

HOW GOD HEALS WOUNDED HEARTS

“A Very Present Help in Trouble” (Psalm 46:1b) KJV

Seven Devotional Studies based on the
Bible Week Theme:

**“GOD’S WORD BRINGS HEALING TO THE
WOUNDED HEARTS”**

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FOREWORD

The Bible Week celebration is an ongoing event in Fiji and some countries of the South Pacific. As for this year, the theme “God’s Word Brings Healing to the Wounded Hearts” is a fitting one for the nation and the Bible Week opens from Sunday 26th June and closes on Sunday 3rd July, 2016. Please continue to pray for all the churches, institutions, communities, families and individuals who are celebrating the Bible Week this year through various programs and activities to help them focus and re-focus on God’s Word.

The Bible Society is grateful to partner with the Reverend Wesley Neal who has written this year’s devotional studies based on the Bible Week theme but specifically on the topic “How God Heals Wounded Hearts” which is an important part of the Bible Week program. This Bible Week Bible Study booklet (comprising of seven studies) is highly recommended to be used throughout the Bible Week on a daily basis. The Bible Study can be run in small groups at church, workplace, school, or used individually. However, since this Bible Study booklet is a very useful resource material, it can be widely used even after the Bible Week dates perhaps in church or counseling programs where the book is relevant and useful. You can learn more about this study from the book introduction to follow.

‘We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning.’ (1 John 1:1)

INTRODUCTION

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1, KJV)”

These words of the Psalmist have taken on a new meaning in Fiji during the months since Cyclone Winston blew through our islands. We understand the word “trouble” in a new way now that we have seen villages destroyed by Category 5 winds, but we also understand “refuge” and “strength” in a new way as well. We especially understand that each of these words describes not only a reality in our world, but a condition of the human heart as well.

These three words: “trouble”, “refuge”, and “strength”, are at the center of our devotions for Bible Week 2016. Through the lens of the Genesis account of Joseph (Genesis 37-50), we will be looking closely at how our God heals wounded hearts. Starting with the betrayal and plan for murder that mark the start of Joseph’s trouble, we will see how our faithful God proves to be a refuge to Joseph through the ups and downs of many years, and a strength for Joseph that is greater than any evil that may befall him.

We have chosen this focus on healing wounded hearts this year for two reasons. First and foremost, because cyclones have left so many people in need of heart healing in our Pacific region. Homes and villages can be rebuilt, crops can be replanted, but sometimes the heart takes the longest time to heal. These devotions are written especially for churches and individuals who are recovering from cyclones and who need encouragement from the pages of scripture along the way.

Secondly, these devotions will share some key lessons and insights from Trauma Healing Workshops that the Bible Society has been partnering to sponsor over the last year and a half. These workshops, held everywhere from Homes of Hope and Korovou Women’s Prison in Fiji, to the Bible Society headquarters in Vanuatu and Tonga, have helped many people find healing for heart wounds and a way to share that healing with others. The core insights from these devotions are drawn from these workshops. If you find what you read here helpful, please contact the Bible Society of the South Pacific for the means to go deeper into how God heals wounded hearts through the cross and how the Church can help.

I am thankful to the Bible Society and to all who have participated in our Trauma Healing Workshops for their partnership in writing these devotions. I am also thankful for the invitation to write on such a theme at such a time as this. May God be glorified through the pages that follow.

Rev. Wesley Neal
Davuilevu Theological College, Fiji

LESSON 1: WHEN THE STORMS OF LIFE ARE RAGING

Bible Texts: Genesis 37:17b-28; Matthew 2:13-18

When it comes to trouble, the witness of the Bible is unified. It is not a matter of “if” trouble will come into a person’s life, but a matter of “when”. For all we wrestle with questions of “why me?” and “why now?” when suffering comes into our lives, the Bible’s response, at many points seems to be “why not?”

Trouble comes to everyone in life, to the deserving and to the innocent. As the story in Genesis of Joseph’s life begins, he is not depicted as innocent (read Gen. 37:1-11 from the perspective of his older brothers!), but he is certainly not deserving of the trouble that his jealous brothers bring into his life. And as for Jesus and the infants of Bethlehem, who could argue that they were deserving in any sense of the brutality of Herod’s jealous rage?

But while the Bible gives us several possible answers as to why cyclones, or disasters, or injustice, or trouble visits our lives, it gives us one answer as to what God does about it. On seeing the troubles we face, God sends his Son, to die on the cross and be raised again to life. In this way, God forgives our sins, binds up our broken-hearts, and overcomes evil in our world. As the old favorite hymn helps us pray “when the storms of life are raging, stand by me”.

Looking back on the moment described in our Genesis passage, I imagine Joseph, in his later years, testifying that God was with him in the dry well where his brothers threw him, and on the long dusty road to Egypt, and at every point along his troubled journey. May this be our testimony as we journey through life’s troubles to the promise of God.

QUESTIONS:

1. When have you asked God the question “why?”
2. How did you experience God’s response to your trouble?
3. How is God a refuge and strength to Joseph in the Genesis story?

LESSON 2: HOW LONG, O LORD?

Bible Texts: Genesis 39:1-15; Mark 9:14-29

Just when it seems that things are going to get easier for Joseph, just when it seems God has provided for him to prosper in Egypt, trouble comes again. Joseph acts with integrity toward his master and yet is still cast down by forces beyond his control. The lust of his master's wife and her willingness to make a false accusation are all that it takes for Joseph to end up back in another pit.

Or think of the father of the boy who the disciples meet at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration in Mark 9:14-18. The father so loves his son that he brings him to the disciples for their help. "Since he was a child," the man says to Jesus when he asks how long the boy had suffered. "Many times the evil spirit has tried to kill him." And yet even the disciples can't help the boy. Instead of the healing he hopes for, the father ends up in a public debate between some embarrassed disciples and the teachers of the Law.

It is the nature of suffering that it always lasts too long. The first signs of hope often do not bear out. The solution we think we see is delayed, or proves a disappointment. Complications arise and things go from bad to worse. The road out of trouble never seems to be as direct as the road into trouble.

But the promise of God is not that every trouble will be solved the minute we pray to God. It is rather that God is a very present help in our troubles. The Spirit of Jesus was there with Joseph as he stood falsely accused, and stayed close as the prison door closed again. Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of the boy and then took him by the hand and helped him to rise.

"Only prayer can drive this kind out," Jesus teaches the disciples when they ask what went wrong. And in his words we hear a reminder that, most of the time, hearts are healed and lives are mended slowly. The cry from the Psalms, "How long, O Lord?" (Psalm 13:1) is a prayer of deep faith. Those who pray it entrust their troubles to the God who they believe can save them.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Joseph was thinking when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him?
2. When have you prayed "How long, O Lord?" to God?
3. What were some times when Jesus prayed this prayer?

LESSON 3: THE LONG ROAD TO HEALING

Bible Texts: Genesis 40: 1-23; John 5:2-9a

We would like to think of the road to healing as a well-paved, four-lane highway that takes us quickly from the crisis we experience to the restoration we hope for. In reality, however, the road to healing usually looks more like most roads we drive: full of potholes and construction delays, with lots of unexpected turns and blind corners.

Why do you think the man at the pool of Bethzatha had been there for 38 years? We know what explanation he gave to Jesus for his long road to healing (v.7), but what other reasons can you imagine? What might have kept him lying there by the pool from the time he was a young man to the time he was old?

Perhaps we can gain some insight to the answer to this question from the story of Joseph. We read today about the low point in Joseph's road to healing. While he is in prison as a result of a false accusation, he has risen again to a position of responsibility there. God has continued to give him gifts of insight and Joseph has continued to give glory to God for the gifts (v. 8b). And yet at the end of the passage today Joseph is forgotten again – for two more years!

How easy it would have been for Joseph to have given up! How easy it would have been for Joseph to look back 38 years later and make excuses why he had been there in prison so long! And yet this doesn't happen with Joseph. Instead, he remembers God's faithfulness in the past and trusts that God will be faithful in the future.

The road to healing stretches very long, sometimes, and can even run through the "deepest darkness" (Ps. 23:4) but God never leaves us or forsakes us, no matter how bad the road. Instead God is working all the while to lead us to the new beginning that comes when our wounded hearts are healed.

QUESTIONS

1. What stories from your past help you to get through hard times?
2. Have you ever known someone like the man by the pool at Bethzatha?
3. What helps people who have lost hope?

LESSON 4: TRUSTING GOD WITH GRIEF

Bible Texts: Genesis 41:14-28; Romans 5: 1-5

After several years in prison on false charges, Joseph must have been desperate to regain his freedom. And yet, when the chance comes for Joseph to have an audience with the very man who had the power to set him free, he acts in an unexpected way. We might expect Joseph to try to impress the king in hope of getting out of prison. But instead, Joseph keeps turning the king's attention to God. Three times in the passage (vs. 16, 25, 28) Joseph uses the occasion of his audience with the king to remind him that it is God who is the source of insight, and not Joseph.

When we are faced with the loss of someone or something that is precious to us, we experience grief. In times of grief, we can be tempted to try to take a shortcut to healing, rather than trusting God to heal the feeling of loss inside. Rather than living through the denial, and anger, and times of hopelessness that are a part of the way God heals heart wounds, we are tempted to numb the pain with alcohol or kava, or to ignore the loss by telling ourselves that we would not feel the pain if we only had more faith.

Contrast our desire to take a shortcut around grief, with Paul's mature attitude of trusting God with his grief. Paul was a person who knew grief and loss firsthand. He had been through much suffering in his life, most of it for the sake of the Gospel, and yet as he writes to the church in Rome, he speaks out of a place of deep trust. "For we know," he writes in Romans 5:3-4, "that trouble produces endurance," and "endurance brings God's approval and his approval creates hope." Paul knows that the way through grief is not with feel-good promises or by numbing the pain, but through trusting God with our grief.

Whether you are in prison, or suffering loss, or facing trouble, remember, "my help will come from the Lord" (Ps 121:2). As our Romans passage reminds us, when we trust God with our grief, God "will pour out his love into our hearts" through the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS

1. When was a time in your life that you experienced grief?
2. Were you tempted to try to take a shortcut around grief?
3. How are Paul's words in Romans 5 an encouragement to you?

LESSON 5: GIVING IT TO GOD

Bible Texts: Genesis 42: 5-24; I Peter 5:6-11

One of the songs I have learned since moving to the South Pacific two years ago is the children's chorus: "Cast your burdens (clap, clap, clap), onto Jesus (clap, clap, clap) for he cares for you!" While many of us know that these words come from the last chapter of I Peter, we sometimes miss the fullness of the promise of the passage from which they come. We don't just cast our burdens onto God because he "cares for us" (v. 7), we entrust our sufferings to God in the assurance that "the God of all grace...will himself perfect you and give you firmness, strength, and a sure foundation" (v. 10).

God's plan for the trouble that comes into our lives is not just that we should be able to endure it. God uses the trouble that comes into every life to "perfect us" and give us firmness, strength, and a sure foundation. When I think of older people who I have come to admire in my 15 years of serving churches – the ones I hope, by the grace of God, to be like someday – they have one thing in common. All of them have been through some great trouble or loss in their life and have come to be a stronger and more faithful person through it.

In our reading from the Genesis story, this is the kind of person who we see Joseph is becoming through the years of trouble he has endured. As our reading today begins, Joseph is in a position of great power over his brothers, and he has not forgotten their cruelty to him. The prospect of revenge is easily within his reach, but instead he shows them mercy (v.18). While he could have inflicted great suffering on his enemies and their families, Joseph instead has compassion and makes a way for them to provide for those at home. In showing such mercy, Joseph also makes a way, eventually, to be reconciled with his brothers.

The troubles of life can either make us bitter and resentful, or compassionate and merciful. Joseph shows us the fruit of giving our troubles to God.

QUESTIONS

1. In Genesis 42:24, Joseph is overcome with tears. Put in your own words what he might have been feeling.
2. When we tell people "let go and let God", what do we mean?
3. What troubles do you have that you need to give to God?

LESSON 6: FORGIVING YOUR ENEMIES

Bible Texts: Genesis 45:1-15; Colossians 3:12-17

God's work of healing wounded hearts is not complete when we entrust our pain and trouble to him. There is one very difficult step that there remains for us to take. Beyond giving our troubles to God, there lies the challenge of forgiving our enemies.

Joseph's tears are the indication in our Genesis passage today of just what difficult work it is to forgive. At the start of the passage, he cries with such loud sobs that the Egyptians who he had ordered out of the room hear him and wonder what is happening (v.2). At the end of the passage, Joseph is still weeping as he embraces first his younger brother Benjamin, and then each of his other brothers in turn (v. 14-15). In between, as he tells them who he is and what God has done, we can infer that his tears continue to flow freely. These are not just tears of emotional release. Joseph's tears reflect the painful difficulty of forgiving these enemies and brothers of his.

Forgiveness does not depend on the repentance of the one who harmed us, or on the readiness of our hearts to forgive. It depends on the grace of God that is revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. As Joseph tells his brothers what has happened, they seem to remain silent as Joseph weeps with the difficulty of forgiving them. And yet, Joseph is free after he unburdens his heart. This reminds us that forgiveness is a work that takes place first, between God and us, and then, second, between us and our enemies. As Colossians 3:13 teaches, we are compelled to forgive one another when we remember how God has forgiven us.

The power of the resurrection "at work in us" (Ephesians 1:19-20) is apparent when we find ourselves able to forgive those who have harmed us. It is a sure sign that the healing power of the cross is working on our wounded hearts.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is forgiving our enemies so hard?
2. Why is accepting the forgiveness of others hard?
3. How does Jesus' cross and resurrection make our forgiving others necessary?

LESSON 7: LIVING IN GOD'S PEACE

Bible Texts: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 46

One of the most important facts of the end of Joseph's story is often overlooked. When we remember Joseph's testimony to his brothers that their intention to harm him was used for good by God (Gen 50:20) we seldom ask how long it was before Joseph was able to express such faith to his brothers. Instead of the few years we might expect, what we find when we read the Genesis text carefully is that Joseph's journey to peace with his brothers took 17 years.

It is a good thing that we do not have to wait until our wounded hearts are healed to experience God's peace in our lives. If that were the case, we would probably never get to the end of the healing work God needs to do in us. But Psalm 46 reminds us that God is with us as our hearts heal, "a very present help in trouble" just as God was with Joseph throughout those 17 years. Even as we journey through the process described in this last week of devotions, God calls us to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10, NRSV).

In Jesus' final words to his disciples on the night before he was betrayed, he assures them of his gift of peace through the Holy Spirit. It is not given as the world gives peace, but is a gift of God's presence with us (John 14:27). Through this presence, we can live in God's peace even as the troubles of life come and go, and even as God is healing our wounded hearts.

It is my prayer that these devotions have led you closer to experiencing that peace in your life. In the aftermath of storms and troubles of all kinds, the world needs Christians to witness to the peace of God that passes understanding. May you and your church be instruments of that peace as God is your refuge, strength, and very present help in trouble.

QUESTIONS

1. Think back over Joseph's journey of 17 years. How did he experience God as refuge and strength in the midst of his troubles?
2. When has God reminded you to "be still and know that I am God"?
3. What can you do to live more in God's peace today?



BIBLE WEEK RESPONSE SLIP

Thank you for being a part of the Bible Week this year.

We trust that you have found this Bible Study meaningful, resourceful, and helpful. We also encourage you to pray for the ongoing work of the Bible Society in distributing Bibles and scripture materials to communities who were badly affected by the cyclone and other natural disasters. And If you also would like to be a partner of the Bible Society in this great work by giving financially, please fill the form below and send it to us, or you could use the bank details below to send in your donation.

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