

Episode 1

Stories from General Conference

FORGIVENESS

NARRATOR: Forgiveness is the topic of this series of stories from General Conference. Indeed, the practical application of this principle is sometimes difficult. The Savior set the example as he hung on the cross and plead on behalf of the very men who had placed him there, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Forgiveness is a fundamental principle of the gospel. In more modern times, the Savior declared, “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.” (D&C 64:10). President Thomas S. Monson, in an address given in the April 2002 General Conference, now introduces us to an analogy that sets the stage and illustrates the principle of forgiveness.

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning Session, April 2002)

In April 1966, at the Church's annual general conference, Elder Spencer W. Kimball gave a memorable address. He quoted an account written by Samuel T. Whitman entitled "Forgotten Wedges." Today I, too, have chosen to quote from Samuel T. Whitman, followed by examples from my own life.

Whitman wrote: "The ice storm [that winter] wasn't generally destructive. True, a few wires came down, and there was a sudden jump in accidents along the highway. . . . Normally, the big walnut tree could easily have borne the weight that formed on its spreading limbs. It was the iron wedge in its heart that caused the damage.

"The story of the iron wedge began years ago when the white-haired farmer [who now inhabited the property on which it stood] was a lad on his father's homestead. The sawmill had then only recently been moved from the valley, and the settlers were still finding tools and odd pieces of equipment scattered about. . . .

"On this particular day, it was a faller's wedge—wide, flat, and heavy, a foot or more long, and splayed from mighty poundings [—which the lad found] . . . in the south pasture. [A faller's wedge, used to help fell a tree, is inserted in a cut made by a saw and then struck with a sledge hammer to widen the cut.] . . . Because he was already late for dinner, the lad laid the wedge . . . between the limbs of the young walnut tree his father had planted near the front gate. He would take the wedge to the shed right after dinner, or sometime when he was going that way.

"He truly meant to, but he never did. [The wedge] was there between the limbs, a little tight, when he attained his manhood. It was there, now firmly gripped, when he married

and took over his father's farm. It was half grown over on the day the threshing crew ate dinner under the tree. . . . Grown in and healed over, the wedge was still in the tree the winter the ice storm came.

"In the chill silence of that wintry night . . . one of the three major limbs split away from the trunk and crashed to the ground. This so unbalanced the remainder of the top that it, too, split apart and went down. When the storm was over, not a twig of the once-proud tree remained.

"Early the next morning, the farmer went out to mourn his loss. . . .

"Then, his eyes caught sight of something in the splintered ruin. 'The wedge,' he muttered reproachfully. 'The wedge I found in the south pasture.' A glance told him why the tree had fallen. Growing, edge-up in the trunk, the wedge had prevented the limb fibers from knitting together as they should."

My dear brothers and sisters, there are hidden wedges in the lives of many whom we know—yes, perhaps in our own families.

NARRATOR: Later in the same conference address, President Monson related the following illustration of how a hidden wedge was removed and forgiveness granted:

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning Session, April 2002)

Long years ago, Roy Kohler and Grant Remund served together in Church capacities. They were the best of friends. They were tillers of the soil and dairymen. Then a misunderstanding arose which became somewhat of a rift between them.

Later, when Roy Kohler became grievously ill with cancer and had but a limited time to live, my wife Frances and I visited Roy and his wife, and I gave him a blessing. As we talked afterward, Brother Kohler said, "Let me tell you about one of the sweetest experiences I have had during my life." He then recounted to me his misunderstanding with Grant Remund and the ensuing estrangement. His comment was, "We were sort of on the outs with each other."

"Then," continued Roy, "I had just put up our hay for the winter to come, when one night, as a result of spontaneous combustion, the hay caught fire, burning the hay, the barn, and everything in it right to the ground. I was devastated," said Roy. "I didn't know what in the world I would do. The night was dark, except for the dying embers of the fire. Then I saw coming toward me from the road, in the direction of Grant Remund's place, the lights of tractors and heavy equipment. As the 'rescue party' turned in our drive and met me amidst my tears, Grant said, 'Roy, you've got quite a mess to clean up. My boys and I are here. Let's get to it.' "Together they plunged to the task at hand. Gone forever was the hidden wedge which had separated them for a short time. They worked throughout the night and into the next day, with many others in the community joining in.

Roy Kohler has passed away, and Grant Remund is getting older. Their sons have served together in the same ward bishopric. I truly treasure the friendship of these two wonderful families.

NARRATOR: **In the April 2003 General Conference, Elder David E. Sorensen related the following story about the devastating and long-lasting effects that can occur when one is unwilling to forgive.**

(Elder David E. Sorensen, Saturday Morning Session, April 2003)

I'd like to speak today of forgiveness.

I grew up in a small farming town where water was the lifeblood of the community. I remember the people of our society constantly watching, worrying, and praying over the rain, irrigation rights, and water in general. Sometimes my children chide me; they say they never knew someone so preoccupied with rain. I tell them I suppose that's true because where I grew up the rain was more than a preoccupation. It was a matter of survival!

Under the stress and strain of our climate, sometimes people weren't always at their best. Occasionally, neighbors would squabble over one farmer taking too long a turn from the irrigation ditch. That's how it started with two men who lived near our mountain pasture, whom I will call Chet and Walt. These two neighbors began to quarrel over water from the irrigation ditch they shared. It was innocent enough at first, but over the years the two men allowed their disagreements to turn into resentment and then arguments—even to the point of threats.

One July morning both men felt they were once again short of water. Each went to the ditch to see what had happened, each in his own mind reckoning the other had stolen his water. They arrived at the headgate at the same time. Angry words were exchanged; a scuffle ensued. Walt was a large man with great strength. Chet was small, wiry, and tenacious. In the heat of the scuffle, the shovels the men were carrying were used as weapons. Walt accidentally struck one of Chet's eyes with the shovel, leaving him blind in that eye.

Months and years passed, yet Chet could not forget nor forgive. The anger that he felt over losing his eye boiled inside him, and his hatred grew more intense. One day, Chet went to his barn, took down the gun from its rack, got on his horse, and rode down to the headgate of the ditch. He put a dam in the ditch and diverted the water away from Walt's farm, knowing that Walt would soon come to see what had happened. Then Chet slipped into the brush and waited. When Walt appeared, Chet shot him dead. Then he got on his horse, went back to his home, and called the sheriff to inform him that he had just shot Walt.

My father was asked to be on the jury that tried Chet for murder. Father disqualified himself because he was a longtime friend of both men and their families. Chet was tried and convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

After many years, Chet's wife came to my father and asked if he would sign a petition to the governor, asking for clemency for her husband, whose health was now broken after serving so many years in the state penitentiary. Father signed the petition. A few nights later, two of Walt's grown sons appeared at our door. They were very angry and upset. They said that because Father had signed the petition, many others had signed. They asked Father to have his name withdrawn from the petition. He said no. He felt that Chet was a broken and sick man. He had suffered these many years in prison for that terrible crime of passion. He wanted to see Chet have a decent funeral and burial beside his family.

Walt's sons whirled in anger and said, "If he is released from prison, we will see that harm comes to him and his family."

Chet was eventually released and allowed to come home to die with his family. Fortunately, there was no further violence between the families. My father often lamented how tragic it was that Chet and Walt, these two neighbors and boyhood friends, had fallen captive to their anger and let it destroy their lives. How tragic that the passion of the moment was allowed to escalate out of control—eventually taking the lives of both men—simply because two men could not forgive each other over a few shares of irrigation water.

NARRATOR: **In the October 2005 General Conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley provided a modern story of forgiveness with an outcome very different than the previous story.**

(President Gordon B. Hinckley, Sunday Morning Session, October 2005)

A time back, I clipped a column from the *Deseret Morning News*, written by Jay Evensen. With his permission, I quote from a part of it. Wrote he:

"How would you feel toward a teenager who decided to toss a 20-pound frozen turkey from a speeding car headlong into the windshield of the car you were driving? How would you feel after enduring six hours of surgery using metal plates and other hardware to piece your face together, and after learning you still face years of therapy before returning to normal—and that you ought to feel lucky you didn't die or suffer permanent brain damage?

"And how would you feel after learning that your assailant and his buddies had the turkey in the first place because they had stolen a credit card and gone on a senseless shopping spree, just for kicks? . . .

"This is the kind of hideous crime that propels politicians to office on promises of getting tough on crime. It's the kind of thing that prompts legislators to climb all over each other in a struggle to be the first to introduce a bill that would add enhanced penalties for the use of frozen fowl in the commission of a crime.

"The New York Times quoted the district attorney as saying this is the sort of crime for which victims feel no punishment is harsh enough. 'Death doesn't even satisfy them,' he said.

"Which is what makes what really happened so unusual. The victim, Victoria Ruvolo, a 44-year-old former manager of a collections agency, was more interested in salvaging the life of her 19-year-old assailant, Ryan Cushing, than in exacting any sort of revenge. She pestered prosecutors for information about him, his life, how he was raised, etc. Then she insisted on offering him a plea deal. Cushing could serve six months in the county jail and be on probation for 5 years if he pleaded guilty to second-degree assault.

"Had he been convicted of first-degree assault—the charge most fitting for the crime—he could have served 25 years in prison, finally thrown back into society as a middle-aged man with no skills or prospects.

"But this is only half the story. The rest of it, what happened the day this all played out in court, is the truly remarkable part.

"According to an account in the New York Post, Cushing carefully and tentatively made his way to where Ruvolo sat in the courtroom and tearfully whispered an apology. 'I'm so sorry for what I did to you.'

"Ruvolo then stood, and the victim and her assailant embraced, weeping. She stroked his head and patted his back as he sobbed, and witnesses, including a Times reporter, heard her say, 'It's OK. I just want you to make your life the best it can be.' According to accounts, hardened prosecutors, and even reporters, were choking back tears" ("Forgiveness Has Power to Change Future," *Deseret Morning News*, Aug. 21, 2005, p. AA3).

What a great story that is, greater because it actually happened, and that it happened in tough old New York. Who can feel anything but admiration for this woman who forgave the young man who might have taken her life?

NARRATOR: **Sometimes, it may be necessary to seek forgiveness, not from something you have done, but rather from something you have not done. In the April 2002 General Conference, President Monson told this story:**

(President Thomas S. Monson, Saturday Morning Session, April 2002)

I am acquainted with a family which came to America from Germany. The English language was difficult for them. They had but little by way of means, but each was blessed with the will to work and with a love of God.

Their third child was born, lived but two months, and then died. Father was a cabinetmaker and fashioned a beautiful casket for the body of his precious child. The day of the funeral was gloomy, thus reflecting the sadness they felt in their loss. As the family walked to the chapel, with Father carrying the tiny casket, a small number of friends had gathered. However, the chapel door was locked. The busy bishop had forgotten the funeral. Attempts to reach him were futile. Not knowing what to do, the father placed the casket under his arm and, with his family beside him, carried it home, walking in a drenching rain.

If the family were of a lesser character, they could have blamed the bishop and harbored ill feelings. When the bishop discovered the tragedy, he visited the family and apologized. With the hurt still evident in his expression, but with tears in his eyes, the father accepted the apology, and the two embraced in a spirit of understanding. No hidden wedge was left to cause further feelings of anger. Love and acceptance prevailed.

NARRATOR: And finally, a modern-day story of forgiveness by President James E. Faust, delivered in an address given in the April 2007 General Conference.

(President James E. Faust, Sunday Morning Session, April 2007)

In the beautiful hills of Pennsylvania, a devout group of Christian people live a simple life without automobiles, electricity, or modern machinery. They work hard and live quiet, peaceful lives separate from the world. Most of their food comes from their own farms. The women sew and knit and weave their clothing, which is modest and plain. They are known as the Amish people.

A 32-year-old milk truck driver lived with his family in their Nickel Mines community. He was not Amish, but his pickup route took him to many Amish dairy farms, where he became known as the quiet milkman. Last October he suddenly lost all reason and control. In his tormented mind he blamed God for the death of his first child and some unsubstantiated memories. He stormed into the Amish school without any provocation, released the boys and adults, and tied up the 10 girls. He shot the girls, killing five and wounding five. Then he took his own life.

This shocking violence caused great anguish among the Amish but no anger. There was hurt but no hate. Their forgiveness was immediate. Collectively they began to reach out to the milkman's suffering family. As the milkman's family gathered in his home the day after the shootings, an Amish neighbor came over, wrapped his arms around the father of the dead gunman, and said, "We will forgive you." Amish leaders visited the milkman's wife and children to extend their sympathy, their forgiveness, their help, and their love. About half of the mourners at the milkman's funeral were Amish. In turn, the Amish

invited the milkman's family to attend the funeral services of the girls who had been killed. A remarkable peace settled on the Amish as their faith sustained them during this crisis.

One local resident very eloquently summed up the aftermath of this tragedy when he said, "We were all speaking the same language, and not just English, but a language of caring, a language of community, [and] a language of service. And, yes, a language of forgiveness." It was an amazing outpouring of their complete faith in the Lord's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you."

The family of the milkman who killed the five girls released the following statement to the public:

"To our Amish friends, neighbors, and local community:

"Our family wants each of you to know that we are overwhelmed by the forgiveness, grace, and mercy that you've extended to us. Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. The prayers, flowers, cards, and gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.

"Please know that our hearts have been broken by all that has happened. We are filled with sorrow for all of our Amish neighbors whom we have loved and continue to love. We know that there are many hard days ahead for all the families who lost loved ones, and so we will continue to put our hope and trust in the God of all comfort, as we all seek to rebuild our lives."

How could the whole Amish group manifest such an expression of forgiveness? It was because of their faith in God and trust in His word, which is part of their inner beings. They see themselves as disciples of Christ and want to follow His example.

NARRATOR:

This has been a collection of stories from General Conference on the topic of forgiveness. We hope this program has provided a positive influence in your life. Thank you for listening to the Mormon Channel.