



THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

On June 8th 1972, at the height of the Vietnam War, one of the most famous photos of all time was taken. A group of villagers were sheltering in a temple in the village of Trang Bang, north of Saigon, when they heard planes overhead. Afraid they would be bombed, they ran outside to find safety, just as bombs detonated all around the temple. The bombs contained napalm, a thick jelly of gasoline, that clings to human skin, causing horrific burns when ignited.

A 21 year old Associated Press Photo Journalist, Nick Ut, took the famous black and white photo of children fleeing the burning temple. It won the Pulitzer Prize and was chosen as the "World Press Photo of the Year" in 1972.

The photographer told CNN recently "I looked through the black smoke and I saw a girl, naked...running." The children were screaming for help. Instinct took over and he started taking pictures. As the girl approached he could see parts of her skin falling off. He put his camera down and poured water over her. "So hot" she kept saying, "So hot." He drove her to the hospital in his jeep, and somewhere along the way she lapsed into unconsciousness.

The girl's name was Kim Phuc, meaning "Golden Happiness." She spent 14 months in hospitals and underwent 17 painful skin grafts and surgeries. For years afterward, she was just an anonymous teenage girl, who always wore long sleeves to cover her twisted scars, and worried they were so ugly that no one would ever want to marry her. She had suffered serious burns over a third of her body, at a time when most people who sustained such injuries over 10% of their bodies, died.

Vietnamese authorities noticed that journalists kept asking what had happened to the young girl in the photo, so they started using her as a propaganda tool. They got her to roll up her sleeves to display her scars, making her act as a poster child for the horrors of American aggression.

She became very depressed and wished to die. Then she began spending time in a local library, where she read the New Testament for the first time. Its portrait of Jesus differed radically from what she had learned about Him in her family religion of Cao Dai, which included spiritualist practices including séances where messages were solicited from the dead. She began to question her childhood faith.

Eventually, she was invited to attend a Christian church. She was greatly attracted to the Christian faith, but reluctant to leave her family's religion. One Sunday before church, she prayed for the first time, asking Jesus for a small favour. "I need one girlfriend I can talk with. If I see a girl sitting alone in the Church, that is who will be my girlfriend."

When Kim walked through the church doors, sure enough, she saw one woman sitting alone. She approached her, and they quickly became friends. "I felt very happy," Kim says. "God answered my prayer right away!" Not long afterward, at the age of 19, Kim accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour. "It was the fire of the bomb that burned my body, and it was the skill of the doctor that mended my skin," she says, "but it took the power of God to heal my heart."

In 1986 she went to study in Cuba, where she fell in love with a young Vietnamese student named Toan. (Her scars only made him love her more, he told her.) They married in 1992 and honeymooned in Moscow. On the return flight to Cuba the plane stopped to refuel in Canada, and the pair sought asylum, and have lived in Canada ever since. Marriage was like a miracle to Kim, but later another one came. She became pregnant! The couple now have 2 sons, Thomas, 23 years old just married and graduated from Bible College, and Stephen (19), who is also studying theology at a U.S. Bible College. Her husband took a degree in Theology in 2005.

In 1996, Kim agreed to speak at Veterans' Day Ceremonies in Washington D.C.

"As you know, I am the little girl who was running to escape from the napalm fire. I do not want to talk about the war because I cannot change history. I only want you to remember the tragedy of war in order to do things to stop fighting and killing around the world."

Her voice dropped. "I have suffered a lot from both physical and emotional pain. Sometimes I thought I could not live, but God saved my life and gave me faith and hope."

And then she uttered healing words of grace and forgiveness: "Even if I could talk face-to-face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, I could tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace."

When she finished her brief but moving remarks, the veterans rose to their feet and broke into an explosion of applause, many of them in tears. "It's important to us that she's here," one veteran said. "For her to forgive us personally means something."

One man, overcome with emotion, rushed to a patrolman and scribbled out a note, asking him to deliver it to Kim. "*I'm the man you are looking for,*" the note read. Intermediaries asked if she was willing to see him. Yes, she said, if they could arrange a meeting away from the crush of people. Officials brought the man over to her car.

When the reporters cleared away, Kim turned and looked straight into the man's eyes and then held out her arms...the same arms she had held out as she ran along the road, in agony from her burning skin. She hugged the man, and he began to sob.

"I am sorry. I am just so sorry!" he said. "It is okay. I forgive. I forgive," said Kim Phuc, echoing her favourite Bible verse, "Forgive and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37).

In 1997, Kim started a Foundation to help other child victims of war. That same year, she became a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Peace. Ever since, she has travelled the world telling her story of love, hope and forgiveness.

Kim says her Christian faith brought her physical and emotional peace in the midst of hatred and bitterness, loss and hopelessness, when the pain seemed insurmountable.

"When I became a Christian, I gained a wonderful connection – the relationship between me and Jesus and God. And from that point, I learned to forgive."

"Forgiveness freed me from hatred," she wrote in her biography, entitled "The Girl in the Picture."

"I still have many scars on my body and severe pain on most days, but my heart is purified. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness and love are much stronger. There would be no more war if everyone were to learn to live with true love, hope and forgiveness."

"If the little girl in the photo could do it, ask yourself, can I?"

The story of Kim Phuc is a powerful story of forgiveness.

Luke 6:37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

Forgiveness is a vitally important characteristic quality of a Christian. It is such a basic essential fundamental aspect of Jesus’ nature and character—the very reason He came to earth was so our sins could be forgiven! Forgiveness isn’t easy though—it is a hard and costly thing to do. Let’s consider what it involves.

Matthew 6:12 “Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.”

Jesus used the image of debts to describe the nature of sins. When someone wrongs us, there is a sense that the wrongdoer owes you something. They have incurred a debt or obligation. When you have been wronged, you really want to make the other person pay that debt to you. You do that by yelling at them, hurting them, making them feel bad in some way, or just waiting and watching and hoping something bad happens to them so you can get even.

So what is forgiveness? It is giving up the right to seek repayment from the one who harmed you. It’s letting them get away with it. “Forgive” contains the word “give.” Like grace, forgiveness is undeserved, unmerited, unfair.

If someone owes you money and you forgive the debt, the money is still missing! When you forgive someone you are agreeing to pay that money. To forgive means to cancel a debt by paying it or absorbing it yourself. Someone always has to pay every debt. Even when no money is involved in wrongdoing, you always lose something—perhaps happiness, reputation, peace of mind, an opportunity, etc.

Every time something wrong is done, there is suffering. Either you make the perpetrator suffer for it, or you forgive and suffer for it yourself.

Forgiveness means agreeing to pay for the damage rather than the perpetrator, foregoing the chance to get even, giving up the right to be paid for what has been done to you. To forgive is to say “You’re free; your debt is paid. I’ll pay—not you.”

It always involves suffering and loss on your part. It is difficult and costly, because you are bearing the cost of the sin yourself. But it deepens your character, frees you to rebuild a relationship with the person, and leads to love and peace rather than bitterness. Forgiveness wasn’t easy for God either. When Jesus thought of the cost, He sweated drops of blood.

By bearing the cost of the sin, you are walking in the path of your Master.

Colossians 3:13 “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Jesus was willing to go through suffering, nails, thorns, sweat and blood for the sins of all humanity. We are commanded to follow Him and forgive others.

Matthew 6:14-15 ¹⁴“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

What about if the person refuses to repent? Do we still need to forgive them?

Mark 11:25 “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

He doesn't say anything about them having to repent first. It doesn't say “forgive him if he repents,” but rather “forgive him right there, while you are praying.”

Luke 23:34 “Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up His clothes by casting lots.” Jesus didn't ask them to repent first.

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” He forgave us before we repented. However, we do need to repent in order to accept that forgiveness.

Let's also notice Luke 17:3-4 ³“So watch yourselves. “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

This is a special situation, where a fellow Christian sins against you in a manner that they should be rebuked—they have done something seriously wrong and to simply forgive them might harden their conscience and cause them to keep doing the wrongful action.

All of the Scriptures are true and correct. We should have the inner heartfelt attitude of forgiveness of someone regardless of whether they have repented of it, but we should also at times let the person know they have hurt us so they don't gloss over the sin and keep on doing it.

So there are 4 possible scenarios.

		Sinner repents	
		Yes	No
Victim Forgives	Yes	1	2
	No	3	4

Another Scripture to remember is Romans 12:18-19 ¹⁸“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.”

Verse 18 is an interesting one. Sometimes people seem to deliberately be against you. It's pretty hard to please everybody all the time! But we can't do things for anyone else, the only person we are responsible for is ourselves, and as far as it depends on us, if at all possible, we have to do our very best to have peace, regardless of what others do. Forgiveness is an act of faith—trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am.

That may be costly to us. Sometimes we have to bite our tongues and bear an insult or an injustice like Teina Pora did for many years. But there's no point in getting bitter over it. Forgiveness is costly, but it is a wonderful thing, a vitally important character attribute of a Christian, the essence of the character of Jesus Christ.

Failing to forgive is even more costly. It imprisons us in the past. It leads to resentment. Re-sentment means "to feel again"—to keep picking the scab of hurt so it keeps bleeding.

Someone wisely said: "When we genuinely forgive we set a prisoner free, and then find that prisoner was us." Martin Luther King said something profound: "Forgiveness isn't an occasional act. It is a permanent attitude." If that is the way our heart is, when people do hurt us, we hopefully won't get overly riled up about it, or at least won't keep it as a lasting grudge.

Matthew 5:44-45 ⁴⁴ "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

God asks us to forgive and to love because that is what He is like. That's how to be children of God, to be like our Father in Heaven.

Kim Phuc: "The more I prayed for my enemies, the softer my heart became."

Forgiveness has great power. It has the power to stop fights and disagreements, to remove guilt and to bring peace. It is a fundamental quality of God's nature and a fruit of God's Holy Spirit. Let's be sure in our lives to exercise the wonderful power of forgiveness.

