**Women’s Ministries Emphasis Day**

**June 11, 2016**

“Are You Thirsty for Living Water?”

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Dear Sister-Leaders,

Joyful greetings. Have you ever been thirsty? I mean really, really thirsty. When all you could think about was a glass of cool water. Sometimes when I travel and we are driving hours from one location to another, I get so thirsty. Especially if the weather is hot. Then all I can think about is that when I arrive I will drink, and drink, and drink all the water I can find. The thought of quenching my thirst seems to be all I can think about.

Now think about a time when life’s trials were overwhelming. Maybe it was one trial that consumed your waking hours and even disturbed your sleep. Imagine someone came and offered you peace in the middle of the storm, courage to face whatever life brings, joy that would strengthen your day? Would you not desire such help as much as a thirsty man longs for water?

This year our theme for WM Emphasis Day is “Are You Thirsting for Living Water?” We know from that well-known story in John 4 that only Jesus Christ has the water we need to quench our souls desire for comfort, peace, strength, courage, faith, joy, and so much more. So this year we invite you to come to our Savior for He says, “For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground” (Isaiah 44:3). Come my sister, come.



Heather-Dawn Small, GCWM Director

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# About the Author

Born in Russia, Galina Stele has served the church in various capacities, including as a professor of theology at Zaoksky Theological Seminary (Russia); coordinator and general editor of Shepherdess and Living Church for the Euro-Asia Division; and director of the Euro-Asia Division’s Institute of Missiology.

In 1996 she was the first woman to graduate with a doctorate of ministry (D.Min.) from Andrews University.

A widely published author, Stele joined the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research in 2012 as the Research and Program Evaluation Assistant and became Research and Evaluation Manager in late 2015.

Stele uses the New International Version for all biblical references.

# Order of Divine Service

**“Are You Thirsty for Living Water?”**

*2016 Women’s Ministries Emphasis Day Packet*

Call to worship:

Opening song:

Invocation: Speaker

Scripture reading:

Pastoral prayer:

Call for the offering:

Offertory music:

Special music:

Sermon: “Are You Thirsty for Living Water?”

Closing Song:

Closing Prayer:

Song of Hope: congregation

# Scripture Reading

*From John 4, 7*

So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

**Jacob’s well was there, and** **Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.**

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water**,** Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into town to buy food.)

**The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)**

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and He would have given you living water.”

**“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”**

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst again. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

**The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”**

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

**“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.**

# Sermon: Are You Thirsty for Living Water?

“Are You Thirsty for Living Water?”

By Galina Stele

*“If anybody is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37).*

**Introduction**

Do you know how long people can live without food or water? Some say people can live 40 days without food but only 3 or 4 days without water. If one survives longer without water, it is considered a miracle. One such miracle was a Haiti earthquake survivor, Evans Monsignac. He was 27 years of age when the terrible earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010. A father of two children, and a struggling rice seller in a poor Haitian market, he left for his job as usual on that day. Everything seemed normal until he saw buildings in the market start to collapse. The walls fell on his right and left, preventing his escape. People were screaming around him, and everything was terrifying, especially when a piece of concrete fell toward his face. Then something unexplainable happened; he felt like someone came in and pulled the piece back. Evans was trapped in darkness. He was able to breathe but was afraid to move and perhaps injure himself or cause further movement of the cement. During the first day, he heard people screaming, but gradually the cries died out and it became eerily silent.

When he was finally pulled from the devastation, the rescue team reckoned he had been trapped there for 27 days without food or water, although he did not know how long he had been there. He lost the perception of time, falling into unconsciousness from time to time. He lost 60 pounds (27 kilograms) and was only 88 pounds (40 kilograms), when he was rescued and eventually brought to Tampa General Hospital in Florida. He was the longest-ever earthquake and without-water survivor. People thought that he probably had access to water or some food during the time of his terrible imprisonment. “No,” he said. But he had the access to sewage water that he noticed on his second or third day. He tried to taste it, but it made him sick in his stomach, so he dipped his little finger in it and wet his lips and tried to swallow it. It was very disgusting and made him sicker as time went on. Did this help him to survive? It is hard to say. He himself gave credit to God for his survival when he was telling his story. “I was resigned to death,” he said, “but God gave me life. The fact that I'm alive today isn't because of me; it's because of the grace of God. It's a miracle; I can't explain it….Now I know I must live life to the best I can each day."[[1]](#footnote-1)

This story reminded me that we all meet different kinds of disaster in our lives. When a crisis comes, we are tested for our spiritual survival. At the time of crisis, we all are thirsty, not only for the immediate satisfaction of physical needs but also for another kind of water. We long for the water that can refresh us when our lives are falling apart, the water that can sustain us when all hope has been buried, the water that can help us live beyond fear of death. This water is so essential that sometimes the need even surpasses our need for physical water.

Many cultures express this desire to have living water in their folk epics, legends, and fairy tales. The heroes in these narratives went for long journeys to get this kind of water, they sacrificed, and they fought for it. It was believed that the one who got it would be unbeatable, powerful, and immortal.

Interestingly, the Bible also addresses this kind of human need and our thirstiness for this kind of water. In spiritual terms, there is no need for us to become the longest-ever without living water survivors. And God does not want us to feed ourselves with sewage water. He has shown us the source of fresh and living water. We don’t need to pay for it; living water from Jesus is free and available for all who are thirsty today, for all who are prospering or are in crisis. God only desires to see us coming for it regularly each day since it is essential for our spiritual well-being and survival.

**Bible Texts and Message**

Let us look more closely at one such Bible passage where living water is mentioned ina John 7:37-39: *“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anybody is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.”*

 Do you know the context of the passage when Jesus said these well-known words? It was in the Jerusalem temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the most beautiful and loved holidays in the Jewish nation. It was the last of the main big holidays of the year and fell at the time when the harvest was gathered and people had the opportunity to rest and reflect on all the blessings that God bestowed on them. During seven days of the holiday, they lived in the booths made from tree branches, and the whole of Jerusalem looked like a green forest. The green booths “were erected in the streets, in the courts of the temple, or on the housetops.” And even “the hills and valleys surrounding Jerusalem were also dotted with these leafy dwellings, and seemed to be alive with people” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 448).

The Feast of Tabernacles played several functions for people of Israel:

1. First of all, it was a time of **gratitude**. During these days, people thanked the Lord for His care and blessings in the past and present. They remembered how He protected the people of Israel and cared for them during their journey to the Promised Land. Their clothes and shoes were not worn out, and God’s manna fell from above each day to feed them (Deut. 8:3-4). And now when the harvest was gathered, they had an opportunity to express their gratitude for God’s care and blessings during the last year by bringing some goods of the harvest to the Lord as a token of gratitude. These offerings pointed to the main source of their blessings. Of course, some years were more fruitful than others, but the annual Feast of Tabernacles suggested that in spite of quantity of the harvest, in spite of the expectations, in spite of rich or poor harvest of their neighbors, people would go to the Lord and thank Him for the goods they received. Additionally, the Feast of Tabernacles was also a sign of their trust in the Lord, their faith that He would continue to protect and care for them in the future.
2. The Feast of Tabernacles also had another characteristic. It was a **universal gathering** of the people of God. All—young and old, rich and poor, living in the north, south, east, and west, inside or abroad—were to come to Jerusalem and reunite again with the people of God. Thus, people from all corners of Palestine and from the countries of their current dwelling were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate together the Feast of Tabernacles. This also was a symbol of heavenly gathering, the future Feast of Tabernacles, when all the redeemed will be gathered on the glass sea—there will be place for all—rich and poor, young and old, from the west and east, north and south. They all will be equally precious and welcome in that heavenly Promised Land.
3. The Feast of Tabernacles was also a symbol of the **temporal character** **of their life** on this earth. The days and nights in the booths during this beautiful holiday were to remind them about their life in the wilderness, and even more importantly, to point out that they were still on their journey to the heavenly Promised Land, that even now they were not home yet. The annual regularity of the Feast of Tabernacles was to remind them again and again that this earth was not a point of their destination; the journey was to continue until they meet their Savior face to face.
4. The Feast of Tabernacles was a holiday filled with **peace**, **joy, and beauty**. By God’s grace and wisdom, the Day of Atonement was scheduled to precede rather than follow it. And at the Feast of Tabernacles people already felt forgiven and at peace with the Lord. This allowed them to enjoy the holiday fully and express their joy and gratitude to the Lord because there were no obstacles to their rejoicing. They could enjoy everything, especially their relationships with the Lord and with each other.

 This important dimension of being at peace with the Lord and rejoicing in His presence found its expression in beautiful ceremonies and praises to the Lord. As Ellen White described it:

“The temple was the center of universal joy. Here was the pomp of the sacrificial ceremonies. Here, ranged on either side of the white marble steps of the sacred building, the choir of Levites led the service of song. The multitude of worshipers, waving their branches of palm and myrtle, took up the strain, and echoed the chorus; and again the melody was caught up by voices near and afar off, till the encircling hills were vocal with praise. At night the temple and its court blazed with artificial light. The music, the waving of palm branches, the glad hosannas, the great concourse of people, over whom the light streamed from the hanging lamps, the array of the priests, and the majesty of the ceremonies, combined to make a scene that deeply impressed the beholders” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 448).

 The beauty of the holiday filled with music, songs, Levite choir, temple ceremonies, palm and willow branches, and so forth, pointed to the beauty, harmony, and joy that the presence of the Lord could bring in the lives of His people. People who experience God’s forgiveness and grace manifest inner harmony of soul with the Lord. Their hearts cannot stop praising Him, and they radiate this peace and joy. Thus, the holiday stood as a symbol of the Christian life now and also in the future, in the presence of the Lord.

1. Although the Feast of the Tabernacles was to remind people about God’s presence in their past and present journey, it had even greater function. It was to remind them about **Jesus as a source of salvation and a source of living water**.

 To do so, a special ceremony opened the Feast of Tabernacles. Ellen White describes it as follows:

 “At the first dawn of day, the priests sounded a long, shrill blast upon their silver trumpets, and the answering trumpets and the glad shouts of the people from their booths, echoing over hill and valley, welcomed the festal day. Then the priest dipped from the flowing waters of the Kedron a flagon of water, and, lifting it on high, while the trumpets were sounding, he ascended the broad steps of the temple, keeping time with the music with slow and measured tread, chanting meanwhile, “Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.” Ps. 122:2. He bore the flagon to the altar, which occupied a central position in the court of the priests. Here were two silver basins, with a priest standing at each one. The flagon of water was poured into one, and a flagon of wine into the other; and the contents of both flowed into a pipe which communicated with the Kedron, and was conducted to the Dead Sea. This display of the consecrated water represented the fountain that at the command of God had gushed from the rock to quench the thirst of the children of Israel. Then the jubilant strains rang forth, ‘The Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation’ Isa. 12:2, 3” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, pp. 448-449).

 This ceremony performed daily during the Feast of Tabernacles represented Christ as the rock from which the children of Israel received water in the wilderness and also as the sacrifice necessary for their salvation. Jesus the Messiah was the center of this holiday. “That rock was a symbol of Him who by His death would cause living streams of salvation to flow to all who are athirst… In smiting Christ, Satan thought to destroy the Prince of life; but from the smitten rock there flowed living water” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 454).

 It was on the last day of this holiday that Jesus said these words: *“If anybody is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John, 7:37-38).* We read in the book *Desire of Ages* that these words made a deep impression on those who heard them:

“Many of those who heard Jesus were mourners over disappointed hopes, many were nourishing a secret grief, many were seeking to satisfy their restless longing with the things of the world and praise of men; but when all was gained, they found that they had toiled only to reach a broken cistern, from which they could not quench their thirst”. “Jesus knew the wants of the soul. Pomp, riches, and honor cannot satisfy the heart” (E. G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 454).

 Interestingly, Jesus went even further with these symbols. He promised that living water cannot only satisfy the thirstiness of those who drink from the Rock but also fill a person so that he or she will become streams of living water.

**Application of the Message**

 And what about us? How relevant is this story to us living in the 21st century? Does the Feast of Tabernacles from Bible times have anything to do with us today?

 No doubt, Jesus’ invitation at that holiday is still relevant. Through that feast He speaks to us. The symbols of the Feast of Tabernacles should become a reality in the lives of those who are going to the future Feast on the sea of glass and who will drink from the Rock. Those who drink the living water will manifest in their lives the principles of this great holiday. Let us look at the application of these principles to our lives:

* **People who are going to the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles will practice the principle of gratitude**. How often do we remind ourselves that all good things come from our Father who is in heaven? How often are we thankful for all we have even when our neighbors have more? Do we find time to talk about our blessings with Jesus? Do we share our gratitude and testimonies with people around us? Do we know the benefit of the grateful heart that becomes a blessing to us by itself? Let’s remember that the Bible teaches us to always be grateful and contented. The more living water we take in, the more grateful and trusting in God we will become.
* **People who are going to the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles will rightly understand and contribute to the universal character of God’s kingdom**. Do I manifest in my life this belief that the Lord is the Lord of all people? Do I contribute to the universal character of the future Feast of Tabernacles, where people will be gathered from all parts of the world, all nations, all social and age groups? What kind of people can I welcome and lead to this future Feast in the heavenly Promised Land? They all are thirsty. They all need this living water that I know about. Jesus said, “If *anybody* is thirsty.” *Anybody*—with no racial, social, or religious limits. The water is free for all. But as apostle Paul said: *“And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:14).*
* **People who are going to the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles will understand the temporal character of our life here**. Someone said that we all live on the bridge that connects us with eternity, but often we forget this and build permanent houses instead of tents on this bridge. Do we remember that all that really matters is what we can take with us to eternity—our characters, our children, and people we love? Let us make this a priority and make sure that we are moving ahead on this bridge towards eternity together with those we love and care about.
* **People who are going to the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles will practice principles of peace, joy, and beauty**. Have you noticed that people who are at peace with the Lord and others usually are very joyful and able to bring joy, encouragement, and beauty to the lives of those around them? If you don’t find it in your heart to sing praises to the Lord, to share joy and beauty with others, then think about your personal “Day of Atonement.” How long ago did you have it? Do you need one? Do you feel forgiven and forgiving? Usually those who feel hurt also hurt other people. Broken vessels cannot be a source of living water. Broken cisterns cannot hold living water. Dry wells cannot give living water to those who are thirsty. We need to be at peace with the Lord to be able to enjoy our life, to rejoice in service to the Lord and others, and to radiate joy and beauty.
* **People who are going to the heavenly Feast of Tabernacles will become themselves streams of living water.** Their lives will demonstrate the fact that they are saved by the grace of Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit when he said: *“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38).* We read: “*By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive” (John 7:39).* We are praying about the power of the Holy Spirit, we are waiting for the Latter Rain, but are we doing our part in receiving Him? Are we drinking daily from the Word of God in order to be filled with the living water and become these living streams?

 The wine and the water in the Feast of Tabernacles were mixed together while flowing from the temple to the Dead Sea. One was a symbol of Jesus’ sacrifice, a symbol of His death; the other was a symbol of regeneration, new life, a symbol of the end of thirstiness, a symbol of power of the Holy Spirit. These two realities should go hand in hand in our spiritual lives too. We should die daily in Christ and rise again daily in Him to be able to offer living water to the Dead Sea of our world. Let us ask ourselves: from what springs do I drink? Do I drink from broken cisterns? From sewage water as did Evans Monsignac? Or from the source of living water? The world is dying today from thirstiness, and nothing can satisfy the longing of hearts except the living waters that can regenerate the soul. Do I care about people who are thirsty and do not know where to find the source of living water?

 In His conversation with woman of Samaria, Jesus emphasized the same thought when He said: *“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13).*

**Conclusion**

 The story is told of a little girl who underwent a surgery and was not allowed to drink afterward for some time. She was in pain and thirsty, but her mother refused to give her water when she asked for it. The little girl did not understand this; she wanted to drink and wanted it badly. Following the nurse’s instructions, the mother dipped a piece of cloth in water and wet her child’s lips. She suffered with her daughter, but wanted her to recover soon and did not give her what she wanted. The girl fell asleep and soon awoke with a cry. “Why do you cry?” asked her mother. “What did you dream about?”

“I dreamed about an ocean full of water,” said the girl. “I went there. There was so much water, I wanted to drink, but the water was so bitter and salty that I could not. Why?” she sobbed. “Why was there so much water if I could not drink it?”

 Dear friends, unlike this little girl, we don’t need to suffer thirst any more. Jesus invites us to the fresh waters that can satisfy thirstiness of our hearts, regenerate our souls, and transform our lives. As the prophet Isaiah said: *“The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs” (Isa. 41:17-18).* This living water will produce the invaluable fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

 Why so much water if we don’t use it? Why so much water if we don’t drink it? Or why so much water if we enjoy it alone without sharing these streams of living water with a dying and thirsty world?

 Let us remember that we are going to the universal Feast of Tabernacles. May the symbols and principles of this Feast become our own spiritual realities today. May Jesus—Who was the center of these symbols then—become the center of our lives now. There is no need for us to become longest-ever-without-water survivors. May we daily respond to Jesus’ invitation to come and drink. And the thirstiness and longing of our souls will be met, our lives will be transformed into springs of living water that are springing up into everlasting life.

# Seminar: Power to Forgive

**Power to Forgive**

*By Galina Stele, D.Min.*

**Introduction**

 The need for forgiveness is woven into the fabric of our lives. It is so, probably because we all are sinners. Forgiveness played a remarkable role in the lives of Bible heroes too. People of Israel would not exist if Esau had not forgiven Jacob. Solomon would not be a king of Israel if God had not forgiven David. And neither you nor I would exist if God had not forgiven Adam and Eve. None of us would have any future if God stopped forgiving us. Interestingly, we may find it easy to accept God’s forgiveness, but most of us find it difficult to forgive others or to be forgiven by another.

 Throughout our lives we will often need to forgive. And sometimes it is really hard to forgive. Many people struggle with this. They may want to forgive, but they don’t know how to do it in such a way that their memories and feelings do not come back again. Why is it so hard for us to forgive? What is forgiveness? What do I need to do to forgive a person? And how do I learn to forgive *and* forget?

 What if we did not forgive? What if we preferred payback when someone hurt or harmed us? Mahatma Gandhi wisely points out that “An eye-for-an-eye and a-tooth-for-a-tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless.”

 It is crucial to remember that if we are unforgiving, this harms not only the other person, it harms us. Research has shown that an unforgiving spirit can cause many health problems. On the other hand, when we forgive, we improve our own health.

Forgiveness brings many health benefits. It…

* Lowers blood pressure.
* Lowers stress.
* Lowers level of hostility and aggressiveness.
* Lowers risk of alcohol and other addictions.
* Lowers symptoms of depression and anxiety.
* Lowers pain.
* Keeps one’s heart healthy.
* Helps one to recover from various illnesses.
* Brings emotional balance and harmony.

 So, people who practice forgiveness are happier and healthier than those who hold resentment and keep counting their hurts.

Interestingly, according to one research study by Gallup Organization in 1988 in USA:

* 94% of respondents said it was important to forgive.
* 85% said that they needed some outside help to be able to forgive.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 The statistics probably change very little from decade to decade. People know they should forgive, but they fail; they need someone to assist them, someone to explain how to forgive. Nancy Van Pelt shares a good illustration in her book, *To Have and to Hold,* citing a brilliant answer from Ann Landers (pen name of newspaper advice columnist).

“Dear Ann Landers,

You must be made of stone. You tell every wronged husband or wife or daughter or son, sweetheart, friend, or neighbor to ‘forgive and forget.’ Did it ever occur to you that some people just CAN’T? They are too deeply hurt, too badly damaged. Please pull your head out of the sand, or the clouds, or wherever it is, and use it to think with. It’s preposterous to expect mere mortals to behave like saints.

Signed: NO SAINT”

Ann Landers answered as follows:

“Dear No Saint,

For those who don’t like my advice to forgive and forget, here’s an alternative. Don’t forgive and don’t forget. Keep alive every agonizing, torturous detail of the past. Talk about it. Dream about it. Cry a lot and feel sorry for yourself. Lose weight and look haggard so friends will worry about you. Build an ulcer. Get a migraine. Break a leg. Anything to create pain and serve as a reminder to what the dirty louse did to you. If you follow this advice, you are sure to end up miserable, sick, bitter, and alone.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Why is it so hard to forgive?**

 Mother Theresa tells us, “If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.” But before we go into how to forgive, let’s look at *why* it is sometimes so difficult to practice forgiveness.

It is hard to forgive for several reasons:

* We believe some myths about forgiveness.
* We believe in the idea of a “just world” and want to bring justice.
* We don’t understand why God allowed the offense to happen and cannot accept it.
* We do not know the various stages of forgiveness.
* We do not understand the “injustice gap.”
* We don’t know what forgiveness is.
* We don’t know how to forgive.

Let’s look briefly at each of these.

1. *We believe some myths about forgiveness.*

 There are several myths that people believe regarding forgiveness. They may think that to forgive means:

* To nullify the evil or damage that has been done.
* To forget and never remember it anymore.
* To say the offense was not important.
* To allow allow someone to do the same thing again.
* That there will be no consequences.

These myths suggest why it is so hard for some people to forgive, because they think that an offender will then think that the offense was not a big deal! It is important for us to understand the truth. Forgiveness is…

* Not a green light to repeat the same offense.
* Not amnesty.
* Not amnesia.
* Not a denial of the damage or harm done.
* Not an acknowledgement that we are guilty.

 Forgiveness is none of the above. It is grace in action, and a bit later in this seminar we will clarify what it is. For now, we will continue looking at our list of reasons why it is hard to forgive.

1. *We believe in the idea of a “just world.”*

 Another reason it is so hard for us to forgive is because we believe in the idea of a “just world,” and we want to bring justice. Perhaps we have this idea from the Garden of Eden and subconsciously expect that good things will happen to good people and bad things to bad people. But in reality this is not so. The world is not just; bad things can happen to good people, and it is not our responsibility to pay back and bring justice. Only God is the true judge.

 The desire to bring justice and punish the offender sometimes is so intense we forget that God is the only one who can bring justice. We want to play the role of the judge ourselves, especially when we think that people were unjust to us. When we cannot do anything about it, we punish them by refusing to give forgiveness.

1. *We don’t understand why God allowed the offense to happen.*

 Perhaps we can accept the idea that God is the only true judge, but we don’t understand why He allows such things to happen to us. This thought can be very painful and prevent us from forgiving. We need to learn to trust Him, to trust that in His wisdom. He knows why He chose to lead us through this experience. It could be that He wants us to develop His character or become His help to others. Often people who were victims of mistreatment later become powerful tools in the hands of the Lord, helping others to overcome the same circumstances or recover from similar tragedies.

1. *We do not know the various* *stages of forgiveness.*

 We may find it difficult to forgive because we do not realize there are specific stages in the process of forgiveness. These stages are:

Hurt

 Pain

 Healing

 Forgiveness

 *and perhaps* Reconciliation!

 It is usually hard to forgive when we are in stage one or two. We need some time to recover from our hurt before we are able to think clearly and calmly. It is also important to recognize that sometimes we can forgive but not reconcile, since reconciliation requires good will of both parties.

1. *We do not understand the “injustice gap.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

 According to research on forgiveness, figuratively speaking each offence creates a “gap.” It is difficult to forgive when that “injustice gap” is very big. The offender can reduce this “gap” by offering an apology or doing something to reduce the harm done. Or the offender can increase the size of the “gap” by denying his or her fault or behaving in such a way that the hurt is increased. It is easier to forgive when the offender tries to decrease the “injustice gap,” but we need to remember that we should be able to forgive even when there is no apology or the “injustice gap” has not been decreased.

1. *We don’t know what forgiveness is.*

 It is hard to forgive because very often we don’t know what true forgiveness is and how to forgive. As mentioned earlier, forgiveness is grace in action. Grace has a divine origin. As Alexander Pope said, “To err is human; to forgive, Divine.” Our ability to forgive depends on how we understand God’s forgiveness, how we treat ourselves, and whether we have experienced God’s grace in our lives.

 “The remarkable thing is that we really love our neighbor as ourselves: we do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant toward others when we tolerate ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves. We are prone to sacrifice others when we are ready to sacrifice ourselves.” (Eric Hoffer)

 We may think of the passage where Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness: “Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (or seventy times seven) (Matt. 18:21-22).

 Jesus also added a parable about the unforgiving servant (Мatt. 18:21-35). In this story one person had a debt of 10,000 talents and he was forgiven. However, he found another person who owned him only 100 denarii and began to press him. Let’s look at how long it would take to earn 10,000 talents and 100 denarii.

 “The denarius was one day’s wage for a typical day laborer, who worked six days a week with a Sabbath day of rest. Allowing approximately two weeks for various Jewish holidays, the typical laborer worked 50 weeks of the year and earned an annual wage of 300 denarii (50 weeks x 6 days). Therefore, 100 denarii was one-third of a year’s salary, or four months’ wages.

 Now suppose you continued to work as a day laborer earning 300 denarii each year. After 20 years of such labor, you will have earned 6,000 denarii. At this point, the king would say to his debtor, “Congratulations. You have worked for 20 years and have now earned 6,000 denarii. That’s enough to pay back one talent. You owe only 9,999 more talents.”

 From this, we can easily see that if it takes 20 years to earn one talent, then repaying 10,000 talents would require working 200,000 YEARS!”[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Jesus used this example to show us how small the hurts we receive from others are in comparison to what we all did and are doing to Him. Yet He forgives us—time and again.

So we see that forgiveness is:

* Grace in action. When we think about forgiveness, we surely will look to the character of God and God’s grace. Grace is unconditional; it is undeserved mercy.
* “Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it” (Mark Twain).
* Micah 7:19 tells us that when God forgives our sins, He casts them into the depths of the sea. Someone has added “and puts a sign there: ‘Fishing is forbidden!’” However, what we usually like to do is fish our own sins and mistakes. We also enjoy fishing the sins of other people. But we must remember, “Fishing is forbidden!”
* When it is hard for you to forgive yourselves or other people and the offenses are coming back again and again in your mind, remind yourself “Fishing is forbidden!”

Let us also remember that…

* If we are at war with others, we cannot be at peace with ourselves.
* Hurt people hurt people.
* Forgiveness changes us from prisoners of the past to the people of peace.
* Forgiveness helps us to reconcile with our past.

And you may want to include these quotations in your notes:

* “Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain but it takes character and self-control to be understanding and forgiving.” (Dale Carnegie)
* “To forgive means to understand.” (French proverb)
* “Only great people can forgive.” (O. Ozheshko)

The most beautiful thing about forgiveness is that it is all about FREEDOM!

* Forgiveness is about my personal freedom!
* Forgiveness is about freedom of my offender!
* Forgiveness is free!
* Forgiveness is unconditional!
* Forgiveness has power, even without repentance of the offender or reconciliation with him or her!
* Power to forgive comes from the Lord!

*“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).*

1. *We don’t know how to forgive.*

 This leads us to the most important point: how do we forgive? People often don’t forgive because they don’t know how. The most important thing to remember is that forgiveness never happens without your personal, definite decision to forgive. It is true that it is easier to forgive when a person says he or she is sorry. But interestingly, it is not necessary to receive an apology in order for us to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice. We perform forgiveness in our head. It does not depend on the repentance of the other person. Forgiveness is our own decision. And we should be able to forgive even when we receive no apology or cannot be reconciled.

**Steps in the process of forgiveness:**

 There are several steps that can help us through the process of forgiveness, especially when we find it hard to forgive.

***Step 1***

* Write a list of or think about people/events that have hurt you.
* Ask yourself:
	+ Why is it so difficult to forgive this particular one?
	+ How does this unsolved problem affect my life, my health, and my relationships with God and other people?
	+ What kind of feelings do I have every time I remember this?
	+ What would I like to happen to help me forgive?
	+ What in particular do I need to forgive and forget?

Although the answers to each of these questions may vary, the reality is that there is nothing we need in order to forgive. We just need to make the choice, to decide that we will forgive.

***Step 2***

* Make your decision to forgive.
* Pray about it.
* Tell God about all your feelings, hurts, etc.
* Put the offender and the consequences in the hands of the Lord.
* Pray for your offender. (Matt. 5:44)

***Step 3***

* Think: Who was responsible for my feeling of hurt and pain? For my inability to forgive?
* Decide on a strategy: What would I do if the feelings of pain and hurt come back in the future? The best thing is to remind yourself of your decision and say to yourself: “Stop it! I don’t live in the past anymore! I live in the present, and I am going into the future a free person!”

 Forgiveness releases others from our criticism and also releases us from being imprisoned by our own negative thoughts and feelings. As someone said “We cannot take the poison every day and expect someone else to die.” Remember also that when God sees gaps, He builds bridges (Robert Schuller).

 In Mark 11:25, we read: *"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."* And Paul counsels us, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"* (Ephesians 4:32).

 *“The Bible teaches us to love our neighbors and to forgive our enemies. Maybe because very often they are the same people.”*

 There is a difference between the decision to forgive and emotional forgiveness. They are not the same, and you can still feel some emotions even when you have made your decision to forgive. It may require some time to heal emotionally. Nevertheless, continue to remind yourself about your decision. Don’t allow negative thinking. The real healing takes place when your decisional and emotional forgiveness say the same thing: you forgave that person. How do you know you are there? “You know you have forgiven someone when he or she has harmless passage through your mind” (Karyl Huntley).

**Conclusion**

 We cannot control certain things in our lives. People make their own right and wrong decisions; people are on different levels of maturity. They can hurt and offend others. However, forgiveness is a sign of maturity!

 We can choose to be an agent of positive change no matter what. The power to do so and the power to forgive are available from above.

 The story is told of a lady who brought a wonderful change to her landscape. She kept planting daffodils for many years and eventually five acres of land were transformed into a lovely garden! Everyone who visited that beautiful spot saw a sign with the following words:

“Answers to the Questions You Probably Want to Ask:

* 50,000 bulbs
* One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet, and one brain.
* Began in 1958."[[6]](#footnote-6)

 What a delightful project! One bulb at a time. One step at a time in positive direction can eventually change the landscape of your life.

 Let us remember that those who make other people happy are the happiest people!

Let us hurry up to give people happy minutes, because:

* Happy minutes make happy hours;
* Happy hours make happy days;
* Happy days make happy months;
* Happy months make happy years; and
* Happy years make a happy life!

**Choose to Be Free**

 “One of the most lasting pleasures you can experience is the feeling that comes over you when you genuinely forgive an enemy—whether he knows about it or not.” (A. Battista)

 To forgive or not? It is your choice! But your heavenly Father is ready to help you to practice divine grace in action and to go free into the future!

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