



The Wounds THAT HEAL

by Brad Jersak

While 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

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

How Great Is the Love?

I appreciated Greg Albrecht's "How Great is the Love?" in the February *CWRm*. I'm basking in the love of God more each day, thanks to the ministry of PTM/CWR. I used to feel so undeserving of God's grace! I tried so hard but I could never do enough to earn God's love. Thanks to your teachings I now understand that it doesn't matter if I can never do enough! God loves me because of who He is, not because of anything I do. I enjoyed the quote by Desmond Tutu at the end of Greg's article: "God's love is like sitting by a fire in the winter—you are just there in front of the fire. You don't have to be smart or anything. The fire warms you." I'm now sitting a little closer to the warming fire of God's love.

California

I thank God daily for your wonderful message of God's love. Without that message how lost we would all be. Christ is the only way! God bless you and everyone at Plain Truth Ministries.

Illinois

Thanks so much for all the great articles in the new *CWRm*. My kids read some of them! They took it home and they love it! I think someone bigger than me is in charge!

Idaho

32 Scriptures That Dare Us to Hope

I was delighted to find "32 Scriptures That Dare Us to Hope" in the Winter 2016 edition of *CWRm*, that indicate all might eventually be reconciled to God! I am so glad you are addressing this, as this is such a vital, game-changing topic, one that goes to the very core of God's character. Nothing could be more important! Not too

many Christian magazines would dare to examine a subject that all too many feel is not even debatable.

Ohio

7 Myths About Christian Universalism

I am writing to thank you for the great article in the Winter *CWRm* on universalism by Robin Parry. I believe that Christ's salvation offered to men will go beyond the grave. God certainly hasn't given us clarity on this topic in its entirety and there is speculation. But even as Jesus testified to the Pharisees that harlots and tax collectors would enter the Kingdom of Heaven before they would, this statement signifies that even the Pharisees would enter eventually. How much more so for those who have not had a chance to know Jesus and his redeeming work on the Cross at Calvary?

Florida

A More Christlike God

This past week I've been reading *A More Christlike God*. I don't normally send emails to authors, but this time I felt like I just had to. This book has made quite an impression on me. It's surprisingly easy to read, especially given the subject of the book isn't necessarily that easy! I'm sure this book will help people think and talk about God in a clear way and in contemporary language.

Netherlands

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The Wounds THAT HEAL

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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."¹

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."²





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

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

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>



Easter: The Game-Changer

Something has gone awry in our culture when we begin to tell the Resurrection story from a narrative of “The Good Guy Wins.” We love seeing the good guys “kick ass.” We celebrate rugged heroes like Jack Bauer from the hit TV show 24, even when they kill. We chuckle at the Avengers movie when Hulk (Good guy) flings Loki (Bad guy) back and forth like a toy with his brute strength. We laugh at violence because the good guy wins. We’re so steeped in what Walter Wink calls, “the myth of redemptive violence,” that we have subsumed the Easter Story into this framework.

When Christianity becomes the dominant power, the resurrection of Jesus becomes the triumph of the victors. The way “Jesus is Risen” is proclaimed, it sounds like bragging, one-upping those who disagree with us by saying smugly: we win. The problem? Easter is then used as a trump card to threaten people into joining our side.

Again and again, the Church tries to grow by dominating: passing laws to discriminate against others, fighting legal battles in the courts, using money and clout to sway people into a certain ideology.

Easter celebrations at mega-churches get bigger and jazzier every year. We are like the disciples who just don't get it, arguing over who among us is the greatest.

We need to tell a different story. More important, we need to live a different story. *The Resurrection is not one where the Good Guy wins; it's a story where nobody wins and then everybody wins.* When the world, like Rome, is organized around dominant systems preserving power through oppression, or structured, like the Temple establishment, by religious gatekeepers drawing lines in the sand between us and them, the end result always looks like violence and death—like the cross. When Christ bore all our violence and was raised from the dead, God snatched us out of the old story and put us in a new era.

The resurrection ushers us into a better way. A way of love and forgiveness, a way to serve, a way where everyone wins. *The Resurrection is not a trump card in our game, it's a revision of the rulebook.* It was a game-changer to ensure everyone wins.

Yet as we speak, lurking in the dark shadows of our society are people who bear the brunt of the ways we play our game. Greed for better and cheaper products drives the economy on the backs of slave laborers. Our lust to dominate the bodies of women sustains a demand for rape. Our apathy ignores the plight of millions in crushing poverty. Our need to be right keeps us busy making enemies instead of loving them. *We call ourselves followers of Christ but use his name to keep playing the same game.*

This cannot be. Easter demands we rip apart the old rules and start seeking out every person we have crucified because of our greed, lust, and self-righteousness. By the power of the resurrected God, we forgive, rescue, restore and redeem.

Easter exposes the “Good Guy Wins” narrative, and offers an alternative ending. We cease to play by the rules of the empire because the game was over when Jesus cried out, “it is finished!”

On that glorious Sunday morning, Jesus rose to say “no more!” to hate, violence and dividing lines. No more us vs. them. No more good guy/bad guy divide.

We lay down our swords and fight on the same team with weapons of love, justice and beauty. Every day we labor to ensure everyone knows they have already won the game.

We do not have to be activists with X-number of Twitter followers to be resurrection people. The risen Lord entrusted his alternate rulebook to those on the bottom rung of society on that first Easter Sunday. *He put justice in the hands of the ordinary.*

All it takes is what Kathy Escobar calls “pockets of love”—small revolutionary acts defying the prevailing Empire narrative.

With every breath we subvert through radical inclusion, uncompromising dignity for all and transformative justice by way of peace. *With every act of love we reenact the Easter story, a piece of hope to patch up the gaping wounds laid bare by our vicious cycles of hate. With every word of forgiveness, we release the floodgates of heaven to overflow dark pits hollowed by bitterness.*

You and I have the alternate rulebook: let's go change the game. □

Editor in Chief Brad Jersak speaks with Paul Young about the movie adaptation of his award winning bestseller, *The Shack*.

PAUL: Fire away!

CWR: First, for people who have never read *The Shack*, those coming in cold, what's the theme? What are we to expect from this story?

PAUL: It's a mystery-suspense wrapped in a "what if." It's a very human story about loss and tragedy and the "what ifs." What if in the middle of our losses and tragedies there is actually a God who is good all the time? And how would that change everything? So the story line is about a father who goes camping with his kids, something that he

fiction, but they are absolutely true. When you deal with fiction versus non-fiction in general terms, fiction actually creates more space than it uses up, whereas non-fiction is an attempt to reduce space. In non-fiction, I'm trying to get my space to match yours and yours with mine. We do that through argumentation and logic and everything else. It might resonate in the head but often has very little impact anywhere else.

Fiction is about building and crafting a space. People who read Lewis or Tolkien or Madeleine L'Engle—they go into this space, and they hear for themselves whatever they hear. So fiction wants to craft a place where people can hear for themselves. I think it does a magnificent job. Music does that too, or any creative sort of art.



The Shack

Interview with W. Paul Young

Official movie poster, © Lions Gate, Summit Entertainment

obviously does normally, and he experiences a great tragic loss. And it's about the struggle with his sense and perception of himself, who God is and what this means. God begins to dismantle his world and rebuild it around something very new for him, and we get to go along on the journey.

CWR: You like to talk about how fiction can deliver truth. Is that what you're talking about here?

PAUL: Yes, fiction has a way, I think, of delivering truth. When you think about it, nobody would argue that Jesus' parables were not true. They are

I love how film does that. Most successful movies—I think it's 65%—are based on fiction books or adaptations of one sort or another. It's respectful as long as it's not propaganda, because you can use fiction to create propaganda. But when it's respectful and it's exploring, especially if it's exploring questions, which is what I do, stories open up a respectful space for the other to hear for themselves. It doesn't have an agenda to make you think like I think, or for you to think that I must be right, either.

CWR: This is fascinating; fiction can be a delivery

system for the truth you've lived, Paul, but also for the guy on death row who's reading *The Shack*, someone who may never see grass or the night sky. There's a truth in it for him as well.

PAUL: Correct. Our participation and co-existence with God, who is a creative Being, means that creativity emerges from that source. Our tendency is to attach creativity to darkness. And then we begin to imagine things based in fear, rather than exploring the creative reality of truth and goodness and kindness, and how that interrelates with darkness.

You've just alluded to a story I've shared where *The Shack* had a massive impact on a man who's been on death row in Tennessee—I was able to visit him recently. He's in a very small cell and hasn't been able to step on grass for 33 years. It's one of his great longings and desires. But inside a story, he is not bound by those four walls or concrete and tile, and God meets us in that space.

So yes, I'm able to explore my own story and wrap it in a way that gets past "our watchful dragons" (as Lewis would say). Fiction is powerfully able to do that for us.

We have our theology and we have our philosophy and our certainties, but when you interact with someone's story, and it's relational, you're interacting with them in another form.

So when I meet people like Terry on death row, he already knows me to some degree.

CWR: Now there are also folks who have read your book once or twice or five times, and they've been transformed.

But a movie adaptation can be

scary for them. Some worry the film might not do justice to the book. Are you able to reassure them? How do you feel about the movie compared to the book?

PAUL: Great question. Let me jump on one thing that you said in the process of asking the question. I have friends that have read the book a dozen times, and their response is, "I didn't see that even on the twelfth time!" Well, it's because you were a behind a tree last time.

CWR: Or if you're looking at it through a "knothole of pain"?

PAUL: It looks like that, right! That's the beauty and the wonder of the how the Holy Spirit is able to meet us in the place we're at. But we're the ones that are offering our participation in that. As to the comparison, the movie is a faithful adaptation. A lot of folks get very nervous, and I understand that, rightfully so.

On a technical level that you are dealing with two very



There's this incredible dynamic that when you read a story, you hear what is relevant to you in the world that you occupy at that time.

It's like looking at a mountain. If you're in the valley, the mountain looks like this. But if you're on another mountain, it looks like this. Or if you're on the other side it looks like that.

different genres. And it is quite a chore to move from the written word to a visual expression, especially if the written side is highly dialogued, which *The Shack* is. And just like people who listen to the audio book; they hear it differently than when they read it. We read differently than we listen. We tend to skip stuff and we don't

even realize we skip it, but then we hear someone speaking it and engage with it differently.

It's the same with visual imagery. The big challenge, I think, for the producer, the director and the crew, is how to take this from the written side and put it on the screen in such a way that those for whom *The Shack* was massively significant are not betrayed in the process.

And there is also a special challenge when you're dealing with faith components.

How do you not turn that into propaganda? Most of us have grown up where (how do I put this kindly?) "Christian art" wasn't [art], generally speaking.

Modern Christian art too often becomes a means to an end, rather than an exploration of space.

As a result, you feel like you've gotten hooked, and we're back into transactional theology. You've now got to pray this magic phrase in order to be in the "in-group," and to escape becoming "toast."

So one challenge is how to keep this from becoming propaganda, and the other challenge is how to avoid making it so esoteric that it becomes rather meaningless. How do you avoid changing the story into something it was never meant to say? You've seen some movies where you ask, "What book was this exactly?"

But with *The Shack*, the movie did a good job of riding that line. I didn't have any creative control at all, but unexpectedly, I was enfolded into the process in a significant way. They constantly asked me for input and let me look at the script.

So there are some things you're going to watch in the movie that weren't exactly like

they were in the book, but the intent was there. Sometimes they framed it in a different way, but everything that matters is in there. It is solid, strong, orthodox.

CWR: A final question just for fun. How did the cast do? Who are the cast?

PAUL: Octavia Spencer (who won an Oscar for "The Help") plays "Papa," the maternal Papa.

So Papa already knows the kitchen, knows how to bake pies—for those who have seen "The Help," that's an inside joke. I tell you, Octavia knocked it out of the park, and that was the sense of everyone who came to it.

The paternal "Papa" is played by Graham Green, the Canadian First Nations actor from "Dances with Wolves."

Sam Worthington (from "Hacksaw Ridge") not only did a really great job as "MacKenzie," but he engaged with Kate (Megan, who plays

the daughter). She's a young actress and Sam was really able to help her emerge inside that character.

Then you've got Radha Mitchell, who's amazing anyway. And Avraham Aviv Alush is, I believe, the first actual Jew to play Jesus in a major motion picture. Sumire Matsubara plays the Holy Spirit. If you have an imagination of Sarayu, she's there. She's Japanese-Hawaiian who fits the character very well. "Sofia" [Alice Braga Moraes] is one of the top actresses in Brazil—very present, very powerful. And Tim McGraw—he's a natural. He brings a presence, and he was sort of the stable "through-line" for the whole thing.

CWR: Thanks Paul. And by the way, let's all watch for Paul's cameo in the movie!

PAUL: Oh yeah! I'm in a two-second cameo! And you know what . . . film really does make you look fatter! □

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“Have I truly accepted Christ?”

When I asked for salvation at a younger age, a part of me wondered if I was truly accepted by Christ. I held to some bad theology and thought I'd committed the unpardonable sin in the past. I literally cried for forgiveness (wondering, “Is it even possible for me!”). But I was still not 100% completely convinced Jesus' sacrifice would apply to my particular sin.

I believed in him entirely as the King and Source of salvation. I believe he died for our sins. I also looked to him in faith and begged for his help.

So was asking that enough to be saved? Was it turning to him?

Or because I didn't trust completely that his sacrifice covered *me* and *my* sin, was I falling short of actually believing in him for salvation, even though I invited him into my life if he was willing? I hope that just turning and asking him is enough, but I'm confused.

It seems your main question is “was Jesus' sacrifice able to forgive my particular sin?” That question extrapolates the worries we may have, and reasonable doubts as to why God might not have forgiven, restored and redeemed us. Worries and concerns like:

1) What if I believed some “bad theology” at the time

2) Was just asking enough to be saved, if I still had doubts?

3) Did I trust him *enough*—or did I fall short?

Your concerns and worries are based on responses and actions that *you* have taken or not taken. Concerns and worries that we have about God forgiving us often center on whether *we* “did enough” at the time.

The gospel of Jesus Christ insists that the relationship to which God invites us is based on HIS goodness, not our own.

Let me assure you—no, neither you, nor I, nor anyone ever “did enough” when we asked God to forgive us. That is why, of course, we asked God.

Our confusion is indeed a matter of trust, and our confusion often flows out of performance-based, legalistic assumption about how God relates to us.

Christ-less religion gives us the notion that our performance, duties and/or actions are at least in part responsible for what God does. If that's the case, then we are all sunk!

But the gospel is good news, not bad news. The gospel says God forgives us even though we did not, do not, nor ever will, do enough to deserve it, understand

it, appreciate it or fully embrace it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ insists that the relationship to which God invites us is based on *his* goodness, not our own. Even the act of turning to God or asking to receive forgiveness is a gift we receive from him, for the Bible insists that humans are not naturally disposed to ask God to forgive them. That is, if you like, the

only thing we need to do—ask for and accept his forgiveness.

You mention the term “unpardonable sin”—the only unpardonable sin is

believing that God will not pardon sin.

It's unpardonable because God does not force us to receive his pardon.

He offers his forgiveness and pardon, and we must accept it—we must accept that he is big enough and good enough to do what we cannot. So yes, Jesus' sacrifice is able to cover all our sins—*all*. It is “big” enough, “strong” enough and “righteous” enough.

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”

— 1 John 5:14-15 □

Back in 1990, after the Iraqi army was evicted from Kuwait, Saddam Hussein, then the President of Iraq, told his people to prepare for what he called the “mother of all battles” against the American-led coalition forces.

Though Hussein did not invent the phrase, since that time the phrase “the mother of all...” has spread through the English language and is often used to

They had no children and it didn't look like their bodies would produce one. They had given up hope—they knew their biological clocks had either stopped ticking or at the very least, needed new batteries. Ten more years passed after the initial promise of a child. Now Abram was 85 and Sarai was 75. And still no child.

So Sarai came up with what seemed like a good idea at the

Double Trouble

Two women sharing one husband. One of them pregnant, the other one desperately wanting to be pregnant but feeling she probably never would be. It was a recipe for disaster. Storm clouds were looming.

Sarai was continually living with the reality that her servant Hagar was pregnant, all the while knowing that God had promised

The Mother Of Us All

define not only the origin or source of something, but also the significance or the greatest example of something.

Two Mothers

In Galatians 4:21-31, we read the story of two mothers. The historical background to Paul's lesson is recorded in Genesis 16 and 21. Paul presents an allegory of these facts. *An allegory is a symbolic interpretation of a historical facts or events.* More specifically, in the biblical sense, it is *a spiritual meaning that transcends literal facts or actual historical events.*

To set the stage, let's briefly summarize the historical facts upon which Paul draws his Christ-centered conclusions via an allegory. In Genesis 16 we read that Abram, as he was then called, and his wife Sarai, to whom God had promised a son, became impatient with God.

Back in Genesis 12 and again in Genesis 15, God had promised to make a great nation of their descendants. It was a wonderful promise, but as the clock kept ticking and the pages of the calendar kept turning, the promise became more and more unbelievable.

At the time of the promise, Abram was 75 and Sarai was 65.



time—a good human resolution to the problem. She was too old to get pregnant, too old to give birth, but Abram was a young buck filled with testosterone at the age of 85.

At 85 Abram was apparently still capable of impregnating a woman, so Sarai decided to send him to the tent of Hagar, her servant. Sarai and Abram could have a son, she reasoned, by a surrogate. Abram agreed and Hagar became pregnant.

her that she herself would one day become a mother. Sarai no doubt concluded this entire mess was God's fault. Hagar was prancing around, displaying her obvious pregnancy. Sarai started to despise her because Hagar was everything Sarai wasn't: younger, and beautifully with child.

Sarai started to mistreat Hagar, so much so that Hagar—now conspicuously pregnant—ran away. The angel of the Lord had to rescue her and bring her back

home. In due time Hagar gave birth to a son named Ishmael.

Homelife in Abram's tents became even more complicated when God finally did fulfill his promise.

Abraham, who had been renamed by God through all of this, was 100 years old and Sarah, his wife, was age 90 when finally Sarah gave birth to their son Isaac. Isaac was truly the child of promise.

There's no way on God's green earth for a 99-year-old man and an 89-year-old woman to become pregnant. *Isaac's birth obviously happened by God's grace.* No human effort could produce this child of promise, and it was for that very reason that God waited so long to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. God wanted to make sure there was no way that Abraham and Sarah could claim their own aged bodies had produced this child naturally.

slave woman" (Genesis 21:10).

Sarah's demand, born of envy and jealousy, filled with a good degree of animosity, was nonetheless correct in the definition she gave to Hagar. Indeed, Hagar was a slave woman.

So Abraham, to keep peace with his wife, expelled Ishmael his son, and Ishmael's mother, "that slave woman."

Before considering Paul's allegory of this historical account from Genesis, we should pause to remember the book of Galatians is Paul's "Magna Carta" of Christian freedom. He's dealing with people who have been convinced they need to please God via legalism and religious deeds. Paul is making a devastatingly true and accurate case for grace:

"Tell me, you who want to be under the law,"[who believe they prove their worth to God by obedience to

woman than of her who has a husband. Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.' Therefore brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman" (Galatians 4:21-31, my comment).

The purpose of this allegory, a spiritual interpretation of a factual historical event, is to demonstrate the glory of the new covenant in Christ.

- This allegory is about two women, Sarah and Hagar; two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; and two covenants.

- Sarah represents the covenant of grace.

- Sarah's son, Isaac, represents the children of the promise who are spiritually transformed and reborn by the power of God's grace.

- Hagar represents the covenant of human performance, the covenant of religion.

- Hagar's son, Ishmael, represents all those who attempt to build a relationship with God on the basis of their own righteousness rather than on the divinely given righteousness of Christ.

You Want to be Under the Law?

One of the key verses in this passage is the first one: *"Tell me, you who want to be under the law*[who believe that you need to prove your worth to God by your obedience to the law] *are you not aware of what the law says?"* (Galatians 4:21, my comment). Taking the liberty to paraphrase Paul, it's as if he is saying, "So, you want to prove your obedience to God, you want to earn his favor, you want to please and appease him by keeping religious rules and regulations? You do, do you? Well now let's just take a look at the story of two women."

No two forces ... are more absolutely opposed than law and grace.

It was a supernatural birth, it was a miracle of God's grace. As we'll read in Galatians, *Ishmael was born the natural way while Isaac was born as a result of God's promise.* But miracles do not always produce human happiness, do they?

Two Women, Two Sons

The plot continued to thicken and the relationship between Sarah and Hagar worsened. Not only did sparks fly between Sarah and Hagar, but we read in Genesis 21 that Ishmael, the older brother of Isaac, persecuted and made fun of Isaac. The two women and the two sons could not coexist under the same roof...that is, under the same tent.

Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of what she called, "that

the law] *"are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively:*

The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free: she is our mother. For it is written: Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate

In the book of Galatians, Paul keeps reiterating the central theme of salvation: *eternal relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*. The purpose of the book of Galatians is to demonstrate and teach that all who trust in Christ and receive him by grace are free from the law.

The background of Galatians is that Paul is writing to a group of Christians who once fully embraced God's grace, who once fully accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, but then, after Paul left them and continued to travel to other places, false teachers came and called God's grace into question. These false teachers insisted that God's grace, grace alone, was a pipe dream. These false teachers claimed that God expects (in fact he stipulates and demands) obedience to laws as requirements we must fulfill for salvation.

Let's pause a moment. Let me underline the importance of the central theme of Galatians. *No two forces or dynamics or philosophies are more absolutely opposed to one another than law and grace*. It is a religious heresy to suggest or demand that God loves and accepts us on the basis of his grace as well as the basis of our obedience to laws. *Any mixture, any intermingling of grace with law is a complete dilution and devaluation of God's grace*.

Spiritually speaking, such a teaching is toxic and deadly.

Two Ways

In this allegory Paul is clearly, without equivocation, explaining there are two and only two ways to approach God.

There is the way of law and rules and requirements, of legalism and performance-based religion, of works-based righteousness. You can attempt to become holy on the basis of all the things you do.

On the other hand, God can make you holy, by his grace.

One is the way of slavery, Paul says. The other is the way of freedom. In this passage, Paul consistently draws the contrast to these two diametrically opposed views: on the one hand, the way of Christ-less religion, and on the other, God's grace, religion-less Christianity.

- Two contrasts.
- Two mothers, Sarah and Hagar.
- Two sons, Isaac and Ishmael.
- Two covenants, works and grace.

- Two cities, the earthly Jerusalem and religious center of the world (when Paul wrote Galatians), as over against the heavenly Jerusalem.
- Two relationships, bondage and freedom.

The Days of Our Lives

The story that Paul relates, put in simple terms, reads almost like a soap opera, doesn't it?

One father, two mothers, two sons.

One son who was born the ordinary way, and one son born by God's intervention.

One son born by human effort, the other son born to two individuals so old and so incapable of having children that this child could only be known as a miracle baby.

One son was born by human scheming to "help" God, a child produced based on the belief that God's grace needs human help. The other son born according to God's promise.

Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, was born into slavery as the result of human attempts to solve





religion and authentic Christ-centered relationship with God.

One man had two sons by two mothers. The two mothers represent two ways of relating to God, two covenants; one old, one new. The two mothers represent law and grace. Law produces slavery and bondage. Grace produces freedom in Christ.

There is no equivocation, there is no other option.

Just as Sarah realized that she and Hagar could not live in the same household, just as Ishmael, the slave child of law could not abide God's grace as exemplified by Isaac and thus he persecuted him, we too must not be under any illusions. We may not choose to live our lives both ways. It will be one or the other. *Choose law or choose grace—Mount Sinai or the cross of Christ.*

Do not allow yourself to be deceived by some religiously fabricated compromise that would dilute the purity and beauty and holiness of God's grace by adding old covenant, law-based, ritualistic, law-keeping elements. *God does not recognize any third way.*

And realize this—the chief opposition and objections to God's grace do not come from those who do not claim to be Christians at all, like Buddhists or Muslims. The chief objections to God's grace come from those who call themselves Christians, but they are trapped by legalism and are in the swamps of Christ-less religion.

No one hates God's grace so much as those who work hard to convince God that their efforts are holy and righteous. It was religion that hated Jesus.

We must not compromise with God's grace, my friends. We must not allow God's grace to be watered down. Each of us will either be children of faith, grace and of the promise, and thus free in Christ, or we will be slaves of law in bondage to religion. □

problems by human efforts. Isaac, the son of a free woman, born free because of God's promise, born by grace, not by works.

To make sure his point is crystal clear, Paul says that Hagar stands for Mount Sinai. Some of his readers might well have read Paul's words and asked, "Mount Sinai? Isn't that where the Ten Commandments were given?" You might be asking the same question. And Paul says, "yes, exactly."

Hagar stands for the old covenant—those who try to mix the old covenant with the new covenant. *Hagar stands for those who attempt to earn God's favor by keeping the Ten Commandments, and any of the other statutes and stipulations of the old covenant.*

Hagar, Paul says, is like the present city of Jerusalem, then and now, mired in slavery and sin for all of its religion.

In spite of all the deeds done by which the city and system of Jerusalem attempts to make itself more holy and more pleasing to God and to man, all of its religious efforts will fail!

Our Divine Mother

Paul says Jerusalem above, heavenly Jerusalem, is free and she is our mother.

Sarah represents grace, and Hagar represents law. Sarah stands for trusting in God to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Hagar stands for trying to please and appease God through human efforts.

And the sons born to them represent two ways of relating to God, on the basis of law or on the basis of grace. *There is no third way.* There is no other option!

Mount Sinai is a clear reference to the law given to Moses.

The earthly Jerusalem is a clear reference to the religion at that time, headquartered in the city of Jerusalem, a religion that depended on law-keeping as a means of salvation.

Sarah stands for the gospel, for the promise of God given to us by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sarah stands for God's grace giving us his favor, his mercy, his forgiveness and his love freely.

Here's the fundamental difference between Christ-less



The Great Descent

Christ shattered the gates of hell and raised those who had been dead from the ages. Hell groaned, death lamented, while the world and all people rejoiced together. —Ancient Hymn

Modern Christians generally celebrate Easter weekend by focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and his resurrection on Sunday morning, and well we should. These events stand at the very center of our faith.

But historically, believers also paid special attention to the gap day in between, traditionally called “Holy Saturday.” Of course, the day after Good Friday was a dark day. The apostles were paralyzed by grief and fear—in emotional freefall. In their crestfallen state, two disciples on the road to Emmaus reflected wistfully, “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). As Easter dawned and Christ appeared alive to his loved ones, “Sad

Saturday” would be no more. After that, believers would speculate with joy about Christ’s victorious “descensus”

—i.e. his descent into death and victory over *hades*.

They didn’t imagine the Lord lounging in heaven’s “green room” or suffering in the dungeons of hell. Rather, they gravitated to biblical texts that prophesied a grand conquest over the powers of darkness. Here were some their key texts:

Job 38:17; Psalm 23:7; Psalm 68:18-22; Hosea 13:14; Zechariah 9:11; Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:21-22; Acts 2:24; Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:7-10, Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6.

Some of these passages seem to be drawn out of context, but the early church, from Emmaus on, read their sacred scrolls through the Jesus lens. Why?

“...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Later, our spiritual forefathers would enshrine the “Great Descent” into the Apostles Creed, as part of the faith “once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3). It proclaims, “[He] was crucified, dead and was buried. He descended into hell [Latin, *infernus*]. On the third day, he rose again.”

The biblical texts are like stray puzzle pieces, but

by the mid-fourth century, a narrative picture emerged in the liturgy, iconography and the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. *Nicodemus is not an authentic gospel, nor was it heretical. Rather, it’s a beautiful Christian confession, speculating on the events of Holy Saturday. Its purpose was not to portray literal facts, but to proclaim of Christ over death.*

Chapters 1-8 recount the trial and crucifixion of Christ (based on Luke 23), including a solar eclipse, and Jesus’ burial.

In chapters 9-11, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea testify, are imprisoned, and Joseph miraculously escapes.

Chapter 12-22 brings us to the juicy bit! Leucius and Charinus, two souls resurrected from the dead, appear before the Sanhedrin to describe the so-called “harrowing of *hades*.” It’s well worth reading.

The witnesses saw a golden light beginning to shine in the darkness of hell. Then Simeon, Isaiah and John the Baptist announce the impending arrival of Christ. Adam and Seth chime in, and the Old

Testament patriarchs and prophets gather to hear the good news.

At this point, Satan and “the prince of hell” (Beelzebub) start arguing. They’re terrified at Christ’s coming and want to bar the doors. The saints shout at them, quoting the Psalmist, “Open the gates that the King of Glory may come in!”

They needn’t bother! Christ arrives and shatters the gates, tramples death, binds Beelzebub, then proceeds to rescue Adam. He leads Adam by the hand, and the rest of the saints follow them up into Paradise. There they meet Enoch, Elijah and the crucified thief.

If this Gospel is late and fictional, what’s the point? It functions like any parable, delivering eternal truths draped in a story. Nicodemus’ message is true: Jesus has conquered death for us, so we need no longer be afraid. Christ has raised and redeemed human nature (Adam), and our destiny is eternal life with him.

As Hebrews 2 says, “...by his death he [broke] the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free[d] those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” □

“Hell groaned, death lamented, while the world and all people rejoiced together.”

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Suffering and Love Suffering is woven like a tapestry into the experience of God's love expressed for you and me, and the expressions of his love that we pass on to others, by his grace. Week of April 2

The Slave Auction We thrill to stories about a person being rescued who is unknown to the rescuer, but what kind of love does it take to purchase a slave who has been unfaithful? Week of April 9

The Not So Accidental Gardener Was it a coincidence that Mary thought the risen Jesus Christ was a gardener – or did Jesus plan that? Celebrate Easter with us! Week of April 16

Stranger on the Road After Jesus was resurrected, he joined two of his disciples, walking away from Jerusalem. They did not recognize him. Jesus the Stranger gave the impression he didn't know what was going on – but ironically, he was the only one who really did know. Week of April 23

Stranger on the Shore Join us as we consider yet another time when, just after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples, yet initially they had no idea who he was. Week of April 30

The Bride and the Whore Two word-pictures of our spiritual condition – a woman who by her own work as a slave, purchases clothing that loudly proclaims her profession – and a bride whose husband gives her a wedding dress she could never afford. Week of May 7

The Stretch Marks of a Mother's Love What does a mother really want – what is a mother's greatest hope – in return for all of her sacrifices, scars and stretch marks? Week of May 14

The Devil You Say? Join us as we consider what the Bible says and doesn't say about Satan the devil – as we search for a Christ-centered perspective, we will discuss two extreme views about the devil. Week of May 21

Saved from Shame Shame is a powerful and intimidating emotional reality employed widely, throughout our society, in an effort to keep people under control – and religious organizations are no exception to this rule. Week of May 28

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