



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



# THE WOUNDS THAT HEAL

by Brad Jersak

**W**hile Jesus was dining at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes who were Pharisees saw Jesus eating with these people, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing

*this, Jesus told them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Mark 2:15-17).

In this first recorded confrontation with religious authority, Jesus radically reframed the "sin question," identifying **sin as something to be healed rather than punished.**

In so doing, Jesus presents

*Continued on page 3*

inside

The Wounds that Heal  
– Brad Jersak **p1**

The Shack – Interview with  
Paul Young **p6**

Pastoral Perspective  
– Greg Albrecht **p7**

Easter: The Game-Changer  
– Cindy Brandt **p10**

The Mother of Us All  
– Greg Albrecht **p11**

The Great Descent  
– Brad Jersak **p15**

# The Wounds That Heal

*Continued from page 1*

himself as the Great Physician, rather than a punishing judge. As stewards of Israel's Law, the critical scribes must have wondered about Jesus' use of a medical metaphor, rather than the more common legal framework in which they lived their religion. They had come to see righteousness as law-keeping and sin as law-breaking—as works of good or evil for which each individual was responsible. No doubt, there is something to this. God holds us responsible for our choices. Certainly that's how these Pharisees judged the sinners and congratulated themselves.

But they had missed something essential. In an Easter message in 2014, Pope Francis put it this way,

“It is impossible for us to free ourselves from sin on our own. It's impossible. These doctors of the law, these people who taught the law, didn't have a clear idea on this. They believed in the forgiveness of God but considered themselves strong, self-sufficient and that they knew everything. In the end, they transformed their adoration of God into a culture with values, reflections, certain commandments of conduct. They believed, yes, that the Lord could pardon them, but they were far removed from all this.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Sin as Sickness**

**By addressing sin as a sickness in need of a doctor, Jesus intensifies the problem of sin. Sin is not merely bad choices**

**that we commit. Beneath our bad behavior we discover a wounded soul, suffering the effects of a fatal disease.**

That disease is sin—our particular misdeeds are symptoms of the deeper soul-sickness.

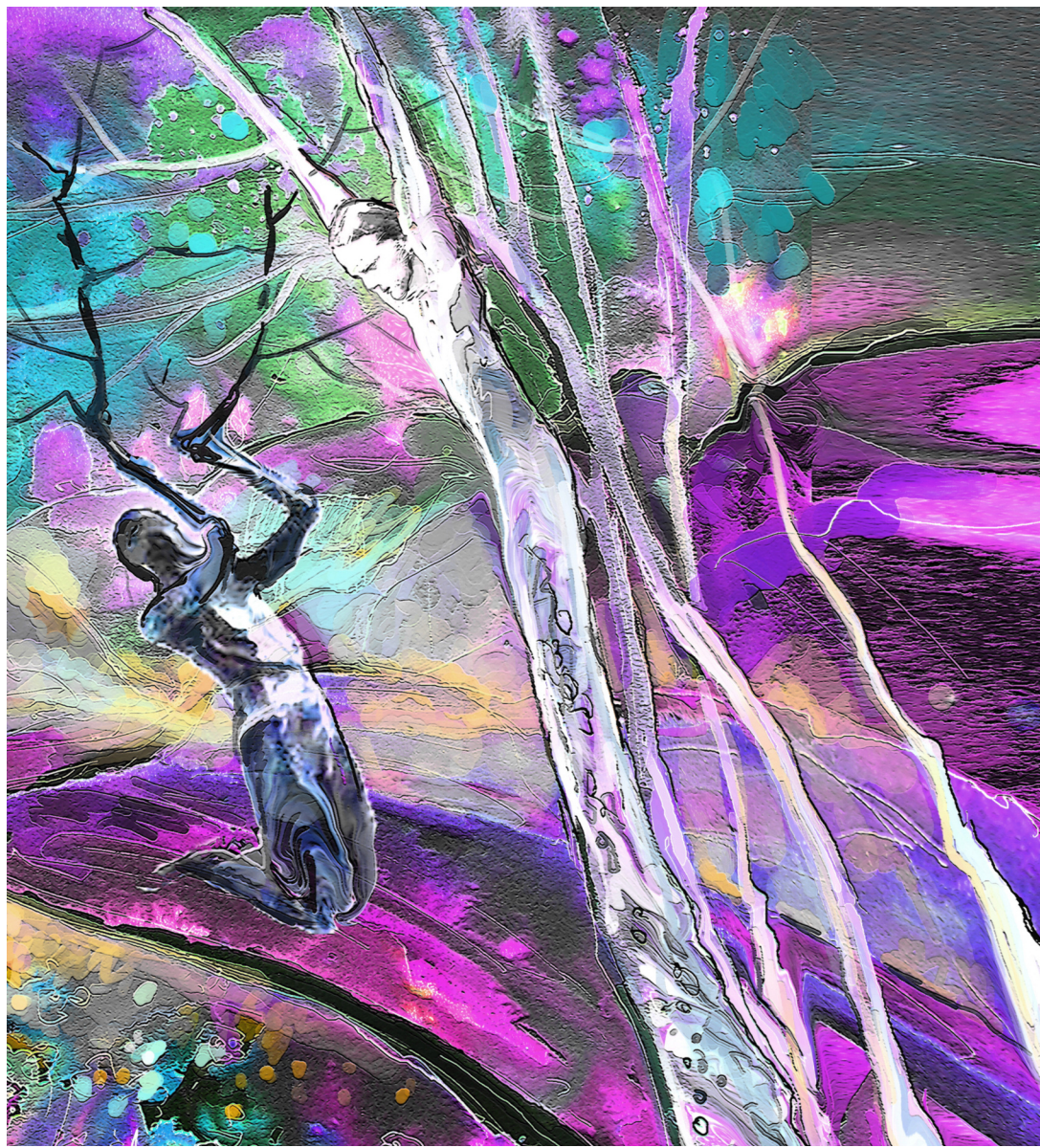
needs to be removed—something we could never do ourselves, no matter how obedient we try to be.

The great Scottish preacher, George MacDonald argued that Christ came to save us from our sin, not merely from the

***Christ rescues us from the serpent, heals us of the fatal venom and negates the inevitable curse of death.***

Further, when the Bible speaks of sin being “forgiven,” this forgiveness includes a freedom far greater than being let off the hook. The sin itself, like a virus,

consequences of our sins while the sin yet remained. That, he said, “would be to cast out of the window the medicine of cure while yet the man lay sick.”<sup>2</sup>





Our own efforts, however noble, to purge ourselves through personal goodness are a bit like putting bandages on a tumor. **Grace alone gets to the root of the disease.**

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we do read of debts being forgiven, the lost being found and those in bondage being freed. But in texts like Mark 2, what needs to be restored is spiritual (and apparently social) health. So in this case, sin is a sort of disease rooted in the soul that needs to be healed. How? Through the grace of Dr. Jesus.

When we begin to see sin as a disease that produces ugly

symptoms, general malaise, and a guaranteed death-warrant, we will realize how useless punishment is as a cure. When the scourge of HIV/AIDS first hit North American communities, do you remember the terror it produced? Here was this new epidemic, seemingly incurable, spreading rapidly and taking many lives.

How did we react? First, cover-ups and denial, then blaming and scapegoating, just like in the Garden of Eden! But when has fear or anger ever cured a disease? When has shame and guilt ever restored someone's life? When has punishing the victim ever transformed a heart

or life? So it is with sin. As a disease, it cannot be beaten out of us. **We don't need a judge, jury or jailor. We need a divine Healer.**

But how did eating with Jesus heal the sinners who dined with him? How did he cure them of sin? I imagine they found sitting in his presence to be medicinal. The grace in his gaze, his smile and his kind words washed the stains and shame of sin away. **Jesus is both the good doctor and the grace prescription that heals the soul of sin and its crippling effects.**

Notice this too: the power of saving grace, administered through Christ, was already saving/healing (same Greek word, *sozo*) during his active ministry, even prior to the Cross. But as we'll see, this healing of sin culminates in a decisive way on Good Friday.

## **The Healing Serpent**

So Jesus revealed himself to sinners as their great Doctor and divine Therapist. But he used another healing metaphor as well, this time relating directly to the Cross. In his nightcap dialogue with Nicodemus ('Israel's teacher,' John 3:10), Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14-15).

Later in the same Gospel, Jesus adds, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Then John comments, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:32-33).

We often see this symbol, the snake on the pole, zooming by on the side of an ambulance, or around a wrist on a medic-alert bracelet. The serpent on the pole has come to represent

healing to the broader public. Sometimes the symbol includes two snakes wrapped around the pole, with two wings at the top. It's called the "caduceus" and is associated with the Greek God Hermes (in Rome, Mercury).

The other version has a single serpent wrapped around the pole, with no wings. This is the staff of Asclepius, who was a Greek physician who later became the Greek god of medicine and healing (son of Apollo and Coronis). Asclepius' skills were such that some believed he could bring the dead to life. This image is the symbol of the American Medical Association and the one usually used on the bracelets I mentioned.

Some commentators believe the staff of Asclepius really originated in the story of Nehushtan—the same serpent on the pole Jesus referred to in John 3 and 12. In these passages, Jesus borrows a story from Numbers 21, where a plague of snakes had come to torment the people of Israel. Remembering that "wrath" is a metaphor for God's consent, this infestation was a consequence, caused and allowed by the people's rebellion. **God's heart is never to punish but to heal, so God provided the means for healing.** He had Moses erect a bronze serpent onto a pole so that any and all who looked its way would be healed.

Jesus uses this story to intensify the healing metaphor. I say intensify because in this case, **sin is more than a crippling sickness; it is fatal venom from the serpent's bite (think of the first garden). It infects and ultimately kills everyone.** Furthermore, Jesus deepens the symbolism because on the Cross, Jesus himself is

lifted up and becomes the definitive saving cure. Anyone in the whole world and across all time who looks in faith to the Cruciform God will be healed of sin's lethal effects.

### The Venomous Bite

In the story, why is it a serpent on the pole? I'm a bit uncomfortable seeing Jesus as a bronze snake. I think of Satan, not Jesus, as a serpent. Yet a generation later, Paul writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole'" (Galatians 3:13). In his death, Jesus himself absorbed the curse of sin and death for all of us, drawing the darkness of the world into his wounds. His own blood is the all-powerful, spiritual anti-venom that cleanses sin and overcomes death. Assuming the likeness of fallen humanity, he is able to heal it.

It's important to remember that the serpent on the pole is a metaphor. The "venom" is sin's curse and the "blood" of Christ is his forgiving love even in death. The "look" that heals is active trust in the One who hung on that Cross. In this imagery, who or what are we being saved from? **Christ rescues us from the serpent, heals us of the fatal venom and negates the curse of death.**

All these symbols—the venom, the blood and the look—recall God's verdict on the serpent in the original Eden chronicle: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"* (Genesis 3:15).

The serpent strikes the heel of Eve's offspring. This imagery anticipates the

crucifixion of Christ. It is what Christ endures and overcomes on the Cross; he undergoes the venomous bite for us all. Why? Because standing in for us, Christ did what we could not do for ourselves: in his Passion, Jesus overcame the poison of our sin through perfect obedience and radical forgiveness. And he overcame death by entering the grave, trampling down death and rising again. This victory is how the "seed [offspring] of the woman" (Christ) "crushes the serpent's head" once and for all.

And so, with Isaiah we rejoice, *"By his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:5).

This is the amazing grace of the Cross—the cruciform God who humbled himself, took on our plight, and bore our sin in his body. Where is my sin? I've committed so many, and they run so deep. But look! Look up! There it is, there on the Cross. In his wounds—those wounds that heal. On that Tree where our sins were healed from root to fruit.

May the One who was "lifted up to draw all men to himself" draw us to himself this Easter. □

1. Pope Francis, April 9, 2014.
2. George MacDonald, *Life Essential: The Hope of the Gospel*, (Harold Shaw, 1974), 15.

The art of French painter **Miki de Goodaboom** is featured on our cover and on pages 3-4, 11, 13-14.

In memory of her father, Jean Clément Fonvielle.

The cross and tree themes remind us that the Cross is our Tree of Life. As the bronze serpent brought healing to those who beheld it, so we gaze on the Cross in faith and are set free.

Her galleries are viewable at <http://www.goodaboom.com>