

# Healing the wounds

## Mental health and mental illness from God's point of view (pt 4)

Unfortunately, by the time we believe the monster of evil really exists, and we're ready to do something about it, it's already messed up our minds and done its damage. As Paul wrote in Romans 6:21, precious years of our lives are wasted in selfish pursuits that accomplish nothing. And all during that time we were blissfully unaware of evil's existence it enjoyed its freedom to do what it liked to us, inflicting all sorts of wounds in our minds that probably still make relating to God and to people a real problem for us.

Paul too was blissfully unaware that "every kind of covetous desire" lurked in his brain just waiting for a commandment like **Do not covet** to spring those desires to life, **Romans 7:7-8**. It was a shock for Paul, because instead of the command making him stop coveting it actually made him **want** to covet. But how was that even possible? What was happening inside his head to make him that way? It was frightening, because instead of God's good law making him a better person, it was only revealing how awful he was.

We see that in Paul's attitude to Christians. He hated them. By his own admission Paul was utterly obsessed in doing away with them. "I stormed through their meeting places," **Acts 26:11** (The Message) "bullying them into cursing Jesus, a one-man terror obsessed with obliterating these people." He had Christians beaten up and thrown in jail (22:19). He voted in favour of them being put to death too (26:10), and when he'd finished causing havoc for the Christians in Jerusalem, "I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

And Paul did all this, **verse 10**, "On the authority of the chief priests," so Paul was highly regarded by the religious leaders as an upstanding citizen, a man admired and looked up to, a man who got things done.

On the surface, therefore, Paul was a good man. He was self-assured, confident and on top of his game. But **inside his head** it was a different story. In reality Paul was a vicious thug, who took to violence with ease and relish. Given the opportunity to bully people, including women and children, he was off like a shot, rolling up his sleeves and ready for action.

His religious upbringing and strict obedience to God's law hadn't done him much good, then, had it? But that's the startling lesson we learn from Paul's life, that even obeying God's law didn't stem the flow of evil juices squirting hatred and cruelty into his head. And one day it hit Paul, that "in my mind I'm a slave to God's law" (Romans 7:25) - which he truly thought had made him a good person - but his behaviour and actions revealed quite the opposite, that in fact he was 'suffering from a chronic mental disorder with abnormal or violent social behaviour' - an exact definition today of a **psychopath**.

Imagine that: Paul the psychopath, the typical evil person you see in movies, feared by all, because he explodes into violent behaviour in a second and he can shoot people dead without a moment's pause to think. Paul, in other words, was sick in the head. On his own admission he was "a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13), and there was nothing, including God's law, that could do anything about it.

The law, of course, was supposed to prevent that happening, but instead it only showed Paul where the monster had been hacking away inside his head inflicting its horrible wounds, and making him a deeply damaged man.

On the other hand, Paul could now identify and pinpoint the damage the monster had done. The "Do not covet" law, for instance, had successfully dredged up from the depths of his mind the awful reality of his craving for power, and how that had turned him into a vicious bully and a hopeless hypocrite and a total sham. The law, in other words, had revealed how sick his mind really was. It had shown him in no uncertain terms that he, the great religious scholar Paul, was in fact mentally ill and certifiably bonkers, and for the sake of public safety he should be locked up in an institution and sedated.

Did that make the law bad? No, but it did make it embarrassing, because it gave Paul no place to hide from what he'd become. But the positive side of that was - it unearthed what was really happening inside Paul's mind that was making him do such awful things. It got the monster out into the open. Paul could now see he was sick in the head and what was causing it.

The Law, therefore, had been a perfect diagnostic tool for showing Paul he was a psychopath. And isn't **diagnosis the first step toward healing**? You can't get to grips with what ails you if you have no idea what the problem is and what's causing it. The first step in *all* healing is diagnosis.

It's a great pity, then, that the Mental Health community doesn't start with God's law as its main diagnostic tool. Faced with someone like Paul, whose behaviour clearly revealed a deeply disturbing mental illness of some sort, a quick skim through the Ten Commandments could help reveal which areas of the mind the damage has been done.

Paul focused on the tenth commandment in Romans 7:7 as the one that stuck out for him. For someone else it might be the ninth commandment about lying that suddenly shows him how much his whole life has been a lie, creating a false image of himself to get attention and admiration. 'He's such a nice person', people say of him, and he certainly comes across as charming and poised, but it's all just an act to hide some deep seated fear of being isolated or left out, or not being popular. And it's that fear that has driven him to be someone he isn't, a charmer and an extrovert, making his relationships with other people shallow and selfish, and it's driving him crazy, because he knows he's a fake, but he can't do anything about it.

With others, perhaps, it's the eighth commandment that reveals how much they steal from other people's lives to make their own lives seem better. They love dropping juicy hints of weakness in other people's lives to make their own lives look good by comparison, which in reality is stealing from someone else for personal gain. And suddenly they see how their whole lives have been about using others to enhance their own standing in people's eyes, and it makes them feel utterly sick.

Good, because in Paul it was only when he saw himself for who he really was that he begged for help. And isn't that **the second step in healing**? It's realizing how wretched and helpless we are. It's recognizing the monster of evil has got the better of us, and it always has, and it's been playing with our mind making us think we're such fine people, when in reality we're emotional basket cases, and it takes only the slightest provocation to set us off in anger, jealousy, or self pity.

And we've still got seven commandments to go yet, each one of which would reveal more embarrassing but very accurate descriptions of the mental illnesses we carry around with us. Or, as Paul phrased it in **Romans 7:6**, "the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death." God's ten commandments are brilliant at revealing the mental illnesses that wreck our relationships with God and people, torment our conscience, and make it very difficult for us to face ourselves in the mirror.

So now we have the first two steps in healing mental illness; diagnosis, first of all, aided brilliantly by the Ten Commandments and Jesus' expansion of them in Matthew 5 to 7; and secondly, that we need help beyond our own resources, and even beyond obedience to God's commands, because we've got mental illnesses so engrained in our personality that there is nothing we can do to dislodge them. It's like trying to separate the colours in a pot of paint. Once the colours are mixed in there is no getting them out again, and that's exactly where every human being finds himself after years of living in this world. Mental illness is part of us. We're all mentally sick in some form or another, and we need help.

And is there ever a day, even **after** we've become Christians, when we're not flagellating ourselves for some stupid thing we've said, or for an emotion that broke loose we really regret? Does a day pass when we haven't told ourselves off for something we should or shouldn't have done, to the point, perhaps, we're even muttering aloud with frustration at our idiocy, with head in hands rocking to and fro like people in mental institutions do?

Good, because when Paul got to that point and cried out for help to deal with the agony in his head, **he got help**. But what a surprise that must have been for Paul, because all his life he'd depended on himself, thinking that's what he was supposed to do. Wasn't it up to him to obey the commandments? Wasn't it on the strength of his own mind and determination to do what was right that pleased God? Wasn't obedience what life and salvation were all about?

Surely, then, to cry out for help was a sign of weakness. If the *nation* was in trouble, yes, you cried out for help then, just like the Israelites cried out for help in Egypt. But not for *personal* help. God didn't exist to help, Paul thought, he existed to be obeyed, and on that score Paul had done very well. On his own strength he was as close to obeying God as perfectly as any human could (Philippians 3:4-6), and that's what gave him his confidence and peace of mind.

That's what gave Job his confidence and peace of mind too. He obeyed God well and life was good. But like Paul he'd never actually known the power of evil until God let Satan loose on him. And that's how Job came to realize how powerless he was. He grimly hung on to his obedience as his only defense until God intervened and showed Job in Job 40:9-14 that Job was dealing with powers that were way beyond him. No way could Job by his "own right hand" save himself (verse 14). And Job suddenly saw that, repented of trusting in his own faith and obedience, and turned to God to help him.

God, then, allows evil to have its way with us to help us realize what we're up against, and how powerless we are, so we cry out to him for help, just as Paul did in Romans 7:24, and "Thanks be to God," **verse 25**, when God answered.

But notice HOW the help came: It came "through Jesus Christ our Lord." In answer to our plea for help God directs us to Jesus, because it's through Jesus he saves us from evil. And he does it in two stages. The **first** stage already happened before we were born or knew evil existed, when God sent Jesus to "be a sin offering," **Romans 8:3**. At that point evil was "condemned." The lock it held on the human brain was broken, and from that point on any human wishing to be rescued from evil could be freed from it by simply crying out to God for help.

But that was only the first stage. We're out of evil's cage, but now what? Well, the **reason** God freed us from evil's cage through his Son was "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us," **verse 4**. Now, at last, the commandments could be kept without evil twisting them into temptations. Evil had been so clever when IT held sway in our heads, because it would take anything we knew to be wrong and somehow turn it round so we'd want to do it. Paul, for instance, knew the commandment, "Do not kill," but he found himself signing death warrants for Christians, just like Christians go to war and kill other Christians. It doesn't make sense (Romans 7:15), but evil somehow justifies such incongruities in our heads, and we're not even aware of them. We'll even get angry if someone points them out.

Just because we were freed from evil's cage, therefore, doesn't mean we're automatically freed from the wounds that evil caused in our heads as well. They don't just evaporate and disappear. Instead, they still fester and itch and bother us. Take any of the commandments - and especially Jesus' expanded version of them in Matthew 5 to 7, where he includes what we're **thinking** as well as what we're doing - and it's embarrassing to realize our minds are still messed up and susceptible to temptation in obvious areas, like judging others, being jealous and angry and easily offended, and looking at stuff on the internet we shouldn't.

But God provided for all that through his Son too, in the **second** stage of saving us from evil. This time it's not our rescue from evil; it's our **recovery** from it. Now the healing begins, that enables us to keep God's commandments even in our thinking. In other words, the commandments are about mental health too. In fact, they define it. That's why the law is good and holy: Keep God's law and we have a thoroughly healthy mind.

Salvation, therefore, is in two stages: Rescue, first of all, and then Recovery. It starts with realizing we are mentally ill and crying out for God's help, and then God sets about the **long term** job of healing our wounds, a process Paul calls "living according to the Spirit," **Romans 8:4**.

It's a rather surprising process, though, because it involves a lot of fighting. C.S. Lewis pictured the process in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in the many battles fought between the forces of good and evil after Aslan the lion died and came back to life again. Life in Narnia was a constant battle. And so is life for a Christian seeking healing in his mind from the wounds of evil.

Paul spells out the battle in **verse 5**: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have **their minds set** on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."

Paul makes it clear that life for a Christian is a battle of the mind. The fighting isn't with swords and clubs as it was in Narnia, but imagine the battles in Narnia as a picture of the battle going on in our heads. It's the same as the battle going on every day in our bodies between the good and bad bacteria. God designed our bodies as a constant battle, and now as Christians it's our minds that are the battlegrounds.

God isn't against fighting, therefore, but he'd rather we directed it to where it counts, which isn't fighting against each other, it's fighting the war in our heads. And it is war, **Galatians 5:17**, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are **in conflict with each other...**"

And it's good they're in conflict, because before we were Christians our minds were filled with covetous desires, most of which we were probably unaware of, and even if we were aware of them we had nothing to fight them with. But when the children entered Narnia they were given weapons. And that's how God answers our cry for help: He gives us weapons - weapons that enable us to fight the covetous desires in our heads that made us mentally ill in the first place. Now we can set our minds "on what the Spirit desires" (Romans 8:5). The Spirit's desires versus the covetous desires: It's the greatest battle raging on this planet at this very moment, and it's all happening in the minds of Christians, because it's Christians who are the first to understand what it takes to dislodge evil from human minds, as the first step in healing the whole world.

And what it takes is war, because evil, just like the forces of evil in Narnia, ambushes us at every opportunity. It has all the advantages of location and manpower too. It can call upon all sorts of people and situations any time on any day to trip us up and tempt us into thinking wrong thoughts, or reacting badly.

But we have weapons. We've got the Lord's Prayer and that lovely phrase, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil," meaning God can help us recognize temptation and avoid it. We can see it coming and mentally prepare ourselves in how to deal with it. That's a powerful weapon in taking away evil's advantage. We can see the ambush we're being drawn into. We can see the gun barrels poking through the bushes, and we can take avoiding action.

We also know what weapons evil likes using too. It likes to make us feel resistance is impossible. We're led to believe we have addictions we cannot conquer. But James says that's rubbish. Resist evil, James writes (4:7), and evil scampers off in fright, because it's not used to resistance. It expects an easy fight, because with humans that's been its experience. A little temptation here, a little blinding there, a fiery dart smack in a sensitive area - and humans fall like flies. In evil's experience humans don't resist; they give in.

But like the children in Narnia, Christians have weapons to fight back with, and we're not afraid of a good fight. Bring it on, because God issued us with a whole armoury of weapons, for attack and defense, that in the hands of a skilled and determined Christian enable him "to stand up to everything the devil throws his way," **Ephesians 6:11** (The Message). Note the word, 'Everything'. It was the same in Narnia too, because mere children became ferocious adversaries. After a few setbacks and lessons learned as to how evil works, they became impervious to evil. Nothing evil threw at them could touch them, just as "the evil one" cannot "touch" Christians either (1 John 5:18).

The battle of the mind is easily ours to win, because we have amazing weapons, like the shield with ***Made by God out of nothing but the best materials*** written on it, that can actually extinguish flaming arrows fired at us by the devil himself (Ephesians 6:16). Picture ourselves holding that up when someone fires a ridiculous accusation our way. We have a shield that can fizzle it into nothing.

Can we grasp the fact that God is now healing minds, and the evidence of that healing is battles won? We're in a fight but we can expect a string of victories, because God is strengthening our minds. We are becoming seasoned fighters.

And it's all thanks to Jesus Christ providing us with his Spirit, the best weapon of all, because we're up against "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12), so we need a spiritual force to fight them with. And we've got it in "the Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9) constantly fuelling our brains with Christ's brain, Christ's thoughts, and Christ's "righteousness" (10). The same Spirit that kept Jesus safe from evil as a human being he now passes on to us. We're the next in line to become skilled in its use.

You mean, Christians are supposed to become skilled in the use of weapons? Oh yes, Paul answers in **2 Corinthians 10:3**, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does." What? Christians are into waging war as well? Too right we are, Paul says in **verse 4**, "The weapons we fight with..."

Christians are out there swinging weapons? Yes, but they're "not the weapons of the world," because you can't fight evil with worldly weapons. Guns and tanks cannot destroy evil, just as therapy, medication, and mental institutions cannot heal mental illness. We're up against forces of evil that need "divine power" to "demolish" them (4), but because Jesus equipped us with that power it is now possible for us to "take captive **every thought** to make it obedient to Christ" (5).

What Jesus is offering us is the chance to take control of our minds. No more being ruled by our emotions, impulses, temptations, and the stupid ideas of our culture. We can eject them out of our brains like owls spitting out the bones of a mouse. And this is what God wants us to grasp, that we're in that process right now where Jesus is training us in the use of the same weapons he used, just like a master of Kung Fu passes on all his weapon skills to a youngster.

We now belong to Jesus, meaning he's taken us under his wing as his personal project, his goal being that we develop minds as strong as his. He died to free our minds from the grip of evil, and now he lives to fill us with his mind instead. And through the Holy Spirit he gives us the power to "set" and "reset" our minds every day on the same wavelength as his mind, so that our minds are steadily and relentlessly being transformed more and more into the likeness of his mind.

So, yes, evil may have the advantage over us right now, but we have weapons that enable us to prevail on any battleground and terrain of evil's choosing, so that we can stand firm against the devil just as Jesus did. And as we prevail we get the sense that our minds are getting stronger and healthier.

The wounds are being healed.