



THE FINAL “DONG”—*Forgiveness is not an emotion*

Forgiveness is a struggle for all of us at one time or another in our lives. Perhaps one of the greatest stories of forgiveness is an experience Corrie ten Boom, author of [The Hiding Place](#), had after she was released from the concentration camp.

It was in a church in Munich, in 1947, and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture: “When we confess our sins,” I said, “God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.”

And that’s when I saw him, working his way toward me. It all came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form

ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, *fräulein*! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein*”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, stood there. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But *forgiveness is not an emotion.* Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Lord, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. *I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.*

I wish I could say that, having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving, and that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn’t.

I recall the time, some years ago, when some close friends whom I loved and trusted, did something which hurt me. You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child’s play. It wasn’t. For weeks I seethed inside. But at last I asked God again to work His miracle in me. And again it happened: *first the cold-blooded decision, then the flood of joy and peace.*

I had forgiven my friends; I was restored to my Father.

Then, why was I suddenly awake in the middle of the night, hashing over the whole affair again? My *friends!* I thought. *People I loved!* If it had been strangers, I wouldn’t have minded so. I sat up and switched on the light. “Father, I thought it was all forgiven! Please help me do it!”

But the next night I woke up again. They’d talked so sweetly too! Never a hint of what they were planning. “Father!” I cried in alarm. “Help me!” His help came in the form of a kindly pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.

“Up in that church tower,” he said, nodding out the window, “is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First *ding* then *dong*. Slower and slower until there’s a final *dong* and it stops.

“I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.”

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.

“Forgive us our trespasses,” Jesus taught us to pray, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” When we bring our sins to the Lord, He not only forgives them, He makes them as if they had never been.

Who is causing your suffering? Have friends seen your misfortune and forsaken you? Are relatives trying to do you out of your property, a legacy, or something that they owe you? Have people railed at you in the heat of an argument? Have others simply stood beholding your pain and doing nothing to help? Whom do you need to forgive today?