

# MOVING FORWARD

Six Steps to Forgiving Yourself  
and Breaking Free from the Past



EVERETT L.  
WORTHINGTON JR.

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WATERBROOK  
P R E S S

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*To Kirby, who modeled what it takes to break free  
from self-blame and shame and inspired me  
to learn to love God better. I don't deserve you.*

*To my children, the people at Christ Prez, and my friends  
at VCU, who have believed in me and provided needed,  
persistent support. I don't deserve you either.*

*To my colleagues, who are graduate students, professors,  
and counselors—and also are my friends. I cherish our  
mutual learning about forgiveness and virtue. There is  
no way I could deserve such wonderful colleagues.  
I am grateful that the Lord has provided abundantly.*

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## A Personal Note to Get Us Started

**F**orgiveness is hard; we all know that. What comes as a surprise to many of us is this: forgiving yourself can be much harder still. When you are the wrongdoer who needs to be forgiven—and you are the one who needs to forgive—a struggle results that has few equals.

In *Moving Forward* you will learn research-proven steps to forgiving others and yourself. The steps also have been tear-tested in the difficulties and darkness of real life and worked through in the counseling room. As we work through the six steps in the chapters that follow, you will gain life-changing insight into your nature as a person. And you will discover a number of truths about yourself—things you might already have suspected but weren't yet prepared to take a close look at.

The truth about you (and all of us) is hard to accept, but it's powerful and life changing when you do face it and engage with it. The truth is this: you are more flawed than you can imagine. But, miraculously, you also are far more valuable and more cherished than you can imagine.

You—and everyone else—are a contrast of flaws and unspeakable value that is difficult to fathom. But when you do get it, and I finally “got it” as I moved through my own struggles, the breakthrough is a glorious shift in the way you live. So join with me to work through a process that will be much harder than you expect but will end with the freedom you have been seeking. You can live without self-blame and condemnation, without the familiar burden of guilt, and in a place where you can embrace



the precious value of being a flawed person who is deeply loved by God.

The work that is required to reach self-forgiveness will seem daunting. And with good reason. It is more demanding than most of the challenges you will take on in life. But the difficult work eventually achieves a goal that few people reach. Self-forgiveness releases you from shame and self-condemnation and leads to freedom and long-lasting internal peace.

All of this begins with God's recipe for self-acceptance, which is summed up as "you are flawed, but precious." The real struggle in gaining meaningful victory over self-blame is not simply saying you are forgiving yourself. You can forgive yourself with full understanding and yet still feel just as guilty and ashamed of your misdeeds. The hardest struggle—beyond self-forgiveness—is *accepting* yourself as a flawed individual (we all are), and yet being convinced that you are precious to the Lord. You are valued more highly than you can imagine.

After you work through the steps to self-forgiveness, you will experience something that Paul came to realize in his life. Paul couldn't change his past persecution of Christians, but he knew he was living a new life. Likewise, you can admit to your past failures and the things you regret yet strain forward to the future (see Philippians 3:13).

I hope your sense of hope will be renewed as we embark on a journey that will involve a lot of work but will lead to the destination we all long for. So are you ready to work through the six steps to forgiving yourself? Here is the sneak-peek outline.

Step 1: Receive God's Forgiveness

Step 2: Repair Relationships

Step 3: Rethink Ruminations

Step 4: REACH Emotional Self-Forgiveness

Step 5: Rebuild Self-Acceptance

Step 6: Resolve to Live Virtuously

Now let's get started.

## Part 1

# A Life Turned Upside-Down

# I Love Paris in the Summer

*Our dream trip to Europe could  
not have been a bigger disaster*

Guilt upon the conscience, like rust upon iron, both defiles and consumes it, gnawing and creeping into it, as that does which at last eats out the very heart and substance of the metal.

—BISHOP ROBERT SOUTH

Sometimes the most innocent-seeming things can turn your life topsy-turvy. For me, it was an e-mail I received while working on-line at a sweltering Paris Internet café.

“Call me immediately,” wrote our friend Sherry Linger. While we were in Europe, Sherry was scheduling my wife’s (Kirby) speaking and travel engagements for the coming winter season. I assumed a call was needed due to something that had come up with my wife’s schedule.

I jogged back to our hotel to get Kirby. But it turned out the message wasn’t for her. That urgent e-mail was directed at me, and it would lead to a maelstrom of emotions. I soon would give in to seething anger at God. And eventually—after a long period of anguish—I would be able to finally confront my self-blame and shame. I would have to use my

knowledge and skills as a psychologist, draw on my experience as a counselor, and wrestle with God day and night. I had no idea that my life would come to this.

Over the years I had known shame and personal guilt. I have regrets just as you do. But I never dreamed that at age fifty-eight, my entire being would engage in battle with my past failures—and one in particular that I was convinced had led to the death of someone I'd loved my entire life.

I would not rest until I could determine whether it was possible to forgive myself. It seemed my failures would overwhelm me. I was out of my depth as a psychologist and as a person of faith. The next step and the one after that were hidden in darkness, and the journey was one I had to take largely on my own. Always there was the concern that I couldn't deny: what would happen if, at the end of this struggle, I found that it was *impossible* to forgive myself?

I worked harder during this crisis than I have ever worked on any issue in my life. The struggle would weigh so heavily on me that, at times, I wondered if I could survive the process. Could I stand up under it until the issue was resolved? I made progress, very slowly and over a period of years. And then God gave me another challenge that I would have to meet. I would have to face this question: could I use my own experiences to help lessen the pain of others who have been marinating in shame and self-blame? By the end of this book, maybe you can answer that question for me—and even for yourself.

I hope this book will help you. If you struggle with self-blame resulting from something you did or should have done but didn't, or if you feel that you have not lived up to your expectations, I hope you'll break free from that guilt and self-blame. If you have a friend or loved one struggling in this regard, perhaps this book can help you help him or her.

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO SELF-FORGIVENESS

*Moving Forward* is unlike other books that are designed to help you address major problems that hold you back or drain your energy. The others tend to name the problem and then proceed immediately to a list of solutions. The struggle between self-condemnation and self-forgiveness, however, is different. It is worthy of careful examination and deep understanding. Self-blame is a personal issue that bears little resemblance to most other major life issues. The struggle is with yourself, and much of the work that needs to be done is in understanding yourself, the circumstances of your biggest regrets, and the effect of these issues on your daily life.

I will share both clinical and scientific results to help shed light on the struggle as well as on the journey toward self-forgiveness. But because self-forgiveness is so personal, I also will tell stories that describe the most difficult struggle I have ever faced. This is not to say that my experience is like most other people's or that it should be a model for the approach you will take. The value in telling my story is that it is intensely personal, like your story, and that it illustrates the long and difficult series of decisions and practical steps necessary to forgive yourself. As you read my story, interspersed with chapters that provide solid, researched, tested approaches to self-forgiveness, you will gain a more fully formed picture of all that is involved in addressing your shame, guilt, and regrets. I believe that, despite the differences between my story and yours, you will gain insight and understanding into how you can deal with self-condemnation.

As you begin to walk through your own story, you will be introduced to the six steps that led to my self-forgiveness and that have helped others to wrestle successfully with self-forgiveness. My story of failing my brother

and myself, will help you think about your own life. And as I relate these stories, I will show how the Six Steps to Self-Forgiveness apply.

Even though this book is personal, the advice and solutions it offers are not simply the ideas fashioned by one person who found that they worked in his life. I am a psychologist who has studied forgiveness scientifically for more than twenty years. I have seen countless individuals and couples struggle with self-blame, led more than one hundred groups of people who are trying to forgive others and sometimes themselves, and seen lots of pain and healing expressed in those groups. I also am a person of faith. Like many people, I have experienced times of closeness to God and other times of silent distance from God. But this book tells about the largest swings in my life of faith. There were times when I came very close to losing my faith completely.

The hard path from self-condemnation to self-forgiveness is not a mountain trail laid out for people who have everything—including their spiritual life—all worked out. It is for those of us who acknowledge that much of what we face in life is too big to figure out on our own. We know our limitations, and we certainly know our pain and the longing for healing. As you read, I expect you will think: *I don't know Everett Worthington, but I am familiar with the inclines, valleys, underbrush, and cliffs in this mountain trek.* I am grateful, for our sakes, that God is a great Mountain Guide and does not let go even when we try to escape from wise counsel and loving help.

## THE PHONE CALL THAT PLUNGED ME INTO DARKNESS

If I tell my story well, it can help you apply lessons that have been life- and research-tested by many people. Those lessons open the way to overcome self-blame, unwarranted shame, and legitimate (and even false) guilt. It is

natural to blame yourself for wrongs you've done or for failing to reach high enough in life—for giving up before achieving your potential. We all do that at times. I sank into the depths of guilt and self-blame while Kirby and I were in Europe.

Ironically, we were in Paris, where the early summer can be liberating. This was especially true in 2005, at the end of six years of near-constant, life-numbing pressure. Kirby and I were living for ten days in a small hotel in the north of Paris, just west of the train station, Gare du Nord, near the foot of Montmartre. We trekked several times daily to the fifth floor of a walk-up hotel room. We loved the quaint Parisian small-hotel feel, with its wrought-iron banisters and demitasse teacups. It was bare bones in terms of luxury—less than a baby-step up from a hostel. But, ah, it was Paris.

It was July, and we had entered the second week of a two-month vacation prior to my assuming a visiting research-scholar position at Cambridge University. Kirby and I planned to travel around Europe to depressurize from my six years as chair of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Although I kept teaching and doing research, it was the sheer weight of people problems that had worn on me. With more than twelve hundred undergraduate psychology majors, one hundred twenty-five doctoral students, fifteen staff, and almost fifty full-time faculty, it was a rare day when no one needed my input regarding an emotional problem. I was ready for an emotionally calm period.

We arrived at London's Heathrow Airport on July 11, humped our luggage up to Cambridge University, and bused back to London with one backpack each for two months of travel in Europe. We visited our favorite spots in London and even saw (again) *Les Misérables*, one of the best stories of forgiveness ever dramatized. The protagonist, Jean Valjean, recently released from prison, steals silver and, unexpectedly, is forgiven by a priest. In turn, the thief eventually forgives Inspector Javert, the soul of

relentless justice. Not only is *Les Mis* about forgiving others, it is a profound study of self-forgiveness. Javert cannot accept forgiveness and mercy from a criminal. Worse, for him, he cannot forgive himself for taking the mercy offered by Valjean.

Inspector Javert commits suicide. What's more, Valjean, the former thief who had been merciful to others, cannot forgive himself for his own failures.<sup>1</sup> As I sat enthralled in a dark London theater, I didn't know I was being primed for Paris.

In Paris, as we had in London, we walked from museum to museum. After a week, my shoes were broken-backed and crooked-heeled. We suffered from museum overload. So we took the day off and went to the Bois de Boulogne, a huge park similar to New York's Central Park. We strolled through shady lanes and enjoyed a respite from the mid-July heat. I was feeling very Parisian, *mais oui*.

About 2:00 p.m. we went back to the hotel. Kirby stayed in the room while I headed out to an Internet café. I sat in exotic Paris, hunched over a confusing French keyboard in a stuffy Internet café, catching up on e-mail.

In the midst of processing junk e-mail, Sherry's "call me immediately" message pinged me. I hustled to the hotel to tell Kirby, and we phoned Richmond, Virginia. I handed Kirby the phone. She said the usual "hellos," then her face fell. "Oh no," she said. She turned to me. "Your brother, Mike, committed suicide this morning."

I took the phone. "Sherry?" She told me what she knew.

I phoned Mike's wife, Charlene, who was at a police station in Tennessee. Mike had worked as an accountant in Oak Ridge.

"I can't believe it," Charlene said.

"How are you holding up?"

"Not well."

"Do you know what happened?"



"The police are investigating, but apparently he smothered himself. They said it looks like he planned this well in advance. It's probably too soon to say, but I don't think we're going to have a service."

"We can come back to be with you if it would help."

"No. We have people at church. David is devastated, of course. He can't believe his father would kill himself. But David and I will get through this. There's no sense in you and Kirby coming back—especially if there's no service. Just come and see me when you get back home."

"If you're sure—"

"We'll be fine. Listen, I have to go. The police are beckoning. So I reckon I'll be saying good-bye."

"Okay. Bye then."

"Oh, one other thing," said Charlene. (Whenever a person says "one other thing," I always think of the rumpled 1970s television police detective Columbo, played by Peter Falk. When he said "one other thing," he was about to ask the crucial question that the villain would find later was the case-busting, telltale point. In this instance, there was a disturbing similarity.)

"What's that?" I said to Charlene.

"Mike left a suicide note. The police have it. They won't tell us what's in it. Mike addressed the note not to me or to David, but to you, Ev."



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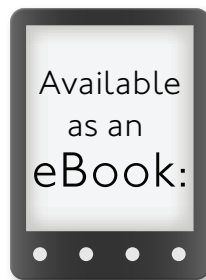
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