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October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month

by **Yvonne DeVaughn**

For many individuals who are or have been victims of domestic violence, the mere fact that there are advertisements, events, and highlights on victims and their stories can create instances of remembering or recognizing their plight, which can create great angst, sorrow or anger. Because I am a CSA (childhood sexual assault) survivor I recognize how long and arduous the road to recovery can be. It is not for the faint of heart and listening to the stories of survivors of domestic violence as they recount the events of physical, verbal, sexual, spiritual and psychological pain can be extremely sorrowful, painful and heartbreaking.

One of the biggest struggles for so many survivors is how to forgive their perpetrators. I can certainly relate to this issue for my perpetrator was a family member who I interacted with until they died. Thankfully, I have come to terms with the issue of forgiveness and in this edition have asked a guest writer to deal with the topic of forgiveness. I think you will find her article extremely helpful and biblical.

If you are interested in bringing awareness to Domestic Violence during the month of October there are some great ideas listed on the AVA website at CovChurch.org/abuse.

Your voice to one person may be just what they need to begin a journey of healing.

Blessings,

Yvonne DeVaughn
AVA Director

A Place for Forgiveness in the Context of Abuse and Violence

by **Carnell L. Cherry, J.D., M.Div.**

Forgiveness is a concept that has been thrown around far too easily and too often. It has increasingly become expected that forgiveness will be granted quickly and immediately in the wake of tragedy or wrongdoing.

Forgiveness may be simple when someone bumps into one's chair or in response to some other small slight. But what is the nature and substance of biblical notions of forgiveness, particularly in the context of repeated or prolonged abuse and violence? Even more, what is the nature of forgiveness when one's abuser or perpetrator lives down the street, or next door, or even in one's own home? What should forgiveness look like then? What shape should forgiveness take? How does one engage in forgiveness in these contexts? Moreover, where are the places for accountability, justice, and the setting up of healthy boundaries within the environment of forgiveness? Ultimately, forgiveness can be understood to be a process. More specifically, forgiveness is a process that is particular to the persons and the predicament involved.



Scripture depicts a variety of types or modes of forgiveness. In Psalm 32, for instance, three different terms are used to denote forgiveness, thereby demonstrating the gamut or totality of forgiveness. *How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.* Psalm 32:1-2. The word for forgiven in verse 1 has the sense of lifting or carrying as a mode of forgiveness. There is also covering and not imputing as two other forms that forgiveness takes. In this psalm, it is God, rather than a human being, who is demonstrating forgiveness, and forgiveness follows the breaking of silence and the confession or acknowledging of the sin. Yet, as Mignon Jacobs indicates in her article *Sin, Silence, Suffering, and Confession in the Conceptual Landscape of Psalm 32*, none of the modes of forgiveness results in the denial of the sin. Whether lifted, covered, or not imputed, the wrongdoings are addressed. Furthermore, verses 3 and 4 characterize God as one who forgives, yet punishes (*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.* Psalm 32:3-4). We similarly see in 2 Samuel 12, regarding God's response to David's sexual violation of Bathsheba and his confession, that the granting of forgiveness and the taking away of sin does not necessarily preclude the imposition of negative consequences upon the wrongdoer (*Then David said to Nathan, 'I have*

sinned against the LORD.’ And Nathan said to David, ‘The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.’ 2 Samuel 12:13-14). Additionally, in some instances we are instructed to forgive others seemingly without qualification just as God has forgiven us (see Mark 11:25; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13), while in other instances forgiveness appears to be contingent upon, or at least tied to, repentance by the perpetrator (see Luke 17:3). This variance in Scripture may attest to the fact that, not only does forgiveness take many shapes, but repentance may not always be forthcoming, and thus forgiveness cannot be made entirely dependent upon it.



Forgiveness then is, in a sense, absorbing or carrying the wrongdoing and the harm caused by the wrongdoing, yet choosing not to retaliate against one's abuser. David Ausburger refers to this as "rejecting vengeance," which he believes is most meaningfully done when one is angry. This is different from blaming oneself for the wrong committed by one's abuser or for the harm resulting from the wrongdoing. It is also different from a call to forever carry the burden of the transgressions. Instead, this absorbing and carrying the wrong is only done from a place of knowledge, understanding, and clarity that the wrong committed is certainly not one's fault and the abused bears no responsibility for the perpetrator's action. They did not cause the abuse. Rather, the actions of the abuser are completely the abuser's

own. Furthermore, absorbing or carrying the wrong certainly does not mean that one should not condemn the wrong, or that the abuser or perpetrator should not be held accountable. In fact, a key part of forgiveness is naming, acknowledging, and condemning the abuse, and holding the abuser accountable for their cruelty. So forgiveness does not negate accountability on the part of the abuser. Forgiveness also does not negate seeking justice; at least to the extent such justice is possible in this life and through the inherently flawed systems currently available.



Notably, forgiveness is not contingent upon the abuser's or perpetrator's repentance, that is, completion of the process of repentance. Forgiveness also does not require the abuser acknowledge the wrong they committed or the harm they caused. Many abuse survivors will never receive such acknowledgement by their abuser. It is reconciliation that requires repentance. The abused working through the process of forgiveness and the abuser working through the process of repentance are both necessary for reconciliation to occur. There is need for a distinction to be made between forgiveness and reconciliation, so that the two concepts are not treated as one and the same. Steven Tracy notes in his book *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* that harmful understandings of forgiveness arise when one conflates forgiveness, trust, and reconciliation, and when one eliminates the

possibility of there being negative consequences for the abuser. Regrettably, reconciliation may not always be possible between the survivor and their abuser, and it may never happen fully. Instead, as a part of reconciliation, clear and healthy boundaries need to be developed for the physical, emotional and psychological safety of the survivor. As Ausburger helpfully observes, forgiveness does not and is not intended to restore a relationship to its former state. The injury inevitably changes the relationship. Instead, in the context of abuse, as Ausburger states in his interview for *The F Word: Forgiveness and Its Imitations*, forgiveness involves “crafting a new relationship with a level of intimacy appropriate to [one’s] level of trust.” The relationship and interactions between the survivor and their abuser take on a new shape, inevitably different from the relationship and interactions in the past. The relationship can never be the same, as abuse and violence sever the relationship as it once was and severely damage the prior relationship dynamics, so that the reestablished relationship must occur on new terms.

Please note, all Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

**AVA (Advocacy for Victims of Abuse) is an initiative of
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