

Healing Our Relationships • Psalm 147:3

There is a Native American legend about the daughter of Chief Hiawatha. Her name was Itasca and the legend says that she wept so many tears that her name was given to Lake Itasca, the source of the Mississippi River.

Some of us have wept enough tears over broken relationships to fill a Mississippi of our own. How do you describe the heartache of a broken teenage romance? Or the feelings when fired from a job you loved by a boss you trusted? Or the ever-present pain of hatred from a prodigal child you love with all your heart? Or the resentment you feel over a good marriage that was betrayed with adultery? Or the hope you had for a church that wounded your soul?

Only a small percentage of us carry physical scars from major surgery or serious injury but all of us know about the wounds of a broken relationship. We know from experience what was reported in a Chicago Tribune article. A brain-imaging study showed that social rejection lit up the brain in much the same way as physical pain. Some will tell you that they have felt the pain from a surgeon's knife or a soldier's bullet but that the pain of a broken relationship hurts far more and heals far less quickly.

King David of Israel dearly loved his son Absalom who turned against his father and led a military rebellion to seize the throne. This broke his father's heart. Absalom died in a battle of the civil war he instigated against his father. When David was informed of Absalom's death he was overcome with grief. Not only was his son dead, any hope of reconciliation was gone. What was a great day of military victory for David's army was transformed into a day of grief by the king's uncontrolled emotions. The record is in II Samuel 19:1-4:

"The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom." And for the whole army the

victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said, "The king is grieving for his son." The men stole into the city that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle. The king covered his face and cried aloud, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Many of us could pray the words of Psalm 77:1-2, *"I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted."*

God wants to heal our relationships. He did not create us for broken hearts. But, how does God fairly heal a relationship without turning people into robots? She wants their marriage reconciled but he doesn't. Should God overrule his will and make him love her? And, even if God did such a thing, does she really want a relationship that is against the will of the one she loves? As much as God yearns for our relationships to be everything he desires them to be, God must also be fair, just and respectful of the choices others make. God does not have an easy job!

How then does God heal our relationships? Let's consider a variety of ways.

God sympathizes with us in our troubles. Here are the passionate words of the Old Testament psalmist who experienced the sympathy and compassion of God in the midst of

his problems and pain in Psalm 116:1-5:

I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and

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sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "O Lord, save me!" The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.

Sometimes we need sympathy more than a solution. Our hearts are broken and our problems are overwhelming. We just need someone who will listen with unconditional love.

I remember times when individuals have come to me and poured out their stories for an hour straight. My heart was heavy with their burdens. I just listened, barely speaking a word. At the end of our time together they have said, "Thank you. You have enormously helped me—more than you could ever know." I have thought, "Help them? I didn't say a word!" But it was the help of caring; the help of compassion; the help of sympathy. Sometimes what we need most to heal is someone who will listen.

God heals our wounds with who he is. God transforms our lives by his presence, his love and his listening. Don't ever say that is not good enough. Love and compassion are among God's most powerful prescriptions. Even if everyone else abandons us, God is there for us. If no one else understands our pain—God understands. If everyone else turns against us—God is on our side. That is why Paul wrote in II Corinthians 1:3-4:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Sympathy is very good but God heals with more than compassion. God forgives.

When we are honest about our broken relationships we admit that we carry guilt for our misbehavior. Even though the majority of the blame may rest with someone else, we bear our own guilt in what has gone wrong. Maybe we never should have gotten into this relationship in the first place. We should not have responded the way we did. We made a bad situation worse.

We need forgiveness.

Many of us can honestly say that most of the blame is ours. Our marriage went wrong because of our lust and misbehavior. Our actions alienated family and friends. What we did resulted in the loss of our job or caused our children to hate us.

Guilt is a heavy burden to carry. The only hope for healing begins with forgiveness and God promises to forgive every mistake and sin on our list. Not that it is always easy. We must confess our guilt to God. We must repent in genuine sorrow. God promises that he will suffer with us and graciously forgive us.

Even if the other person refuses to forgive, God mercifully forgives us and blesses us. Forgiveness is the primary prescription for wounded relationships. God forgives us and grants us the power to forgive others. That is why we pray, "*Our Father in heaven, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*"

We cannot control the behavior of others but we can forgive them. The beginning of our forgiveness of others is in God's forgiveness of us. Even if they will not admit to their wrong, even if they refuse our forgiveness, even if it is painfully difficult to forgive we can forgive them because God has forgiven us.

Forgiveness is a powerful medicine. It relinquishes the right to get even. It reduces the other person's power in our lives. It follows the example of Jesus. It heals our own hearts and souls. It paves the way to reconciliation. God forgives us and gives us the power to forgive others. Forgiveness is the divine medicine to heal the hurt of painful relationships.

But the truth is that most wounded relationships do not heal instantly. It can take time and teaching. Often our relationships were bad because we did not know how to relate. We need to be taught what to say, how to think and what to do. When the wounds are severe it may take us a very long time to learn all over again how to connect to other people.

If you suffer a serious accident or are recovering from an illness or surgery you will prob-

ably be sent to a physical therapist or an occupational therapist. The PT or OT is really a teacher who will instruct you in exercises and behavior. You will be taught how to talk, walk, sit, stand, cook, go upstairs and downstairs, get in and out of a car and otherwise behave in ways to make you healthy and strong. There will be weekly appointments with your therapist/teacher and assignments to do every day until it becomes part of the way you think and behave. Such therapy can be life transforming.

It is like that with the teaching of God. We come to him with our relational wounds and he heals through teaching—showing us how to repent, forgive, understand and relate. He gives us assignments to practice week-after-week until we become strong and healthy.

King David suffered a whole catalog of relational wounds. Listen to his prayer in Psalm 25:4-5: “*Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*”

In answer to the prayer for healing through teaching Jesus promised the spiritual therapist called the Holy Spirit in John 14:26: “*The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*”

So God heals through sympathy and forgiveness and teaching. But that still does not address what I think is the stickiest problem of relational healing. What if we want a relationship fixed but the other person doesn’t? It may be conflict between teachers and students, parents and children, brothers and sisters, labor and management, plaintiffs and defendants, creditors and debtors, church members and neighbors. Will God force someone into a right relationship?

Maybe you remember when you were seven years old and your mom made you apologize to your neighbor for trampling her azaleas. You said

the words but you didn’t mean anything you said. Hardly the basis for healing a broken relationship!

Let me tell you what God does. He uses circumstances. He influences. He persuades. He puts on pressure. Sometimes he directly intervenes. But he does not force people into a relationship they do not choose. So when we pray for God to make a difference we trust him to use his powers to influence for good but also to respect the integrity and will of the other person. She or he must make the choice about reconciliation. The apostle Paul wrote in I Timothy 2:1-2:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made to everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

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St. Paul urges us to pray for God’s influence on our relationships so that we can live “*peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.*” At a time when the emperor was an absolute dictator Paul uses him as an extreme example. We should pray for God to influence the President of the United States and our neighbor next door. Trust God to encourage those for whom we pray to make relationships good, peaceful, quiet, godly and holy.

The ultimate goal of divine healing of relationships is reconciliation. Reconciliation is bringing people back together. It is restoration of friendship and harmony. It is bringing us back together again. It is God’s dream come true. And we have a part in that. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:17-19:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s

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sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The greatest of broken relationships is between God and sinners. God sent Jesus to earth to reconcile our relationship with God. He wants us to have a good relationship with him and with one another. How far will God go to make this happen? He sent his one-and-only Son from heaven to earth to die for us and to make things right.

So, where are you wounded? What relationship do you yearn to have healed? Are you ready for God to heal your relationship? Will you come to him for his sympathy, compassion, forgiveness, teaching, influence and reconciliation? Will you trust him to heal your heart?

We read in Psalm 147:3, “*(The Lord) heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*”

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