

## A PASTOR'S PATH TO FORGIVING HIS FATHER

Billy Waters

By D.G. Wynn

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and  
discover that the prisoner was you.”

Lewis B. Smedes

FORGIVENESS, GENUINE AND HEARTFELT, IS ELUSIVE THESE DAYS. HOW DO WE FORGIVE GRIEVANCES ON THE SCALE OF TERRORISM? OR EVEN THOSE INJUSTICES THAT OCCUR WITHIN OUR FAMILIES? HOW DO WE FORGIVE IN SUCH A WAY THAT WE TASTE FREEDOM OF THE SORT LEWIS SMEDES DESCRIBES?

We gain insight into that kind of forgiveness through the experience of Billy Waters, senior pastor and priest of Wellspring Church of Englewood, Colorado.

Though Billy grew up familiar with church, his faith journey gained traction when he went to college. He dreamed of playing Division One football and was accepted to Colorado State University in Fort Collins. But it didn't take long to realize his dream would not become a reality in the way he had hoped. His senior year of high school, he suffered from significant injuries and other setbacks that dashed his football dreams.

Reflecting on the period after his injury, Billy said, "I left the disciplined life of sports to go to the undisciplined life in a fraternity." After several months indulging in fraternity life, he woke up one Sunday morning with a hangover and thought, *This is not what life is about.* Billy got up and visited a church a former teammate had invited him to several times.

On this particular Sunday, a traveling preacher was speaking, and in the course of his sermon, extended an altar call. God, in His extraordinary grace, cleared the fog in which Billy had been living. Billy gave his life to the Lord. He left the fraternity and moved in with a friend from the church. This roommate became his long-term mentor, teaching him the disciplines of prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit.

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Billy and his roommate pursued the Lord ardently. They sought opportunities to minister and serve—particularly among the poor—and prayed for hours each day. Billy's pastor took note of his zeal for the Lord and encouraged him to go to seminary. But Billy had been studying for a career in medicine and didn't even know what a seminary was. To honor his pastor, he agreed to attend a preaching conference to learn more. At that conference, the Lord moved in Billy's heart, and he felt called to investigate further.

Eager to learn more, but lacking the Internet search engines of today, he went to the library and carefully combed through the pages of a copy of *Christianity Today* for any ad that referenced a seminary. Though he found five, Billy ultimately chose Denver Seminary because it was close to home and the training and mentoring program

appealed to him after the wonderful experience with his roommate as an informal mentor.

### PAINTING ON HIS CANVAS OF FAITH

Going into seminary, Billy was a blank canvas. "I had no background in theology whatsoever," he said. "It was like they were painting for me a background on which I could incorporate all of these different worldviews, understandings, and mindsets. It gave me a way to make sense of things."

As Billy worked to attain his MDiv, he developed something he considers vital: a secure, orthodox foundation before going into ministry. "It helped me identify the difference between the essentials and the non-essentials of our faith. It taught me to discuss issues in a cogent way while not being so emotionally wrapped up in them."

In seminary Billy gained a firm grasp on truth. He learned to recognize when something was off and why it was off, so he could then articulate it to others—an invaluable skill for a pastor. "In fact," Billy said, "Denver Seminary was a game-changer for me. I loved every square inch of it because I couldn't have gotten that foundation in my faith in any other way in life. Seminary was it for me."



### PLANTING A CHURCH OF JUSTICE AND JOY

Billy graduated from seminary in 1999 with a vision. He had a formative conversation in a missions class about church planting. That, coupled with what he'd learned from Danny Carroll about justice and the poor, drove him to become a church planter in Englewood, a city



near Denver that lags behind Colorado averages on income, employment, and housing. As a result, 14 years ago, Wellspring Church came into being.

Billy's early training and mentoring in his college church in Fort Collins taught him the value of a life of prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit. His time in seminary grounded him in the Word of God and the eternal value of salvation in Jesus Christ. His internship during seminary at an Episcopal church taught him the beauty of revering the Father through the rhythms and practices of the liturgical calendar.

Wellspring is the functional culmination of Billy's faith journey. The church is Anglican, and a joyfully charismatic, evangelical, sacramental congregation. And under Billy's leadership, it pursues the Godhead in a beautifully Trinitarian manner.

#### **FORGIVING HIS FATHER'S FAILURE**

Seven years into his ministry, the church was thriving, but a secret was unearthed that rocked Billy's whole family. He discovered that his father—a drug and alcohol addictions counselor—had become embroiled in illegal and unethical behavior.

When Billy confronted his father on his suspicions, his father's reaction was explosive. Instead of offering explanation or contrition, Billy's father fled the state. Eventually the law

caught up with him, and he went to jail. As things came to light, the revelation of his father's past and present transgressions left deep wounds in his family.

In the years since his father's incarceration and subsequent release, Billy's father succumbed to alcoholism, has been in and out of jail several times, and is often homeless.

When Billy last went to see his father at a shelter several months ago, he felt the Lord tell him that the most loving thing he could do for his father would be to let him go. "I believe my dad knows the Lord, but he is a slave to this addiction. And it was like I was hearing the Lord tell me, 'This isn't the way it was meant to be, but all things will be



restored.’ It was like He was promising me that I will see my father again in the way I was meant to see him—just not on this side of glory.”

This word from the Lord has given Billy a picture of resurrection glory to associate with his father instead of the soul-sucking alternative of withholding forgiveness from an unrepentant man. Billy clings to that hopeful picture of eternal redemption, and it allows him to offer genuine grace to his father.

“Seminary allowed me to keep my head in what is true,” said Billy, “but the situation with my father has allowed me to give my heart to others with grace.”

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When you truly understand God’s *truth*—that we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God—and grasp the joy of His *grace*—the bestowal of undue honor, which is beyond mere restoration—then, and only then, can we truly appreciate the *forgiveness* that He has won for us and extend it to others.

Billy summed up his journey in this way: “I’m learning to hold fast to the truth and yet minister with grace, because that is where the power of transformation lies and that is what allows you to forgive.”

Billy Waters

MASTER OF DIVINITY

*Billy Waters is senior pastor and priest of Wellspring Church of Englewood, Colorado and is an alumnus of the MDiv program at Denver Seminary (1999). He is the husband of an “epic” wife, the father of six kids, and a mediocre ping-pong player.*

