

Healing from Wounds

Jesus makes us new people in a new family. We all want to grow into this grace-gifted identity. But growth doesn't happen without doing the hard work of healing.

We tend to think, "Now that I'm a new person in Christ, my past doesn't impact me anymore. I can forget what's behind and press forward." But the wounds of our past don't disappear simply because we want to be done with them.

Each of us bears a unique imprint of sin, sorrow, and suffering. Our past is still our past—how we were raised, the experiences we had, the stories we created and were told, what we did with our bodies, and what was done to our bodies.

We need to know and acknowledge that every one of these things affects our faith and our understanding of God. But that's okay, because every wound is an opportunity to heal. Jesus has come to redeem, rewrite, and renew all of you—including your past.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes put it this way:

Tending our wounds is central to loving. Love is richer when it comes with an understanding of pain endured, of mortality faced, of chasms crossed. To love is to face the wound honestly and then let the wound be less than one's entire truth, to love despite the wound.

And because we've been wounded in the context of relationships, we will only experience true healing in the context of relationships. Jesus is our healer, but he brings healing in our life through healthy, redemptive relationships.

This new life involves "freedoms from" that give us "freedoms for."

Freedom *from* fear, *for* a greater capacity to love. Freedom *from* earning, *for* a greater capacity to receive. Freedom *from* bondage, *for* a greater capacity to flourish.

Scripture calls this putting off the old self with its practices and sinful coping mechanisms and putting "on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." That phrase, should sound familiar. We've traced the story of Scripture before, but let's quickly review it with relational wounds and relational healing in mind.

The Story of God Healing Us

From the beginning, God's mission has been to form a world that flourishes under his goodness, with humans as the representatives of that goodness. But the first man and woman exchanged that truth for the lie that we can create a self-oriented meaning for ourselves better than the one we were made for. That we should be glorified instead of giving glory. This was the first relational wound.

God was the first person to be hurt by someone he was in loving relationship with, hurt by his beloved creations—us. Our choosing of rebellious autonomy unravelled the perfect relational rightness that defined God's garden on earth. Trust was shattered, love rejected, and safety destroyed, breaking our relationships with one another as well. This was the beginning of every kind of sin, suffering, and sorrow.

Stuck in the cycle

God gave Adam and Eve their desire. They wanted to be independent of him, so they were exiled from the garden. Their internal choice became external reality—life separate from God, and every generation since has acted out in constant mental, emotional, sexual, physical, and spiritual violence against one another. Separate from God, relational wounds can only ever beget more relational wounds.

But God made a covenant promise to a man named Abraham to mend that first, ultimate relational wound, a promise that was itself a relationship. A covenant is a binding agreement based on vows that creates a new relationship, making those involved as close as family. Which meant God made himself family to Abraham's family. He would be family to Abraham's children and his children's children. "I will be your God and you will be my people."

Abraham's descendants grew into the nation of Israel and God continued to make covenant promises to his family, eventually promising through the prophets he would change more than just the circumstances of his people—his Spirit would change their very hearts. Their desires would be his desires and the root of their sin would be cut off and replaced by love for God.

The Wounding of God

But this healing would come at a price, through a promised hero who would be "despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain." His

chastisement would bring us peace, and by his wounds our wounds would be healed.

When God revealed who this hero was...it was God himself! God joined us in the middle of all our sin, suffering, and sorrow. The creator of everything became a baby boy born into a human family and made his home with us.

When he grew up, Jesus travelled all over Israel healing the sick with his words, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, and demonstrating that the suffering and sorrow which sin brought to the world was being healed and replaced by God's kingdom.

But, because this message of kingdom threatened the cultural, political, and spiritual elites' relationship to power, Jesus was brutally beaten, nailed to a wooden cross, and lifted up for all to see. God could not remove sin from his world without removing us, so Jesus—the only one who never deserved it—took the death we all deserved, the death that is the only natural conclusion to our relational separation from the Author of Life.

Only the wounds of God could heal our wounds.

Of course, death couldn't hold the Author of Life—Jesus rose from his tomb, then rose again to his throne in heaven. As promised, he sent his own Spirit to transform our hearts and empower us to walk in the ways of God as Jesus had.

The master of master storytellers, God is driving the entire narrative of creation to an exciting conclusion where sin, Satan, and death are removed forever, Jesus is glorified over a fully renewed creation, and everyone and everything will once again be in right relationship to one another. A perfect shalom—remix edition. And your individual story is part of that that master narrative.

Reflect

What challenges are you facing now? How are these shaping your character to be more like Jesus?

Your Story

So let's talk about your story. Your story is what has shaped your beliefs about God, the world, and yourself. The themes that dominate our stories will often be patterns for how we define ourselves and view our relationship to God.

We must know, own, and share our stories if we're ever to be met with true compassion in the midst of our pain. That we are both truly known and truly loved is where Jesus begins his rewrite of our story.

Knowing

Part of our healing will involve owning our story: how we've been formed, how Jesus is redeeming our history, and how God is inviting us to reflect him in our relationships. But to own something, we must first know it.

Knowing and owning our story isn't narcissism. It isn't navel gazing. It's not self-indulgence. To know one's self in truth is to know one's need for God. A right understanding of ourselves will always lead back to God.

But to even begin to really know our stories, we've got to know God. So that's where we start. Knowing God will always impact our right understanding of who we are—deeply loved, no matter how broken.

If we press into our own stories without first knowing that we are fully known, loved, and chosen in Christ we will be overwhelmed by our pain, darkness, sin, and sorrow. We'll be drowning without hope.

But when we realize God is who he says he is—that he loves us to death and never changes—we are able to enter our stories safely. Knowing God is there we can look back at the sin, suffering, and sorrow of our stories and know that we are not alone. We can know, own, and share our stories in freedom. We can be vulnerable because God secures us.

Sharing

We share our stories because we're made for relationship and knowing the events and forces that have shaped one another's lives will help us know and understand one another.

As we get to know one another's stories, we are invited to engage in God's work of making those stories new. We love others by participating in the new parts of their narrative where Jesus is bringing conviction, healing, peace, and hope to them day-by-day.

Telling others about your life may stretch your vulnerability. That's okay! Maybe the whole idea freaks you out a little bit. That's okay, too!

Start small. Share what you're experiencing. You could say, "I don't like talking about myself, so this is hard for me," or "I'm going to give the overview, but there are things in my story I'm not ready to share." This will help your friends and community listen to, pray for, and love you better.

Listening

Of course, for many of us, listening to stories can be almost as difficult as sharing them. Our first inclination will be to make someone else's story about us by relating it to our own stories, by responding out of our own discomfort, by wanting to fix it, or throwing out cheap platitudes rather than holding the cost of simply bearing witness and being present to them.

The most important thing to remember when we listen to someone else's story is that their story isn't about us, it's about what God has done and is doing in them. Jesus is the hero of our stories.

After someone shares their story, reflect back one detail, event, or emotion that seemed important to them. "Reflecting" is part of listening: it can be as simple as repeating back key things you heard, or summarizing something that was said in a way that honors the other person's experience. Doing this shows others you are listening and invites connection.

Practicing

Keep in mind that knowing our stories, owning them, sharing them, and listening to them are processes, not events.

In the same way that living into our new identities in Christ is a lifelong process, learning our true story is something we'll do for the rest of our lives. We practice over time, growing into deeper and deeper ways of knowing both God's story and our own.

As Dane Orltund put it:

The Christian life, from one angle, is a long journey of letting our natural assumption about who God is, over many decades, fall away, being slowly replaced with God's own insistence on who he is....The fall in Genesis 3 not only sent us into condemnation and exile, [it] also entrenched in our minds dark thoughts of God, thoughts that are only dug out over multiple exposures to the gospel over many years.

Our friends and community will play a key role in this process of knowledge becoming experience and theology becoming practice. Remember, because we've been wounded in the context of relationships, we will only experience healing in the context of relationships.

Reflect

Where do you long for God to redeem, rewrite, and renew your story?

Learning to Lament

All of our stories include episodes where we've been wounded and where we've wounded others. These wounds and woundings will be accompanied by all sorts of difficult emotions.

- How should we pray when we're angry?
- What if God is the one we're angry with?
- How do we connect with the Father when we feel ashamed, betrayed, or hopeless?
- What if we're feeling something we can't put into words?

While we may be practiced at confessing our sin and receiving Jesus' forgiving grace, many of us do not have language for calling out to God in our suffering or sorrow.

What we need is lament.

Lament is a prayerful response to the very real struggles of life; a cry to God addressing the incongruity between our experience and his kingdom. In lament, we learn to bring our whole selves to God.

Beyond being a way to carve out space for processing loss and pain, lament also cultivates more profound relationship with God as we open to him in deep vulnerability. Drawing near to him in lament, we become more available to his healing hand, and in return have our hope strengthened and joy expanded by the one who has promised to carry us through.

Lamentation is a process of crying out to God—bringing our pain to him as our needed Comforter and Healer. To learn it, we cannot rely on our instinctual communication. Our hearts turn inward on themselves and, even in religious acts, they seek to make much of us and little of God.

Instead, we need Jesus Christ and his word. Scripture gives us soul-language for lament, soul-grammar for grief. Lamentation is important enough that there's a book of the Bible named after it. And the biblical book of Psalms contains many lamentations that have been used for thousands of years.

Those Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God and, like all Scripture, find their fullness in Christ himself. With this in mind, we can see that lament in the Scriptures

—and in our hearts as well—is a longing for the promised king who makes all things new. The psalms teach us how to pray because they are the word of God which looks forward to and exults in Christ.

The psalms are also the outpourings of real people with real lives thick with sin, suffering, and sorrow. David and the other writers lived with sinful natures in a broken world, just like us. They cried out to God in their abandonment, depression, and anger. So while the psalms are the Word of God, they are also the prayers of people like us.

And, boy, do the psalms communicate some intense emotions! We can hear in their lines urgent desperation, vengeance, and crippling sorrow. The psalmists complain to God with bleak imagery, violent curses, and blistering questions.

Few of us would admit to ourselves that our feelings are so strong, let alone introduce a desire for vengeance into a conversation with God. This is where the psalms teach us something vital to our becoming fully alive in Christ: our Father wants to hear our woes.

God invites us to express the full range of our emotions as we struggle with sin, suffering, and sorrow. In order to lament, we must be willing to connect with ourselves as we seek to connect with God. We must admit that we feel the pain and injustice of the world and our personal stories deeply, and know that our Father desires to partner with us as our hearts search for hope and joy in the midst of suffering and sorrow.

Scripture also acknowledges that some pains and some sorrows are beyond even being able to express in words. We may not know how to articulate what's in our heart nor fully understand what we're feeling. God isn't surprised by that, and he will meet you in your inarticulation. Romans 8 tells us:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The Garden of Gethsemane

As an example of lament, let's again look to Jesus, the incarnate Son, who knows loneliness, sorrow, and grief more intimately than we do or ever could.

The first relational wound occurred in the Garden of Eden. It was in a different garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, the night of his arrest, that Jesus displayed a new way to grapple with pain.

Where Adam and Eve ran into the woods to hide, Jesus went into his garden to commune with his Father.

Adam and Eve scattered into isolation, blaming others for their mess. Jesus brought his friends with him ... shared his emotions, and asked them to pray.

Jesus came into Gethsemane with a heart full of sorrow and with the explicit purpose of pleading for God to let his suffering pass.

Sweating and bleeding, he prayed repeatedly that what he was about to endure would not happen.

Have you ever prayed for something multiple times, passionately pleaded for it, and still nothing happened—even when it was a good thing? Jesus understands that.

In this moment, Jesus taught us how to go to God in our pain, when we are overwhelmed, exhausted, and hurting. When we experience violations of trust, safety, and love. When we long for freedom, for justice, and for healing.

He shows us a new way of ownership rather than blame, of acceptance rather than shame, of surrender rather than control, and of connection rather than escape.

Please note that nowhere is it indicated that his ownership, acceptance, surrender, and connection gave Jesus relief. Trusting God will not necessarily alleviate pain, but it *will* deepen our intimacy with the one who loved us enough that he chose to enter into our pain with us.

Letting Go

Of course, we don't always want him to join us in our pain. We desire to leave it behind entirely. We long for relief from our mess. We want to know how things can be fixed—how we can be fixed. What can we do? Maybe there is a formula or some tools that can lead us out of this.

But we are powerless to heal ourselves in our own strength—because, boy, have we tried! There are so many different ways we attempt to fix things or to cope with them:

- We isolate from everyone because someone hurt us, but we end up feeling anxious, overwhelmed, fearful, or alone.
- Or we try control—to fix ourselves, to figure out the formula, to just keep doing more good to cover up the bad.
- Maybe we escape, getting as far from the painful reality as possible by whatever means necessary.
- Sometimes we blame others and hold onto unforgiveness and bitterness like they somehow makes us powerful, justified, or protected.
- Shame might become our most faithful companion—letting our suffering and sin be what defines us, what we can never escape, what we are forever bonded with.

But these tools don't work, do they?

They are lies, distortions, and condemnations that wound us even further. They are also the same patterns and reactions as our first parents in the Garden of Eden. Our past, always repeating, always haunting us.

We want a smooth and easy path, a sense of relief, if even just for a moment. A next step or a break from it all. Maybe we think if we just have an incredible experience with God, it will all go away, or if we just learn this new thing about the gospel, we won't suffer any more. We want a feeling or insight that will deliver all our healing.

But our redemption isn't found in relief from pain or in new concepts. It's not found in new behaviors or the right community. Our redemption is found in Christ. Our peace is found in him *amidst* the chaos.

As we saw in Gethsemane, ultimate healing is not the absence of pain, but the presence of Christ.

Even so, Jesus doesn't force his way into our pain. He knocks. He's patient, not frustrated. He waits. He never tires. We need to invite him into our deepest pain. We need to say "Yes" to our powerlessness and "No" to our autonomy outside of God.

Even if it's just a willingness to be made willing to let go, we've got to start somewhere. But so often we want to know all the specifics: how long healing will

take, what assurances there are that we'll get what we want, etcetera, before we trust.

But if we knew everything, it wouldn't leave much room for faith or for a Savior. What we do know is we can't do this on our own. And we don't have to.

Christ has purchased us and is actively reinterpreting our patterns, our relationships, and stories. One of his names is Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." Sin, suffering, and sorrow don't just go away. Pain doesn't just go away, circumstances don't just resolve.

But Jesus doesn't go away either. Because our story is actually about him.

Reflect

What emotions are difficult for you to acknowledge or express? What do you think God the Father thinks of those emotions?

The Hero of Every Story

All of us have joy, pain, disappointment, and hope mixed into our stories. But Jesus steps in and brings us into *his* story of redeeming everyone and everything.

Our greatest life-pivoting moment is when we are amazed by grace and turn from our sin to follow Jesus. *He* is the hero of our stories. He is the hope we look forward to. He has filled us with his Holy Spirit and promises to finish the healing work he has begun in us.

Let's keep God's story and our stories in mind as we get to know one another; remembering that every opinion, sin, virtue, and desire has a greater context than this moment.

Let's keep praying that God will help us know his love in a way that moves us to love others, hear their stories, and invite them into the wondrous, healing story God is writing for the whole world.

The most important things in life often aren't the things you need to learn, but the things you already know that you need to be reminded of.

- Healing is not a one-time thing, just like growth is not a one-time thing. Healing doesn't come with a neat little bow and a diploma. Healing is not linear, a straight line from point A to point Z.
- Healing is cyclical. Seasonal. It's like traveling up a mountain. As the trail circles around, you find yourself coming across the same issue, the same struggle, the same area of growth.

But as you continue growing and healing, you travel higher up the mountain and start to see those things from a different vantage point. Maybe you have a softer heart, a more readied response, a deeper understanding.

You're still becoming who you already are, but you've gotten closer. You aren't the same person you were when you began.

Like Lucy at the end of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, you look down and find this hill was much higher than you thought it was and that "the further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets."

Yes, there may be specific seasons of intense healing. Divine invitations to press deeply in. But healing is mostly a process of curating, shaping, and engaging a Jesus-reflecting life as you grow and are made ever more like him.

It takes discipline to confess, to surrender, to be honest, to lament, to repent, and to receive—you must choose to practice these things and to open yourself to the Spirit to empower you to do them. But as this practicing grows your trust of God and you learn to engage it habitually...it slowly becomes your new normal, your new patterns and cycles.

The patterns and cycles of a new person.