March 8. Pope John Paul II. Before John Paul was pope, he lived in Nazi-occupied Poland. Fortunately, the Archbishop of Krakow ran an underground seminary, and the future pope was able to study for the priesthood. After seminary—and after the war—he traveled to Rome to earn a doctorate in theology.

Pope John Paul went on to become the first non-Italian pope in more than 400 years, and he became an advocate for human rights around the world. He believed in following the teachings of Jesus, and he didn’t exclude anyone.

He was the first pope since the first century to step inside a synagogue, and called the Jewish people “older brothers.” He traveled enough miles to go around the world thirty times, and he played a fundamental role in the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe.

**Anger surrendered to God frees a man to forgive.**

On May 13, 1981, John Paul was visiting with thousands of parishioners in St. Peter’s Square. It was just like any other visit to the people he had dedicated his life to, full of blessing parishioners and showing them God’s love. The crowds cheered as John Paul passed, and they greeted him with smiles and waves.

The weather was pleasant, with peeks of sunlight shining through the clouds. The people who stood behind the barricades reached out toward John Paul, and he reached out too, blessing the people. He stood in an open white car as it inched down the street. Someone placed a little girl in his arms, and he held her gently and blessed her with father-like warmth.

Just as he handed her back, a cracking sound echoed through the air. A pop—simple and sudden—cut through the noise of people who were calling John Paul’s name.

Cheers turned to screams, and pain shot through his body. A second hit. A third. And then a fourth. His finger, his arm, and his abdomen stung. His shocked body was knocked back into the arms of his guards, and he sat down hard. His eyes danced around to make sense of what was happening, and the world quickly blurred away.

From a crowd standing near John Paul, a man darted out, and Security scrambled to catch him.
Women cried and screamed. John Paul’s bodyguards encircled him and shouted orders in the chaos. What had been a gentle breeze brushing his skin had turned to a great wind in his face, and the vehicle zoomed toward the nearest hospital.

The emergency attendants confirmed John Paul’s blood pressure had fallen, and he had lost consciousness. His heart rate had slowed. There were murmurs of emergency surgery, and as he was being prepped, his Secretary came forward and administered the Last Rites.

They rushed John Paul into surgery, and doctors worked to stop the internal hemorrhaging. Turned out that one of the bullets missed a main artery by a fraction of an inch. Had the bullet hit the artery, John Paul would have died.

Through life-saving surgery and the prayers of the people, John Paul made a remarkable recovery. And he soon learned who had pulled the trigger and tried to kill him.

The shooter was Mehmet Ali Ağca, who was quickly apprehended and jailed.

As John Paul lay in ICU, hooked up to machines and IVs and confined to his hospital bed, he made a decision that would put his words of faith into practice. From his room, he recorded a message for the people, letting them know he was praying for Ağca, and had forgiven him.

Two years later, John Paul visited Ağca, and there’s a famous picture of the event. John Paul leaned gently toward his would-be assassin as they sat together and talked privately. The Pope would never reveal what they had said.

But he did say, “I forgave him because that is what Jesus teaches us. He teaches us to forgive.”

“Certainly, forgiveness does not come spontaneously or naturally to people,” he wrote. “Forgiving from the heart can sometimes be heroic. … Thanks to the healing power of love, even the most wounded heart can experience the liberating encounter with forgiveness … Real peace … rests above all on … mutual acceptance and a capacity to forgive from the heart. We all need to be forgiven by others, so we must all be ready to forgive. Asking and granting forgiveness is something profoundly worthy of every one of us.”
“Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26 NASB).

Who can you forgive from your heart today? Anger surrendered to God frees a man to forgive.


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