

*Finding God's
Love in Our
Wounds*

His Face
like Mine

Russell W. Joyce



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *His Face like Mine* by Russell W. Joyce

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

The God Who Kisses Our Wounds

One night years back, my fiancée, Anna, and I were making out. She lived with six other women in a house in Portland, Oregon, and we found ourselves alone, which didn't happen often. We decided to take advantage of the privacy. We were in our midtwenties, had been together for a year, were recently engaged, and swooning over each other. It was a happy season. In the middle of this moment, she suddenly pulled back.

“Stop that,” she said.

I was confused. I hadn't the faintest idea what she meant. I hoped it wasn't my kissing.

“Do you know you always do that?” she asked. “Every time I try and kiss the left side of your face, you don't let me. You either pull my lips onto yours, or you start telling me you love me and how beautiful I am. You won't just let me kiss you.”

I was stunned.

“Do you not think I see you?” she asked. “Like, all of you?”

I exhaled as if punched in the stomach. She continued, “Do you not think I love all of you? Let me kiss you.”

I sat dumbstruck, cut open by her words. I genuinely had no idea I was attempting to hide the “bad side” and making her kiss what I deemed to be the “good side.” I didn’t know how to respond or process what she had just revealed to me about myself. I was exposed without any explanation to offer.

“Sit back,” she said, her fingers pressing into my sternum and guiding me into the couch. “Look at me.”

I did.

She reached out her right hand and began to pull her fingertips across the left side of my face, back and forth, over my brokenness. Her fingertips traced my sunken left cheek where my cheek bone never grew and my bumpy, angular, reconstructed ear. She followed the red line of a giant scar that goes from the edge of my mouth to my ear. Her fingers touched every spot of imperfection on my face.

It took everything within me not to cry out in rage. I felt so vulnerable I thought I was going to faint. My cynicism wanted to spit at her. But since I had never let someone into that vulnerable space, I was terrified. The cynicism was my defense. I hated all of it. *I don’t want your pity*, I wanted to scream at her. *I know what I look like. I know how broken I am. Stop patronizing me. I don’t need it and I don’t need you!* I was so angry at everything and everyone.

But she didn’t stop. She kept touching my wounded face. After tracing the outlines of the checkered ridges, misplaced

bones, and red scars, she tilted her head forward and began to kiss me. First, she kissed the top of my broken ear. Then the ridges of my ear. Then my underdeveloped jaw. She kissed me slowly and with intention. Her lips would touch as much flesh as possible, holding the pose for as long as it took for me to realize what she was communicating.

She wanted me to *know* and *feel* that she was kissing my wounded face. And she wanted me to know that she was *choosing* to kiss it. No one was forcing her. She wanted to kiss my wounded face because she loved me. Not the me I thought I was or the me I should be, but the *real me*, the one I thought I had been hiding from her. The deformed, broken, weak, deceptive, humiliated, wounded me. She wanted to kiss *that* me.

She wasn't repulsed by my wounds. She wasn't overlooking them. She saw them for what they were, and she knew that there would be no *me* without them and the stories they told of my life. So she loved them. Because they made the *real me*. And she loved the real me.

As she tenderly kissed every inch of wounded flesh on my face—every mark that carried the tragic baggage of all the rejections I had ever experienced, all the stares I had ever garnered, all the teasing I had ever been subject to, all my self-loathing—the shock and rage in my body began to give way. It melted within me. What replaced that rage was an emotion without a name. The closest thing I can call it is grief. *Deep* grief. Yet it transcended even that. I think it was a death. Something was dying in that moment.

I began to wail. I cried harder than I've ever cried in my life. I had always subconsciously believed that if I were ever to be truly seen for what I was, that if I couldn't distract someone by making them look at the good parts of me, then they would reject me. Because that's what wounded people receive—rejection. But now, for the first time ever, I knew I was truly being seen for what I was and that I was freely chosen as I was. Of course, I had been chosen and loved throughout my life by my parents and brothers. But the narrative I believed was that if my family had been honest, they would not have chosen me, not loved me, not kissed me. In my mind, they were overlooking my wounds because they were compelled to do so.

This is why the moment with Anna was so powerful. Anna was not family, and I knew she saw the real me. She called it out. I couldn't hide. She wasn't bound to me by blood. If she wanted to love me, it was her free choice. She kissed my wounded face over and over, and sorrow and pain emptied from my soul. She spoke no words. She didn't stop. In that space of utter brokenness, I was deemed worthy of her love. And I encountered God like never before.

WOUNDS THAT HEAL OTHER WOUNDS

Lord, would you heal my son and make him whole?

But can you not see it? I already have.

God, heal my son.

Look closer. It's done.

How can God suggest I am whole when clearly, I am not? How can God say I am healed when others' sidelong glances tell me they see someone still in need of healing? How can we be whole unless wholeness for God and wholeness for the rest of us are two different things?

To be clear, this is not a book about my experience having a broken face. It's about how God met me in my soul's wounds found within the stories of my face. It's about how God longs to meet you inside your soul's wounds too. All our souls bear wounds. Some come from brokenness we're born with or born into, which we have to navigate in a fallen world. Some wounds come from pain inflicted on us through others' sinful or ignorant actions. Some wounds we give ourselves, and we don't even know why. And some wounds come from pain we inflict on others, which ends up hurting us in the process too. If we're honest, we can recognize ourselves in all these scenarios. But no matter how our souls come by their wounds, the common denominator is that they all hurt—*terribly*. For those whose wounds are as painful as mine were, I don't know if we really care about what happened, whose fault it is, or why—at least not at first. We just want to know if there's a way to stop the pain. We want to be healed. We want to be *whole*.

As I began to explore the Bible for a way forward, I noticed something peculiar: many, if not most, of the biblical characters were very wounded people, spiritually and physically. Moses had a stutter and killed an Egyptian. Jacob was

deceptive and ended up with a limp. David was the youngest of his brothers and driven by his feckless emotions. Paul had a mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” which has led to all sorts of hypotheses on whether this was physical, psychological, or spiritual pain—or maybe all three! Regardless, it had a humbling effect on Paul’s ministry, his preaching ability, and the shape of the good news of God in the churches he started.

The Bible is such a rich story because God works with our wounded human nature. But it wasn’t just that the characters had wounded personalities and pasts; rather, God used those wounded personalities and pasts *specifically* to fulfill his purposes. It wasn’t that God used people despite their wounds; rather, he used their wounds *especially* to work out his plans. The wounds weren’t baggage; no, they were the very instrument God used to save his world.

That astonished me. I was taught our woundedness was a result of sin—our being separated from God’s presence—which is true. I was also taught that God saves us *in spite* of this. However, when I looked closer, I saw no “despite-ness” at all in God’s dealings. He isn’t avoiding our sinful wounds. Rather, he is charging headlong into the most painful elements of our groaning creation. Wherever our most wounded people, behaviors, decisions, and temperaments are found, there is where God is clearly at work—harnessing, healing, delivering, empowering, *saving*—if we are only willing to look. When I realized this, I saw it everywhere. This simple truth—God saves us not *despite*

our woundedness but by *embodying* it—is the message of the Bible.

Most importantly, we read it in Isaiah’s memorable passage about the suffering servant, who writes of the Savior: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). God didn’t save us despite our wounds. He saved us *through his own*. The question then becomes, *How do wounds heal other wounds?* The answer to that question may help me understand God’s response to my dad so many years ago and how God is doing healing work in all our lives.

LOOKING INTO A MIRROR

Alice Miller, a psychotherapist and expert in childhood trauma, writes about the crucial first weeks of a child’s life and the need for the child to bond with his mother. “In the first weeks and months of life he needs to have the mother at his disposal, must be able to avail himself of her and be mirrored by her . . . the mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother’s face and finds himself therein.”¹

Immediate bonding between a mother and a child is incredibly important. Since chemicals like oxytocin are released through skin and eye contact, much is lost when a child is not able to touch his mother’s skin and see her face immediately. Miller points out the process of mirroring—how a

child gazes upon his mother and mirrors the affections in her. I love the phrase that the child “finds himself therein.” He locates his identity in the face of his mother. Likewise, the mother gazes at her child and mirrors the needs she sees in her baby’s face.

But what if this ideal scenario is not the case? What if the mother is not emotionally available for the child? Or the mother, rather than serving as a steady fount of love for the child’s self-discovery, instead *needs* the love of the child to escape her own pain? Miller answers this question, speaking of how the child gazes at his mother’s face, “provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would find not himself in his mother’s face but rather the mother’s projections. *This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain.*”²

This is one of the more helpful explanations I’ve read for the concept of original sin. Sin comes from the Greek word *hamartanō*, meaning to miss the mark.³ Aristotle used it to describe an archer’s arrow that does not strike the bull’s-eye. We reduce the concept of sin to lies, greed, or violence; in short, our own actions. But it’s deeper than that. We steal because we’re afraid of going without. We’re afraid of going without because we are not gazing at God our Provider. We kill because we’re afraid of not being loved. We’re afraid of not being loved because we’re not finding love in our Father’s face.

Sin, in all its forms—individual, social, institutional, familial, relational, political—represents the ways we’ve been searching for and not finding our true Mirror all our lives. If, as Gregory the Great wrote, “we are changed into the one we see”⁴—a theological understanding of the process of mirroring—then none of us has ever known a perfect parent or had the chance to mirror a family or a world that allows us to become most fully alive, which is to say, *sinless*. We have been ripped apart from our Heavenly Mirror, and sin is our inability to discover our true selves in this world.

So if you’re the college student abuzz with anxiety, perhaps it’s because you’ve never known the perfect peace found in relationship with your Maker. If you’re the married person filled with shame, perhaps it’s because you never tasted the grace of the Wonderful Counselor who said your marriage isn’t saved by your strength or doomed by your weakness.

Perhaps it wasn’t *just* the biological process of procreation, as Augustine imagined, which passed down sin to the next generation. Perhaps it was also that none of us had a chance to mirror the living God and find our face in his. Therefore, we have all become stunted and wounded creatures in a stunted and wounded world.

But what of Jesus?

We read in Colossians that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Could it be that the reason Jesus of Nazareth, the poor carpenter turned itinerant prophet, healer, and preacher, is so compelling to

billions is that he was a human being who did not miss the mark of the ideal human condition? That he was a human who gazed at God's face, our true Mirror, and therefore was able to grow into the perfect image of Love himself, without mar or distortion? That in Jesus we see human wholeness—and our woundedness? If wholeness is unimpeded mirroring between God and us, then what we see in Jesus is that woundless, whole relationship. We see a sinless life.

But that is not all we see. Jesus' life culminated not how we imagined a sinless life would but in a gruesome, humiliating crucifixion. By his *wounds* we are healed. I wonder if God is trying to reveal that he sees us as we really are. On the outside we look put together and strong, but on the inside, doesn't it feel, in a way, like we're hanging on a cross, bleeding out from the wounds we've acquired living in a broken world with broken mirrors and broken relationships? It's as if we're split open from how terrible we can be to one another, how held captive we are to the agency of the evil one—suffocating, weakening, and ultimately waiting to die.

If mirroring is how we're transformed, and none of us ever had the chance to mirror God, then could Jesus on the cross be God's attempt at mirroring *us*? Athanasius, a fourth-century pastor, seemed to think so. He wrote that "God was made like us so that we might be made like him."⁵ We couldn't find our face in his, so instead, he found his face in ours. God took on wounds, just like us, that our wounds might be healed and made whole, just like him.

THE KISS OF GOD

Which brings me back to Anna kissing my face. When she called me out, asking, *Do you not think I see all of you?* I was stunned because truthfully, no, I did not. It took me a few years to process that moment, but here's what I can now articulate. I believed that Anna was overlooking my brokenness in her attempt to love the "loveable parts" of me—my virtue, my character, my personality, my mean scrambled eggs, that sort of stuff. I believed that only the right side of my face was worthy to be kissed. So when she tried to kiss my left side, my subconscious replied, *No, no, let me help you. That side is unfortunate and it cannot be saved. It's too far gone. The right side is the side that deserves love.*

If we really take in what it means that Jesus would end his historical existence with such a death, it should shock us, like Anna pulling back and saying, "Stop that! Do you not think I see all of you? Do you not think I love all of you?" That is the message of Jesus on the cross. It is God mirroring us, saying, *Stop it, world. Enough is enough. I see all of you. I love all of you. I am with you in your worst, which is to say your true, condition.*

Yet notice, the message isn't enough on its own. If Anna wanted to communicate her love for the real me, she could not say, "Let me kiss you," and then kiss only my "good side." Instead, she demonstrated she loved all of me by kissing the worst parts of me. She channeled her love through what I believed to be the most unlovable part of my very being.

And when she did that, I knew she loved all of me. Because if she can love me through my worst, if she can kiss the ugliest parts of me as a free choice, then I know there is no part of me too ugly for her love.

This is why the story of Jesus astonishes me so much. Jesus came to communicate God's love for the world—a very wounded world that hides many of its wounds, even from itself, much like I thought I was hiding mine from Anna. To get through to us with the message of God's love, one we scarcely believe, Jesus had to communicate that love directly through the world's wounds. Not around them or despite them, but *through* them. He had to mirror the real us.

When you see Jesus on the cross, you see him experience your secret addiction as his own. He feels the neglect you suffered as a child. He hears those ugly words spoken by your parents, siblings, and friends as if they were spoken to him. He knows the way you cruelly treated your family, and he feels their pain and yours. He knows how you've led a self-absorbed life rejecting those closest to you, and he feels that rejection and loathing. He wants to join you in those most shameful places, not watch from afar. He wants to feel them with you, alongside you. He knows the precise pain that these wounds have caused you. And he wants to know it fully because he wants to be with you, the real you, not the you you're pretending to be or the you that you wish you were.

On the cross God brings his love, through Jesus, onto the true human condition of brokenness, sin, suffering, and

death. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In Jesus, we know there is no amount of woundedness too ugly for the love of God. The cross assures us of this because God’s love has kissed the wounded human. And as Jesus hands over his life to death, God’s powerful love joins us even in our coffins. The power of the cross is the God who kisses wounds so that we may know we are loved, not despite but *with* our wounds, because his love has been channeled *through* them.

On the cross, God kisses our real face.

YOUR REAL FACE HAS SCARS

Yet as beautiful as that is, we’re still not done. Infection makes a wound painful and tender. That’s why when Anna began to touch the left side of my face with loving intention, I wanted to scream out in rage for the wound of my broken face and all the history associated with it was being touched. But the more she kissed me, *the more her love joined me in that place*, the more the infection was cured and its power emptied. When a wound is healed it does not stay a wound, nor does it go back to pre-wounded flesh. It can only go forward as a new manifestation of what it was.

It becomes a scar.

Our history remains. We were separated from God. We have never mirrored our Maker and so we split each other open on this earth. But because God joined us in our

brokenness, sin, and death, our wounds caused by these forces no longer have power over us. The infection is cured and the wound becomes a scar—one that no longer hurts but is still very real. Lest we forget, when Jesus emerged from his tomb victorious, he did not emerge unscathed.

He went to his disciples and showed them his scars.

Look at Jesus. Put your finger in his hands. Touch his side. God will always be the God with scars—because if we are to live, we cannot go back to an unwounded state of existence. We can only go through it, which is why God’s power is most clearly revealed in scars. His scars are a sign of his strength, that he defeated the powers separating our souls from his love. This is how Paul can sing, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). For he sees on Jesus’ body what sin can do to a person—and yet, Jesus stands alive.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul recounts how God sent him a thorn in his flesh so he would not become conceited about how much God was showing him spiritually. Paul pleaded with God three times to take it away. We can all relate to this: begging God to take away some burden, some memory, some practice that keeps causing discomfort in our lives and souls. But the Lord said no. Rather, God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul then said, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s

sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

According to Paul, God’s love and power are made real not because he pulls the thorn out of the flesh but because we find him in the middle of the pierced flesh, which can no longer destroy us. We hold up the scars of what were once wounds and say, “They have no more power over me, for God has met me in them and healed me there by his love.” Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions—the world doesn’t see good in these yet, but those who have found Jesus there will. The person struggling with addiction who does not shy away from her past but no longer is held captive by its pain. The divorcé who humbly shares how the pain of his failed marriage revealed the unfailing love of God. The perfectionist who has been released by Jesus, who met her in her imperfection. These are all scars that must be lifted up to the world as signs of the sufficiency of God’s grace and power. If we boast in our scars long enough, we give others permission to come out of their own hiding and receive the kiss of God. We give others a chance to be healed too.

I was too ashamed to let Anna kiss my scarred face, believing it to be unworthy. Little did I know that on the last day it will *only* be my scarred face that is worthy of kisses. For scars are the sign that God’s love has entered and made whole again.

MIRRORING THE CRUCIFIED JESUS

Because we don't mirror the living God in our lives, we mirror something else and turn that thing into our god. If we don't know that God has entered our broken marriage, our negative self-talk, our depression and anxiety, then we're still desperately looking for a perfect mirror to escape our inner wounds. That perfect mirror could be a job, a spouse, an idyllic family, a bazillion Instagram followers, political ideologies . . . the list goes on. We continue searching for some idea or thing or person in this life and try to *will ourselves* to be healed by becoming just like it.

There is nothing unique about this desire to make a savior into our own image of what we think will save us. It's as old as time—the human instinct to serve and adore a mirror who accords with what our society values and wants.

Paul addresses precisely the same situation in his letter to the Corinthians. After acknowledging the factions that have developed in the new church community, he expresses that the centerpiece of their very life is Christ. No one else was crucified for them. He goes on to say that God has used the foolish things in this world to shame the wise, so they should not be surprised if people don't understand what they say about the Son of God. Then he writes, “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews

and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Paul is saying that the Jews will always want a miracle-worker Savior while the Greeks will always prefer a Socratic Savior, in the same way every nation has always fit Jesus into their ideological preferences too. And it’s so tempting to acquiesce to them. It’s tempting to talk to a room full of Greeks about the wise, philosophical teachings of the rabbi. It’s tempting to talk to Jews living in Asia Minor about the apocalyptic, Torah-saturated signs that Jesus performed. It’s tempting to tell those of us living in the Western world that Jesus’ power makes us immune to sadness and will lead us toward material blessing, or that his compassion means there’s no need for us to undergo the pain of transformation. And to be sure, in some ways, we would not be completely lying. But the point, says Paul, is that *we cannot start there*. If we do, we lose God’s real power. “We always preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks [not to mention despicable to Americans], but to us, those being saved, it is the power of God . . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24, 29, author’s paraphrase).

Why? Because the reality is that the world—Jews, Greeks, and everyone else—is full of wounded souls bleeding out from its separation from God. Yet no one wants to admit that. Only God knows that’s who we really are. He’s the only one who loves us enough to save the real us. So if you’re

looking for God's love, you won't find it in your strength, your success, or some fantasy of a utopian community, but in your brokenness, your failures, *your own wounded face*.

I wish I could tell you from the moment Anna kissed my wounded face I have never doubted her or God's love. But that's not true. I have found within my soul a myriad of wounds that reveal I do not want to find God in my weakness. I want to be strong. I want to be admired. I do not want people to see my fears, my insecurities, and the ways I have hurt Anna and loathed myself.

I want them to see my intelligence, my successes, my happiness, my virtue signaling—in short, *the right side of my face*. Yet if I do this, I empty the cross of its power. I have no good news to offer anyone. And it rises up in my soul too. Often, when I have subconsciously been focusing my attention on the world's form of boasting, I will discover within me fear, anxiety, vileness, depression, and self-absorption. When that happens, Anna notices it as well. She'll force me to sit down on the couch and, just like before, she'll kiss the left side of my face. Every single time I'll feel irritation and anger come to the surface because I know what this action represents, and it is humiliating. She is forcing me to remember the *real me*, the one I am tempted to hide from everyone, even myself.

But then the weight of this truth washes over me—I am loved not despite my wounds *but through them*. She sees the real me and she chooses that me. I have nothing to prove. I

have nothing to earn. I have nothing to lose. And I am reminded again that scars are God's beautiful signs to a world that isn't yet truthful about its own wounded face.

In the pages to come, I want to tell you the story of a God who meets us in our wounds, kisses them, and turns them into scars, encouraging us to boast in them. It is a story deeply needed in a time when we find ourselves afraid to boast in our weaknesses, afraid to reveal our wounds to one another, afraid to say the wrong thing, afraid to be real in a culture that is performative, afraid to show grace when our society demands perfection, afraid to show our real faces and how much pain we're carrying. This is the story that played out time and again for me as I tried to find my way as a young pastor filled with doubts about what, exactly, I was doing and who I actually was.

Anna and I moved to Brooklyn and started a church. Ours is not a story of strength, conquest, or glamour but of weakness, brokenness, and grace. Because I believe that you will most clearly see God in my story when you see my soul's wounds on the cross. When you see the grotesqueness in my shame, the perversion of my heart, and the depths of my deception, and yet you see me still praising the mercies of God's grace because he has joined me in those places with his love, then I believe you will encounter God's power too. My prayer is that by doing so you will find the courage to let God come near those wounds in your heart and offer the message he has constantly delivered to me:

Russell, you are truly seen for who you are, and you are freely chosen by me.

My prayer is that the church will become a beacon of hope because all of us will be known for boasting about our greatest wounds, our most embarrassing failures, no longer ashamed. We will be known as people who point to our scars, for in so doing, we point to the scars of God. My prayer is that in our community, we will be a people who, like Anna, invite others to show the left side of their faces and receive the kiss of Christ.

When we do so, my prayer is that we would begin to understand what wholeness has always meant for God. That just like my father, when we are tempted to cry out, *God, would you please heal us and make us whole?* we would see Jesus mirroring us, pointing to his split open body, his poured out blood, and his face like ours, saying, *But can you not see it? I already have.*

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