

The Relationship That Heals

I was exiting a bus on the way to meet with some friends for a Christmas eve gathering in Busan, Korea. Once outside, I couldn't help but notice a slightly tottering, inebriated young Korean soldier who looked like he could use a bit of holiday cheer. "Merry Christmas!" I said with a smile. His frosty reply could have chilled a polar bear. "You don't care," he sneered with an aroma of alcohol outpacing his words. "Nobody loves me and nobody cares!"

I had no idea what I was encountering or how to extricate myself, so I latched onto the first sincere idea that came into my head. "Don't your parents love you?" I asked with a pleading look. His face hardened like quick-dry concrete. "My parents are dead. Nobody loves me and nobody cares." Why does he keep saying that? I wondered. Seeing his mournful heart on full display, I offered the one Hope that is able to cover our most desperate losses. "God loves and cares for you."

"No, He doesn't," Mr. Lee spat out. "I told you that nobody loves me and nobody cares!"

As icily resolute as this man was, I sensed a supernatural tug on my heart to keep engaging him. I knew that the compassionate love of his Creator was my only hope to warm his soul, but I couldn't force him to even consider that such love exists. All I knew was that I hoped he would take even the smallest sip

of extended mercy, and perhaps at some later time, desire more.

Despite his outward resistance, I felt that if I kept talking he would follow. And he did. Mr. Lee then accepted my invitation to attend the Christmas eve gathering where I introduced him to my friends. When our evening visit ended, I invited him to come to my church the next day, assuring him that there would be a present waiting for him. Others warmly echoed the same invitation, but Mr. Lee was like a broken record. He kept repeating his oft-used phrase, "I'm not coming, because nobody loves me and nobody cares."

I was speaking that weekend in church. To my pleasant surprise, halfway through my presentation I

For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes.—Jer. 31:25.

noticed him slip in the back, hunching a bit warily, not wanting to be noticed. I quickly yelled out, "Hey, Mr. Lee!" Not really, I didn't, but my heart did. I had just purchased a new sweater, and had wrapped it for him, hoping he would come. After the service, I thought I detected just a bit of thawing somewhere deep inside when he opened his gift.

After lunch, we invited him back, but he continued to cling to his self-loathing refrain that he just couldn't, because after all, nobody loved him and nobody cared. Other

encounters followed, each one playing out this strange dance of invitation, resistance, then acceptance.

Some months later, he again showed up unannounced at a class I was teaching. Leaning over a table around which we had gathered to study the Bible, Mr. Lee did something I had never seen him do. He smiled broadly, then he said, "I finally do really believe that God loves me!" How wonderful! I thought to myself. He's on the road to healing.

God says in His Word:

For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes. — Jeremiah 31:25 (NASB)

Experiences such as this with Mr. Lee only lead me to affirm that the

greatest force in the universe is not loneliness or fear; it's not even suffering, or sin, as terrible as those realities are. The greatest force in the universe is God's infinite love—a love so powerful that it can overcome our greatest deficits, failures, losses and misplaced yearnings. Such love is more than enough to heal the effects of every sin, and can even grant us grace to thrive when all else fails. God's love defies logic. It's bigger than all difficulties. It can overcome every obstacle.

At first, Mr. Lee was convinced

that God couldn't possibly be the relevant answer to his own personal needs and problems. But the magnificent Creator of all life meets us humans right where we are—whether in careless indifference or defiant resistance—and takes us to the place where He becomes not merely the best escape route out of any crisis, but the faithful God whom we can enjoy and delight in above all other previous pursuits. We then say with King David:

You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. —Psalm 16:11 (NKJV)

I could relate to Mr. Lee because I remembered my own immense dissatisfaction as a teenager living in Los Angeles. I sought multiple pathways to help diminish some of the stinging disappointment of life promising so much but yielding so little. The tagline of a TV news station seemed to mock me when it said, “There’s more to life than news, weather and sports,” but they never told me what that something “more” was! And I was desperate to know.

I remember wondering at the time, what would happen if someday the world was obliterated out of existence? If that happened, there would be no one to remember how precious babies were to their mothers, and no tender memories to linger in the hearts of those who live on. I then concluded that the only way for real happiness to continue forever was if some kind of Divine Being existed who was big enough to uphold the universe, yet personal enough to want to have an eternal connection with those He created. But at the same moment, I wondered whether I was wishing for far too much—for the impossible.

My internal musings did help, however, to set me on a search to see if whether or not there was an ultimate meaning to life. If there wasn't, I then wondered if life was really worth living. But if there was...I imagined lots of possibilities....so I decided to begin an earnest search for truth as thoroughly as detectives look for clues. Shortly thereafter, I met a ‘pothead’ inside a hospital I was employed at. After telling him of my search, he replied, “I know a guy here named Larry, who likes to study the Bible with people.” At that moment, I thought this fellow was one taco short of a combination plate, so I said, “No thanks. I’m looking for truth!”

I actually had never read the Bible myself, and I assumed it was mostly written to give structure to a quaint religion for the elderly and the weak. But it couldn't possibly reveal the truth of an infinite, personal Being, even if there was one.

Strangely enough, not long after this, I met Larry in a hospital lunch line. His smile felt so genuine and trustworthy that I found myself asking if we could have Bible studies. “Of course,” he happily agreed. We began meeting at lunch time, and as I read the pages of Scripture I found something so different from what I had encountered up to that time. In my search for truth, I had tried philosophy, new age notions, communication with spirits, and myriads of pleasurable and adrenaline-releasing experiences. But in the end I felt they all promised so much, but only left me with



a gaping hole to fill.

But the Holy Bible was different. As I read it, I discovered the writings of prophets who outlined history in advance, amazing details about God's perfectly loving and trustworthy character, and ultimately, the most heart-warming revelation about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). I detected a Divine signature. While it's Author was above and beyond creation, He willingly entered our realm to provide an authoritative, trustworthy communication of His love and plan to save us. This wasn't religion. It was Ultimate Truth I had been seeking for. It wasn't a creed, or merely a set of ancient, archaic instructions, but rather the Promise of ultimate satisfaction and healing—one that could actually be fulfilled!

This was further affirmed when Larry invited me to visit his church one day. Though I didn't see him when I first entered, I saw him later, standing next to a quadriplegic lady in a wheelchair. Her head was tilted back and she drooled from her mouth.



How nice of Larry to bring this woman to church, I thought to myself. Then I asked someone who she was. “That’s Larry’s wife, Jan,” was the response. “They both grew up as Christians, but after they married they strayed far from God and began living a destructive lifestyle. One night, Jan had a stroke, and the doctors said she would die soon. Larry prayed one of those bargain basement prayers: “Lord, if You save Jan, I promise to completely return to You.” Jan miraculously lived through the night, although it was discovered that she had contracted a terrible disease called Lupus. But Larry was true to his word and came back to Jesus.”

After hearing this story, I was amazed at the love Larry had for his wife. I knew that most men would have left long ago. She couldn’t speak to him, button her daughter’s dress, or even kiss her husband goodnight, but he stayed with her and treated her like a princess. Tears streamed down my face as I realized that Larry must know a God of love who can satisfy one’s heart, and help them face anything, no matter how bad things got. That sealed my decision to become a real Christian, too.

From that point on, I began to

see ‘being saved’ as more than just a legal declaration of pardon for my sins, but a great and personal healing that God seeks to minister on every level of our lives. In fact, the original Greek word for “salvation” (“sozo”) means “healing.” When we receive Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we begin a journey of healing from our love for sin that is replaced with love for Jesus. But why doesn’t this happen all at once? If we come to Him to not only escape the penalty of sin, but the wretchedness of its power, why doesn’t God free us totally and immediately from its grasp?

I once asked this question to a friend and his answer helped put things into perspective. “John,” He said, “God isn’t like an ATM machine. He’ll only give you as much of His power to live for Him as you will continue to seek and depend upon Him for.”

A light went on inside my head. I got it. In other words, God never grows us outside of a relationship with Him. He won’t just zap us into perfection. Instead, He heals and transforms us only as we experience Him in a vital, daily, dependent relationship. Jesus Christ said:

I am the true vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. —John 15:5 (NKJV)

As I focus on Him and become lost in His beauty, I not only become dissatisfied with sin, I also find satisfaction in Him. In Jesus, we find the law of higher affection, or what the famous old preacher Thomas Chalmers called, “The explosive power of a new affection.”

For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness. —Psalm 107:9 (NKJV)

The more Jesus is lifted up in our thoughts and affections, the more the old ways of coping begin to jettison as they’re replaced with a much greater affection for our Savior—the true Satisfier of our souls.

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself. —John 12:32 (NKJV)

To be honest, this experience has been more profoundly forged in the heat of the valley than on the mountain top. While serving on a mission project in Korea I became sick with internal bleeding. When I was admitted to the hospital, my hemoglobin was 3.0. I was coming close to bleeding out. The doctors wanted to do emergency surgery, but they didn’t have my blood type. I don’t have rare blood, there just happened to be a shortage of my particular blood-type that day. I had tubes in several places and some of them were extremely painful. I couldn’t communicate well with the staff. I thought that if I died, my parents who aren’t Christians wouldn’t understand. They would say, “We let our son be a missionary for You, Lord, and You let him die. We can’t trust a God like You!”

I didn’t know whether to panic, or trust, but somehow I knew I had a choice. So I prayed. “Lord, I’m so overwhelmed on every level, I don’t know what to do. Can You give me the peace of Your presence, even at a time like this?”

Then I sensed that familiar, confident Voice telling me, “Johnny, you’ve spent every day with Me listening to My voice, being fed by My presence, ministering with Me to My children. Every day you’ve placed something in your spiritual bank account, and now, you can draw out as much as you need. There’s no reason to panic because you can never draw more than I can

give you. Draw from Me. When I'm all you have, I'll be all you'll need."

God's Holy Spirit spoke so assuringly that I was enveloped by an overwhelming sense of peace. I folded my hands, closed my eyes, and breathed out, "Lord, if You want me to live, I'll live praising You and serving You. And if You allow me to die, I'll die loving You and praising You, just the same."

Now I realized for myself that God wasn't just there for the great saints and those with the most elite spiritual experience, because I knew my journey was riddled with many failures. But God still opened His bank for me when I had no resources of my own. Even in our most desperate moments, God can be trusted and adored. Even when faced with the greatest earthly loss, He still makes sense, because a real relationship with Him is its own reward, and His Word promises us that there will be no end to that.

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness.

—Psalm 17:15 (NKJV)

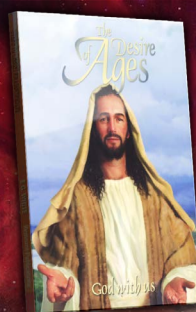
Consider one more analogy: that of eating. On special occasions like Thanksgiving or Christmas, I typically enjoy a delectable feast with my friends. At other times, I just eat and say, "That was fine. That was good." Sometimes it's merely fast food. Some meals I skip. But generally speaking, daily eating keeps me healthy. Spiritually speaking, it's the same way with my relationship with God. Sometimes it's a feast and His presence is so real and overpowering that I can hardly look up amidst the worship. Other times, my soul pauses to be fed and I leave, saying, "That was fine. That was good." Other times it's a bit like fast food—not great for health, but enough to get me through to the next meal. And sometimes, I'll admit, I have skipped my time with God. But the basic truth remains the same: the trend of eating spiritually (feasting on His Word) keeps me healthy and under His healing treatment too.

One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the

beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple... When You said, "Seek My face"; my heart said to You, "Your face, Lord, will I seek"... And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me: therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord. —Psalm 27 (NKJV selected)

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