

SENATE FISH AND GAME

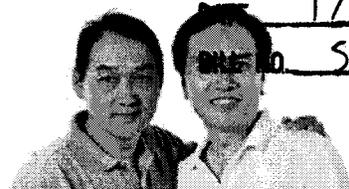
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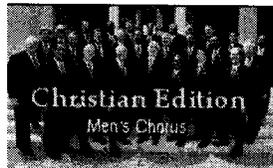
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## Amazing Grace

Her name was Marietta Jaeger and she and her husband and five kids took their first-ever camping vacation in June of 1973. They left their Detroit, MI, home and headed west to Bad-lands National Park, Mt. Rushmore, and the Black Hills.



Photo: Dreamstime

At every rest stop, seven-year-old Susie, the gangly, dark-haired youngest child, practiced cartwheels. Then it was everybody back in the van. Marietta would make a quick head count and they were off again.

On June 23, they reached Missouri Headwaters State Monument near Three Forks, Montana and set up camp beside a river rumbling with snow melt. Four of the kids had a tent all to themselves.

On the third night Susie and 13-year-old Heidi awoke at about 2 and whispered awhile before dropping back to sleep. A few hours later, Heidi was roused by a cold breeze on her shoulders. Groggy, she groped to locate the source and her hand brushed grass where there should have been canvas.

A hole had been sliced into the side of the tent. Two of the sleeping bags beside her were still occupied, but Susie was gone. Quickly the alarm spread and the campground lit up.

The next few heart-stopping hours blurred into days and then weeks as the sheriff was notified, then the FBI. Military crews with tracking dogs combed haystacks and outbuildings, and search planes droned overhead while boats with nets scoured the nearby river.

Two weeks into the ordeal, the family was still at the camp, waiting. It was a search boat with a net that finally undid Marietta Jaeger. Every time the craft halted, the men on board would reel in the net. At every stop, the young mother feared her daughter's body would be in the haul.

As panic and anger rose in Marietta, her stomach roiled and a heavy weight seemed to press against her chest. She fought her feelings, but everything she'd been holding in boiled into a murderous rage. When she crawled into her sleeping bag that night, she told her husband that even if the kidnapper returned Susie unharmed, she would gladly kill him with her bare hands.

She lay awake all night.

Then near dawn Marietta heard a voice and it told her, "I don't want you to feel this way." The message got to her. As a child she had been taught to love her enemies and pray for those who hurt her.

As she pondered the message, the weight on her chest seemed to lift and her stomach relaxed. She fell into the first deep sleep she had had since Susie vanished. In the morning, nothing had changed. She still wanted to kill the monster who'd snatched her little girl. But she'd opened the door just a crack to the possibility that revenge wasn't the best course.

Some say this is how forgiveness starts, not with a rush, but with a weary willingness to try.

Five weeks after Susie's abduction, the Jaegers went home with Marietta counting four heads now instead of five.

### The Turning Point

Back home in Detroit, Bill began packing a gun and sank into silent brooding. For her part, Marietta recalled the flicker of revelation she'd had by the river. And she'd remembered relatives who had died

embittered over ancient affronts.

The conclusion was obvious. Hatred of the magnitude she was feeling got people nowhere. And so she made the decision to try to forgive. She reminded herself that in the eyes of God the kidnapper was as precious as Susie. The thought was awfully hard to swallow, and her exercise of that thought was largely mechanical.

In another strategy, Marietta found a new way to apply the precept to pray for your enemies. She knew he probably lived in the West, and she began wishing him clear skies. Her work became harder each time a development in the case rekindled her rage such as the day a man called claiming to have Susie, seeking a ransom, then hanging up before he could be identified.

Marietta persisted in visualizing positive events in the life of the kidnapper such as blue skies and seeing him catch record size trout. If the kidnapper had Susie, she wanted him to be content. If he did not, she wanted him to come forth and confess.

The relief Marietta felt when she focused on compassion for the man who had wronged her was more than imaginary. Dr. Joan Borysenko, a cancer cell biologist from Harvard and pioneer in studying how emotions affect the body, goes so far as to say that forgiveness is the mind's most powerful healing tool.

How so? Plentiful research now exists showing that hostility is a major risk factor for coronary artery disease and a host of other illnesses. The weight Marietta had originally felt in her chest reflects what was presumably happening in her body as her fury grew. Adrenaline sped into her blood stream, raising her pulse and her blood pressure. Her arteries narrowed and the blood surged through her heart. Over time such stress would be lethal.

But that had stopped as soon as Marietta had made the decision to forgive Susie's kidnapper.

One year almost to the minute that Susie was snatched, the Jaeger's phone rang in the middle of the night. Marietta sprinted toward the kitchen in the dark, switched on the tape recorder attached to the phone by the FBI, then grabbed the receiver.

"Is this Susie's mom?" the guy asked. "I'm the guy that took her from you."

The man said he'd read a newspaper article in which Marietta said she wished she could talk to the kidnapper. She could tell by the tone of his voice that he was calling to taunt her. But the man hadn't counted on the forgiveness homework she had been doing every day after lunch.

When she heard the man's voice, she realized that something had genuinely shifted inside her. The man had done something vile and her child was in dire trouble. Yet the man was also someone's beloved child and in terrible trouble also. The compassion Marietta now felt for him came through in her voice.

She asked evenly if Susie was alive and if he had hurt her. The caller assured her that Susie was fine and that he had hurt her only a little when he had to choke her to keep her from crying out. As he talked, Marietta could hear the clicks of the FBI tracer on the line and she knew the caller must be hearing them too. But every time he grew anxious, she gently drew him in again.

"Can we have her back?" she asked.

"I'm in kind of an awkward position to do that," he said. "I've gotten used to her."

"Why did you take her?"

He stammered for a moment, then said, "I've always wanted a little girl of my own." Then what really brought down the caller's defenses was when Marietta asked with total sincerity, "What can we do to help you?"

There was a brief silence and she realized the kidnapper was crying.

"I wish I knew how to answer that," he said finally.

Miraculously, the call lasted for more than an hour. But the tracer malfunctioned and located the caller in Florida, a dead end. Then the FBI matched a voiceprint of the anniversary call with a call to a suspect in a murder case in the same region where Susie was taken. He was David Meirhofer, a popular baby sitter from the small town of Manhattan, Montana.

When he was arrested, he confessed to killing Susie about a week after abducting her. He also admitted to having murdered a teenage girl and two young boys. Hours after his confession, he committed suicide.

In the years that followed, Bill Jaeger continued to seethe. He developed bleeding ulcers and heart problems. In 1987 he collapsed on the kitchen floor dead of a heart attack. He was only 56.

Today, Marietta, a grandmother of seven, emanates good will as she travels around the country giving workshops on forgiveness. In recent years, she has befriended Meirhofer's 71- year-old mother and the two went together to visit their children's graves.

Afterward the two moms sat in the living room sipping coffee and thumbing through old scrapbooks. There was David Meirhofer in one, a rosy-cheeked little boy, scrubbed and eager to set out for his first day of school. And there were Mother's Day cards from a boy his mother remembered only as doting.

As she studied the smiling boy in the snapshot, Marietta now felt that her struggle to invest the faceless killer of her daughter with humanity was complete. "If you remain vindictive, you give the offender another victim," she said. "Anger, hatred, and resentment would have taken my life just as surely as Susie's life was taken."

Again I challenge you to fix it if you have a forgiveness issue in your life. Whether you need to seek forgiveness or extend it, by God's grace and through an exchanged life, do it. I understand that you can't do this yourself. But when you're truly dead to self, then the Holy Spirit can give you God's forgiveness for whatever hurt you've been through. It can also give you the courage to seek forgiveness from someone you may have hurt along the way.

Then you can begin to receive a healing that will transform your life forever.

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