The Agony and the Ecstasy is a sprawling, 755-page biographical novel of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Michelangelo, as he is commonly known, was one of the foremost painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance. He painted the venerated ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, sculpted masterpieces like the Pieta and the statue of David, and designed the great dome of St. Peter’s Basilica.

This book draws upon 500 letters written by Michelangelo. As the title suggests, there was considerable agony in Michelangelo’s life. He struggled with his petulant and greedy family, faced significant financial shortfall, was on the receiving end of the whims of his patrons and was continually caught in the crossfire of various political and religious intrigues.

The ecstasy in Michelangelo’s life flowed from his artwork. He was passionate about sculpting and painting God’s beauty expressed in creation. There is a powerful spiritual component to his work. It brought him pure bliss—pure ecstasy.

The passage read earlier from Romans is a comparable story of agony and ecstasy.

Paul’s agony and struggle is laid bare in verse 15: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Later, in verse 19, Paul writes, “I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do.” There is a titanic struggle going on in Paul’s life. He likens it, in verse 23, to a proverbial war going on inside. This is not some novice Christian; some rookie on the religious scene. This is the Apostle Paul, the greatest Christian missionary the world has ever known.

Tell me you feel like this sometimes. Your actions are an enigma even to yourself. What was I thinking when I said such and such to that person? Why do I persist in doing things I know to be wrong?

Let’s face it, folks. Sin is irrational. We attempt to rationalize our sins and make it appear as though there are good reasons for our bad choices. Yet, if we are honest, we would admit there is not always justification for our poor choices. There is no rational explanation for what we do. Sin is, well, irrational.

Paul identifies the root problem in verse 18: “I know that nothing good dwells
within, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it.” The fundamental problem in Paul’s life is something called “the flesh.” Flesh doesn’t refer to Paul’s physical body. He would have used a different Greek word had he been speaking about the body. Flesh refers to Paul’s natural self; the human resources at his disposal. Paul’s human resources or natural self are insufficient to root out deeply ingrained sins. He is powerless to defeat sins in his flesh.

Paul expresses his frustration, in verse 24, over his inability to walk in the newness of life while living as a man of the flesh: “Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from the body of death?” (7:24). He answers with thanksgiving for his deliverance: “Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord” (7:25).

Paul has now flipped the switch from agony to ecstasy. He writes in Romans 8, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (8:2-3).

The word Paul uses in verse 3, condemned, is a strong word. It’s the same word used earlier in verse 1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). In Christ, God condemned sin. Any of you who struggle with God’s forgiveness ought to commit this verse to memory. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Our focus today is forgiveness. We’ve been preaching our way through the Apostles’ Creed this spring and come today to the affirmation, “I believe…in the forgiveness of sins.” Whose forgiveness are we talking about here? Ours and everyone else’s! We start with our sins and work out from there.

We are quite eager to be the recipients of God’s gracious pardon. We receive God’s forgiveness enthusiastically. Yet we’re not nearly so eager to appropriate this forgiveness to other people. No wonder our witness for Jesus Christ in the world is muted. We are unwilling to extend this gospel message of forgiveness beyond ourselves.

At one level, everybody believes in forgiveness. Something C.S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity comes to mind: “Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely ideal until he has someone to forgive.”

Real, tangible forgiveness is hard; excruciatingly hard sometimes. Letting go of past hurts is, admittedly, an arduous process.

We will never make much progress with forgiveness unless we are able to grasp the enormity of God’s forgiveness for our own lives. Only as we comprehend God’s infinite capacity for forgiveness can we
Forgiveness is the deepest need of the human heart.

Some of you might have wished today that I would have preached on the institution of motherhood. After all, today is Mother’s Day, and we want to support moms among us. It’s challenging to raise children in this day and age. We honor all mothers who care for kids and keep the family going.

Yet, this matter of forgiveness is altogether relevant to mothers, fathers and families of all kinds. Forgiveness is the deepest need of the human heart. Families are being torn apart by unforgiveness. *Family Feud* is not only a game show, it’s a way of life for some families. Some of you are no longer on speaking terms with members of your family.

Wess Stafford is President of Compassion International, the largest child relief and development ministry in the world. He tells his life story in a book, *Too Small to Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*. He summarized his painful past in an article he wrote for *Christianity Today* entitled “A Candle in the Darkness.” Wess suffered years of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of houseparents at an isolated mission school in Africa. His missionary parents sent him to this boarding school since they were ministering in the harsh, interior region of West Africa, a setting unsuitable for young children. He chronicles the horrendous consequences of this four year abuse on his young soul. It is inconceivable what some people do to children.

The readers responded to his story with a flood of email and letters to the editor. Wess wrote a follow up to his original article. He began, “Ever since my story appeared...the most common question I’ve hear is, ‘How did you move from pain to deliverance?’ My reply to readers is a single word: forgiveness.

“At age 17, I realized that those who hurt me would never apologize. They weren’t even sorry. But I could no longer bear carrying the pain of my past, so I chose to forgive them anyway. ‘Get out of my heart. Get out of my mind. Get out of my life!’ I remember saying. ‘What you did to me will not define me. You stole my childhood, but you cannot have the rest of my life. Get out-I forgive you.’

“Since then I’ve learned that while God always requires us to forgive, forgiving isn’t saying that what happened was okay. It doesn’t release someone from the consequences of their actions. And it doesn’t require letting someone back into your life. It does mean giving up the right to seek revenge.

“So, here is my counsel to those who have suffered: If you
When we refuse to forgive someone, we allow someone to live rent-free in our hearts.

have never been able to forgive, you are allowing the person who hurt you to live rent-free in your heart. It’s costing him nothing and costing you everything. Perhaps it’s time for you to evict him through forgiveness.”

Wess Stafford’s life is living proof that you can move from hurt to deliverance. God’s deliverance is what fuels his passion for championing the cause of children and speaking out against injustice, abuse and poverty.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Forgiveness starts with you. You can move today from hurt to deliverance. If God through Jesus Christ pronounces you pardoned, you can forgive yourself. If God offers you pardon, accept the gift and move on.

Then take the next step and extend this forgiveness to someone else. If you are having difficulty forgiving someone, start with the enormity of God’s forgiveness in your own life. Because we are forgiven, we forgive.

There is something we must give up when it comes to forgiveness. We must surrender the right to get even. We let go of needing to have the last word. The problem of revenge is that nobody gets the last word. Revenge is a cycle that goes on forever.

There is something perversely delicious about holding on to past hurts. Frederick Buechner writes in his book, Wishful Thinking, “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips at grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Forgiveness is not only a gift we give to other people. It’s also a gift we give ourselves. You can be sitting at home, fuming about something that happened long ago while the offending party is out on the town, having a wonderful time. Your unwillingness to forgive has become a self-imposed exile.

When we refuse to forgive someone, we allow someone to live rent-free in our hearts. I’m urging you to swallow your pride and let go of the hurt. Forgiveness isn’t easy, but it sure beats the alternatives.