

Father, Forgive Us

Randall Hall

Richard Nelson's troubles started Tuesday evening when he picked up his scriptures and sat back in the rocker-recliner he had received on his fortieth birthday several years before. The scriptures, brown leather and indexed, were a gift from his son and daughter-in-law who lived in Seattle. He liked the heft of the large-print edition. It seemed to match the weight of the scriptural message, a message that struck him squarely in the heart that evening: "And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you."

He had read the passage in Mosiah many times before, but this time King Benjamin's words were painfully clear. It said *sins*. Not shortcomings, weaknesses, or imperfections. For almost thirty years, Richard had been praying that the Lord would help him overcome his shortcomings and imperfections, with an occasional acknowledgment of his weaknesses. The phrase, he realized, staring out the window toward a darkening horizon, was a very safe one: "And help us to overcome our shortcomings and imperfections."

His parents had always used the phrase. It seemed so natural. And comfortable. There had never been any real sinners in town, much less in his family. Just people with shortcomings and imperfections. Even when Sheila Johnson left her family to run off with a sales representative from the computer company she had been working part time for, Richard hadn't seen her as a sinner. "She must have had a weakness in that area," he had told Loretta.

But that evening, reclining in the warmth of the leather chair, he saw sin for what it was. And he was struck hard as if by a blast of cold wind that robbed him of breath. He, too, was a sinner—not a shortcomer or an imperfectioner—but a sinner.

He squirmed and headed for the kitchen for some bread and milk. He ate mechanically, thinking all the time about how, even though he was the high priests group leader, he still used some cusswords when the occasion warranted and how he had missed a few home-teaching visits in the last several months and how he hadn't accepted it very gracefully when the Vietnamese family moved into the old Larsen place.

Sin was still on his mind several hours later when he and Loretta knelt down together for their nightly prayer. It was her turn, and he listened carefully. There it was: "And please help us to overcome our shortcomings and imperfections." Richard coughed, masking a sudden desire to laugh.

The next night he met things head on. "And please forgive us for our sins," he prayed earnestly. Richard didn't look up, so he didn't see his wife's eyes shoot open nor her staring at him with a peculiar expression on her face for several seconds. He had no idea he was in trouble.

Perhaps he should have sensed it the next morning when Loretta was still in bed after he had showered and shaved. He couldn't remember even three such occasions in their marriage of twenty-one years. She was always up getting breakfast and making sure he had a freshly ironed shirt. He dressed and hemmed and hawed around, but even when he casually reminded her of the time, she only mumbled something about cornflakes in the cupboard and turned over, pulling the covers tightly around her. And so he had fixed his own breakfast and made a feeble attempt at ironing his shirt before heading downtown to the hardware store he owned with his brother Art.

Loretta, who had spent a miserable night, spent a miserable day. What could Richard have meant? What could he have done? It was 2:30 in the afternoon when it came to her. Feeling faint, she sat down in his big leather chair to collect her breath and her thoughts. The new part-time bookkeeper at the store. That was it. Clive Sorenson's cousin Rhonda, a young divorcée, had moved into town three months ago with no ring on her finger, two little girls, and a smile that'd make any woman question her motives. And Richard had hired her.

"No," she thought, trying to calm herself. "Richard would never do such a thing. I've got to get hold of myself." She spent the rest of the afternoon cooking a roast and baking the coconut cream pie that Richard and the judges at the county fair relished.

Then he called. "I'll be home a bit late tonight. Got some inventory that has to be taken care of."

"Couldn't it wait until tomorrow night?" she asked with a catch in her voice.

"Nope. Some things just can't wait."

She thought of going down to the store and having it out right then and there, confronting the two of them in their sin. But she didn't. The roast and the pie went to the neighbors.

She was in bed when he got home and wasn't any too happy when he rousted her out to pray. Blaming a sore throat, she declined to take her turn. So Richard prayed again. And when he asked forgiveness of sins again, she felt like throwing up.

By the end of the week, he was acquiring a taste for cornflakes and had made some real improvements in his shirt-ironing technique.

Richard was home the next night sitting in his rocker-recliner when the phone rang. "It's for you," Loretta called from the kitchen. There was something in her voice that wasn't quite right, as if she had stepped suddenly into subzero weather from a too-warm room. And she turned just a little red around the ears when she handed Richard the phone.

"It's the bishop," she said, looking right at him, watching his eyes.

"Hi, Grant. What's up?" Richard was a bit surprised, but yes, he thought he could get away from the hardware store a little early and go up the canyon for some fly-fishing. Grant and Richard were second cousins, only two years apart. They had done a lot of fishing in their growing-up years, but it had been quite awhile since they had last gone together.

The next afternoon found them on the river with the sun going down and the light resting golden on the water. They fished in silence for almost twenty minutes, waiting for the first strike.

"How's the business, Richard?" Grant asked casually.

"Fine," Richard replied softly.

He could see a big brown circling, and with a practiced flick of his wrist he dropped the fly about ten feet above the fish and let the current drift it slowly down.

“How are things working out with Rhonda Howard?”

“Fine.”

“She’s a mighty fine-looking woman.”

Richard glanced up. There was something constricted in Grant’s tone, like only half the air was getting through his vocal chords. Grant had his head down and was looking away, playing his line. He spoke again. “Pretty enough to turn a man’s head.”

“I suppose,” Richard said, looking over at his friend, wondering where all this was leading. Grant was as decent a Christian as he knew. He had been married to the same woman for over twenty years and had five wonderful kids. Somehow Richard just couldn’t see Grant being tempted. But you never knew.

Just then the brown hit, thrashing the surface of the water. Richard jerked his rod. Too late. He almost swore, but caught himself. “Dang.” If Grant hadn’t rambled on, I might have had him, he thought to himself. There must be something lying heavy on Grant’s mind. He was usually the most silent fisherman Richard knew. Maybe someone in the ward was being tempted. Maybe that temptation was Rhonda, and Grant was just thinking out loud. Well, thought Richard, I sure don’t want to know anything about it. That’s bishop’s work.

They headed home an hour later. Richard had caught four nice German browns. The bishop hadn’t caught a thing. “How was fishing?” Loretta asked as he came in the door. Her eyes were red. Had she been crying? he wondered.

“Fine,” he said. “I caught four. Grant didn’t get a thing.”

“Talk about anything in particular?” she asked, looking out the window.

“No,” he said, taking the creel off his shoulder. “Can’t say as we did.” He figured it best not to mention what Grant had said about Rhonda. Loretta was a good woman, but you never knew what conclusions she might jump to with a tantalizing prod like that. He got a glass of water from the kitchen tap. “You feeling all right?” he asked.

She nodded yes, but not very convincingly, and when Richard came upstairs after putting away his gear, Loretta was already in bed. She was lying in a straight line just an inch and a half from the far edge. Richard wasn't quite certain what to do. Nobody seemed to be acting normal anymore.

After two more days of cornflakes, partially ironed shirts, and suspiciously red eyes, Richard called home again. "Loretta. I'll be a little late tonight. Some bookwork that can't wait."

"Fine," she replied, so calmly she surprised herself. "Take all the time you need." She hung up the phone slowly, feeling like she was floating. She took the frying pan from the sink and with one blow dented the new Formica countertop. "Bookwork my eye," she said to herself. "I thought that's why you hired that dreamy-eyed tramp."

Fifteen minutes later, Richard heard pounding on the side door. "What in the hell?" he thought, then caught himself. "I mean heck." This sin stuff just didn't go away that quickly. He got up from his chair and walked down the hallway. The pounding continued until he opened the door. It was Loretta. There were no tears in her eyes, but they were red.

"How's the bookwork coming?" she asked, her voice thick with sweetness. "Need some help?"

"No," he said, not knowing quite what to make of it all. He knew she wasn't happy. He should have paid more attention to her, but the last week or so had been so busy with meetings, inventory and all. Gently he took her elbow, guiding her toward the door. "Why don't you go home and get some rest," he said in his kindest, most protective voice, "and I'll come home in a while and fix you some of the herbal tea Margaret sent us."

She shook his hand off her arm and looked him right in the face. Her eyes got wild. "I'm going back to that office with you," she said quietly through clenched teeth. He shrugged, and the two of them headed toward the office. She stopped at the doorway and looked around. On the hat rack was a woman's white sweater. Loretta reached out to touch it, then jerked her hand away. "Whose is this?"

"Oh, I think that's Rhonda's."

"And where is she?" Loretta asked, looking around the room. Her eyes stopped on the closed door leading to the stockroom.

"Sacramento, I think," Richard replied. "Been down there almost two weeks taking care of some kind of legal fiddle faddle about custody of her kids. Be nice when she gets back so I don't have to work overtime."

There was a long silence. When Loretta turned around, she had tears in her eyes. Something's out of whack, Richard thought. "Let me take you home, Loretta. I can finish this another night."

She took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes and shook her head no. She looked at him and smiled. It had been almost two weeks since he had seen her do so, and he was more confused than ever. She shook her head again, took a deep breath, kissed him on the cheek, then left without saying a word.

When Richard got home that night, it was almost ten o'clock, but he was greeted by a kiss, the smell of pot roast, and the sight of two huge coconut cream pies on the counter. He noticed a dent in the Formica but decided not to ask. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, and he wasn't sure he would understand even if she told him.

And it was his turn to look up wide-eyed during the prayer that night when he heard Loretta pleading earnestly, "And, Father, please forgive us for our sins."

Randall Hall is Director of Seminary Teacher Training at BYU. "Father Forgive Us" won first place in the first BYU Studies Writing Contest, short story/essay division. A slightly different version of this story has been published in Orson Scott Card and David Dollahite, eds., *Turning Hearts: Short Stories on Family Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994).