, reflection, prayers and exercises, I hope we will come to understand not only in our heads but in our hearts the profound gift we have received by Jesus' death. We will come to see the living power of the cross, at which we exchange our hurtful thoughts and actions for God's love, grace and forgiveness.

Each day we engage with scripture before finishing with a prayer, and for each week I've included some questions for reflection and discussion and several practical spiritual exercises to help bring the scriptures alive. The exercises have been created with the individual in mind, but they can be adapted for use in small groups. Note that you may wish to skip ahead to the exercises during the week, and also note that the first exercise, where we come to the living cross for forgiveness and release, can be practised fruitfully throughout Lent.

The six weeks (plus the four days from Ash Wednesday to Saturday) have been equally divided between the Old and the New Testaments. We start, in our extended Week 1, with the founders of our faith—fallen

heroes such as Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. We begin with God's creation and the quick fall of humanity into sin and death, after which the world is never the same. But the Lord loves his people and promises through the covenant that he will always be their God. The number of times they fail reveals their need for forgiveness.

In Week 2 we move to the kings, flawed but forgiven. The prophet Samuel anoints the first king, Saul, who turns out not to be the kind of king the Lord intends. Then of course comes David, someone the Lord calls a man after his own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), but a man who sins terribly. In Week 3 we look at the prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Hosea. We see how they call God's people back to him through his message of judgement and mercy.

Halfway through Lent, in Week 4, we encounter Jesus, who preaches his radical message of forgiveness as he heals the sick and drives out demons. We see how his message divides the people and the religious leaders, but he is not deterred. We save the world-altering climax of Jesus' passion for Holy Week, so in Week 5 we jump ahead to the early church. We see a changed man in Peter, who at Pentecost preaches boldly to the thousands gathered, as well as Stephen, who later gives his eloquent testimony before being stoned to death. Saul's conversion is equally astonishing, as well as his teaching in his letters. He lives the rest of his days as an embodied example of one who is forgiven and free.

Then during Holy Week we return to Jesus and the momentous events from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday. That a man who was God would come to live as one of us and bear our sins to be the complete sacrifice boggles our minds and strikes love and gratitude into our hearts. On his cross he ushers in forgiveness and new life.

Before we delve into the readings, I leave you with a quotation that sums up our living cross. It's been attributed to St John Chrysostom, but was probably written by an unknown preacher in the fifth century:

This Tree is my eternal salvation. It is my nourishment and my banquet. Amidst its roots I cast my own roots deep: beneath its boughs I grow and expand, revelling in its sigh as in the wind itself. Flying from the burning heat, I have pitched my tent in its shadow, and have found a resting-place of dewy freshness. I flower with its flowers; its fruits bring perfect joy—fruits which have been preserved for me since time's beginning, and which now I freely eat. This Tree is a food, sweet food, for my hunger, and a fountain for my thirst; it is a clothing for my nakedness; its leaves are the breath of life. Away with the fig-tree, from this time on! If I fear God, this is my protection; if I stumble, this is my support; it is the prize for which I fight and the reward of my victory. This is my straitened path, my narrow way; this is the stairway of Jacob, where angels pass up and down, and where the Lord in very truth stands at the head.

This Tree, vast as heaven itself, rises from earth to the skies, a plant immortal, set firm in the midst of heaven and earth, base of all that is, foundation of the universe, support of this world of men, binding-force of all creation, holding within itself all the mysterious essence of man. Secured with the unseen clamps of the spirit, so that, adjusted to the Divine, it may never bend or warp, with foot resting firm on earth it towers to the topmost skies, and spans with its all-embracing arms the boundless gulf of space between.³

May we find forgiveness and new life at the foot of the living cross.

Monday

Tearful reunion

Then Jacob prayed, ‘O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, “Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper;” I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, “I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.”’...

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

GENESIS 32:9–12; 33:1–4

When I saw her, I burst into tears. I was weary, for the flight had been long and I was laden with luggage and my young children. To my delight, not only were my parents waiting for me at baggage claim, but my sister had flown in as well.

‘You came!’ I said.

‘Yes, I found a cheap flight and thought it would be fun to surprise you.’

Surprise me she did. The week was an unexpected gift, for not only were we given a lovely beachside apartment to enjoy, but I had three

family members with me whom I don't get to see often or share my children with. Our reunion was tearful in a good way.

Going back a few millennia, Jacob isn't sure how his meeting with his brother will turn out. As we saw yesterday, Jacob is right to be concerned, for he had to flee from Esau or be killed. Now that 20 years have passed since his deception of Esau, Jacob hears from the Lord that it is time to return to Canaan. He plots and prepares for the meeting, seeking ways to soften Esau's reaction, such as sending along gifts of livestock. Then the night before they meet, Jacob experiences an unexpected encounter with the Lord, in which he wrestles with God, finally coming to the end of himself and his self-sufficiency. He receives a new name, Israel, signifying a change in character. No longer will he be known as someone who deceives. (The full story can be found in Genesis 32–33.)

So it's a different man who meets with Esau the next day, and amazingly we witness a joyful, tearful reunion. Jacob bows down to Esau, humbling himself before him, signifying that he no longer lords the stolen birthright and blessings over him. In a move filled with grace, Esau responds with an embrace, and though wrongs have been committed in the past, forgiveness is extended as the two are reconciled.

As I read the story, I think of King David's song to the Lord in which he says, 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' (Psalm 133:1). Indeed, how good it is for Esau and Jacob to be reconciled, and for Jacob to submit to the Lord, acknowledging that God is God and he is not.

When we read this story, we might do so with a heavy heart, being mired in conflict with our siblings or those who are as close as a sister or brother. We might lack the hope that healing and reconciliation can occur in our situation. But we can ask God to give us the gift of faith, that we might pray for him to work a miracle in our lives, bringing peace and love to those who have been estranged. It may take some time,

humility and maybe even the showering of gifts, as we see in the case of Jacob and Esau, but the Lord has a full stock of resources for us to access as we usher in his kingdom.

If you're feeling trapped or hopeless, may the Lord give you the gift of hope today, and may he work through you as an agent of peace, love and change.

Prayer

Lord God, Jacob received a new name when finally he fell down before you. No longer would he be known as a deceiver, but as someone who wrestled with you. I rejoice that peace came to that family as he and Esau abandoned their fight. And so before you I set the situations I'm concerned about, asking that you would work your freeing power. I think of warring factions among nations that have roots going down through the generations; Lord, have mercy. For those issues closer to home, which might cut to the heart and tie me up inside, Christ, have mercy. Thank you, Father God, that you are the Lord who makes all things new, and that you have the power to bring change and hope. Please bring about more tearful reunions of the good sort.

Saturday

The unforgiving servant

‘Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

‘At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

‘But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.

‘His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.”

‘But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt...

‘Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

‘This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

MATTHEW 18:23–30, 32–35

An acclaimed biblical scholar is not someone I would imagine as harbouring thoughts of killing his stepfather. But in a commentary on Matthew’s Gospel, Michael Wilkins shares how, when he was a soldier

in Vietnam, he became obsessed with the thought of inflicting revenge on the man who had caused his family great pain when he was growing up. He vowed that he would 'make him pay' for what he had done to his family.⁴¹

When Michael later became a Christian, however, he put vengeful thoughts out of his mind. Yet one day, four years later, his stepfather reappeared in his life. While sitting together in their living-room, Michael said, 'I made a vow in Vietnam that the first time I saw you, I would kill you. Today is that day.' As he witnessed the sweat pour off the older man, he continued, 'But I know now that I'm no better a person than you. God has forgiven me. And if he can forgive a sinner like me, I can forgive you. I will not allow you to hurt my family again, so don't think that this is made out of weakness. Rather, I forgive you because I have been forgiven.'⁴²

What a stunning response, fuelled with emotion and extending mercy while not excusing the sins of the past! This biblical commentator reveals his humility in the reflections that follow the story, sharing how surprised he was to have made this offer of forgiveness to his stepfather, while also knowing that it came out of his transformation in Christ. As he says:

My vow had been the rash, irresponsible reaction of a deeply hurt, bitter young sinner. However, my ability later to forgive came from the eternal, loving act of grace in Jesus' sacrifice for my sin. I discovered that the key to forgiveness is to stop focusing on what others have done *to us* and focus instead on what Jesus has done *for us*.⁴³

Michael's story illustrates the parable of the unforgiving servant, for this academic didn't want to resemble the servant who enjoyed the release of debts of several billion (roughly, in today's terms) but who wouldn't release the debts of another who only owed a few thousand. Jesus tells the parable after Peter asks him how many times one should forgive someone in the community. The Old Testament (in books such

as Amos and Job) teaches that to forgive three times is enough to show mercy, so Peter goes above the requirement of the law with his suggestion of seven times. But Jesus, reiterating God's great love for his people, expands the answer of how many times one should forgive, to a number that seems limitless. Because God has forgiven our sins, we too should welcome the sinner back into the community and extend forgiveness to them.

The parable we've read today shows an opposite response to the lived-out parable of the 'sinful' woman that we read yesterday. Whereas she responds with tears and gifts, the servant in the parable shows no mercy. Rather than being transformed by God, this man hardens his heart and resists God's love. Jesus' pronouncement on his fate is stark, saying that the master hands him over to the jailers to be tortured, and that his listeners too will be treated this way by his heavenly Father unless they forgive their brothers and sisters from the heart.

In a day and age when we don't like to hear pronouncements of eternal torture, neither can we wish away the biblical text. It's for each of us to examine our own heart, trusting the Lord through his Spirit to reveal any hidden sins or vows of unforgiveness. Then if we are presented with a situation like that of the academic and his stepfather, we too can extend the gift of forgiveness.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you explode our categories of thought and belief. I may think I'm being gracious in forgiving seven times instead of the required three. But you tell me to forgive 77 times, because I have been forgiven so greatly. Help me to remember just how much I need your grace in my life, or soon I will become like the unforgiving servant, holding the wrongs of others over their heads while I ignore the great release from sins that you have bestowed on me. May I live out the grace you extend to me, that others might know your love through my life.

Explore the freeing, life-changing nature of forgiveness...

As we move from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, daily reflections and prayers help us to experience the living power of the cross of Christ through biblical and modern-day stories of wrongdoing and forgiveness.

'This is quite the best of all the Lent books I've ever read. I just loved the way Amy takes us through the Bible, revealing God's forgiving heart and his burning desire that we should forgive one another.' Jennifer Rees Larcombe, *Journey into God's Heart*

'Few topics are more central to the Christian life—and life in general—than forgiveness. Combining deep insight and practical exercises, *The Living Cross* will help you live free from offences both committed and suffered.' Sheridan Voysey, *Resurrection Year*

'A fresh approach to a timeless necessity to remain healthy as a child of God.' Russ Parker, *Forgiveness Is Healing*



Amy Boucher Pye is a writer and speaker, and the author of *Finding Myself in Britain* (Authentic Media, 2015). She runs the *Woman Alive* Book Club and enjoys writing Bible reading notes. Find her at amyboucherpye.com.



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