

CONVERsations

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HEALING





Inviting God In

*Opening the Door to the Messy and
Miraculous Process of Inner Healing Prayer*

BY MARY YERKES

Melissa tried to steady her voice as she spoke. Workplace bullying by a coworker had jeopardized her health to the point where, in her own words, she was “ready to go over the edge.” To make matters worse, Melissa’s supervisor not only failed to take corrective action, he invalidated her pain, urging Melissa to forgive her aggressor and just move on since, after all, Melissa was a Christian. Now her abuser was up for a promotion—a promotion that would make her Melissa’s boss.

As she spilled her pain, I listened, asking God for wisdom and discernment. A thought formed in my mind: *Every authority figure in her life has failed her, leaving her deeply wounded.* When the thought persisted, I asked Melissa permission to share it. As I did, she let out a heart-wrenching cry, and began sobbing uncontrollably. When the crying stopped, she shared a horrific story of childhood abuse, molestation, and abandonment.

What began as a conversation between friends became a sacred space, as we talked about how she never felt free to express herself. Like most abuse survivors, she had walled herself in emotionally. Any true expression of herself left her vulnerable to attention and attack. We prayed, inviting Jesus to bind her wounds and heal her broken heart. Nothing remarkable seemed to occur during our prayer time, so I assumed her journey would be a longer one.

Nevertheless, when I saw Melissa a few days later, the change was profound.

“I feel like a dam has burst, and the real me is rushing out,” Melissa said. “I’m hearing God’s voice again, and I feel God’s peace.” Creativity had awakened in some deep, dormant well. Long-buried childhood dreams of writing and painting resurfaced, and she longed to explore them.

Through this simple encounter, Melissa experienced a marked transformation. Although we never know exactly how an inner healing process will unfold in an individual’s life, there are some guiding principles that inform our work as co-healers with Christ.

First, our time together included a three-way conversation that included Melissa, Jesus, and me. As Melissa shared her pain, I listened both to her



and to God, asking for discernment and insight. Through listening prayer, God revealed truth, which I in turn communicated to Melissa.

Second, Melissa bore witness to the truth, allowing it to expose areas of hidden pain she had not discussed with anyone for years. She participated in the healing process by bringing her pain into the light of God's presence and asking for prayer.

Third, we relied on God to do what only He could do—remove the sting of her pain with the healing balm of His presence. God alone determined the degree of healing, whether it would happen immediately or over time, and how Melissa was to move forward in her newfound freedom.

Finally, we talked about not only the wounding event but also its impact on her daily choices and relationships. She managed her pain using unhealthy coping mechanisms, including self-injury, emotionally shutting down, and not allowing the full expression of her person lest by “coming out,” she opened herself to further abuse.

Praying together was just the beginning of Melissa's journey toward wholeness. While God initiated the process, she chose to participate in her healing by finding new, healthy ways to cope with her emotional pain and loss, fully embracing her God-given identity, and giving herself permission to explore her gifts and talents in ways that would honor God and those she loves.

Melissa's journey toward wholeness continues as she daily chooses to reengage with her heart allowing Jesus to direct her to the broken places that needed further healing. The freedom Melissa is experiencing runs deep; its tendrils touching every area of her life.

LIBERTY TO CAPTIVES

Jesus speaks of precisely this kind of freedom as He starts his ministry, reading from the ancient scrolls of Isaiah 61:1: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners” (NASB).

The Hebrew word for *broken* is *shabar*.¹ It means to *rend violently, wreck, crush, shatter, and cripple*. Because we live in a fallen world, we must contend with hurtful words and events, unhealthy family dynamics, and trauma—all of which can leave us deeply damaged. This type of brokenness manifests itself in many ways, including performance orientation, eating disorders, sexual compulsivity, and persistent patterns of anxiety and addiction.

¹ Augustus Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, H7665.

It is good news indeed that a major focus of Jesus' ministry is healing broken hearts and shattered lives. Numerous scriptures support the biblical basis for inner healing and reveal the power of God's Word and truth in the healing process. The psalmist reminds us of this transforming truth, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3, NASB).²

Because God's Word is alive, it has the power to transform. Think back to the book of Genesis. God spoke, and life began. That same life-giving power and creative force is at work when God speaks to us in personal ways. He can call into existence the love we lacked in childhood, dismantling destructive coping mechanisms, and restoring our shattered sense of self.

Although we can seek God earnestly and open ourselves to His presence, healing always comes on God's terms and in God's time. We cannot force God's hand. The deep inner transformation we long for does not come through human effort, intellect, or desire, although we can position ourselves to experience God in many ways. The bottom line is this: God initiates the healing, and He invites us to participate in the process.

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THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN HEALING

That said, we cannot fully participate in the inner healing process without acknowledging sinful responses to hurtful people and events. While bitterness and unforgiveness are understandable reactions, they only serve to deepen our pain. The author of Hebrews warns: “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled” (Hebrews 12:15, NASB). Instead, God invites us to trust Him: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10, NIV). God invites us to biblically address our emotional pain with truth and intention.

² See also Psalms 23:3, 34:18, Isaiah 55:11, 61:1–4, Jeremiah 23:29, John 8:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, and 2 Thessalonians 2:13

Sadly, in many faith traditions, talk of emotions and their role in our lives is off limits. Pastors and leaders urge believers to deny painful memories and their impact on our lives, misappropriating such Scriptures as Philippians 3:13, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead” (NIV). The results are devastating. Past injuries affect current lives and ministries. The truism “Hurt people hurt people” plays out in churches around the world, hindering not only intimacy with Christ and others but also the furtherance of the gospel.

The heart of the gospel is love, “which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5, NIV). To enter compassionately into the pain of others and love others as Jesus does, we must tune in to our hearts and embrace our emotions, learning healthy, biblical ways in which to express them, allowing them to lead us deeper into the heart of God while continually aligning our will with God’s will.

RESPONDING TO GOD’S INVITATION

A

s an inner healing prayer practitioner, I sometimes refer people to mental health professionals. While the transformation of inner healing prayer can be profound, the process can also elicit emotionally painful memories. Consequently, people with deep childhood wounds, such

as abuse, incest, or other trauma, should consider first seeing a mental health practitioner. With their counselor’s approval, they can then augment their therapy with prayer from an experienced healing prayer practitioner.

In the practice of healing prayer, I invite others to embrace and express their emotions in healthy, holy ways. I often begin with this question, “What is God speaking to you through your emotions?” Or, “What is your soul crying out for?” God invites us to be free and full in prayer by acknowledging our feelings and naming our need: “Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord” (Lamentations 2:19, NASB). However, before we can pour out our hearts before God, we must be honest with ourselves.

Several consistent themes emerge as people spill their hearts: *I need to forgive my friend or family member; I have areas of emotional pain and bondage I need to address; I am pushing myself too hard, and I need God to show me how to let go of responsibilities and ministries that He hasn’t called me to.*

Sound familiar?

These words rang true for me when, a few years ago, I found myself in crisis. Unrealistic deadlines at work weighed heavily on my soul. My son was in turmoil, and I was struggling with chronic illness and failing physical health. Instead of seeing my emotional and physical distress as an indication that something was wrong that required my attention, I ignored it, pushing harder to get things done.

When I found myself sobbing uncontrollably at a Sunday service and avoiding friends and family, alarm bells began to go off inside me. For the next few weeks, I committed more time to listening prayer. Two words surfaced repeatedly—*retreat* and *sabbatical*.

You would think someone who prays for others for inner healing would know better than to ignore the emotional warning signs of living beyond her physical and emotional limits. However, that was precisely what I did.

AN INNER HEALING PRAYER PROCESS

A few weeks later, I scheduled a private, silent retreat at a bed and breakfast in the Shenandoah Valley to seek God and to explore the practicalities of an extended sabbatical. I arrived on a Friday night. Nestled in a rustic room with mountain views, I let down my guard for the first time in months, opening myself to God and weeping in his presence.

The next day, I followed a process similar to the one Melissa followed: I began with listening prayer, facing the truth, inviting God to do what only He could do, and, finally, participating in the process by making choices and changes in my life.

I began my time of listening, praying the words of Psalm 139:23–24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (NASB). It is illuminating that the word *hurtful* can also be translated as *pain, sorrow, and idol*.

In the quiet solitude of winter with panoramic mountain views outside my windows, God spoke into my distress. Wrapped in His presence and love, He invited me into painful childhood memories, revealing a lie I had come to believe that had shaped my entire adult life: *Love and approval come only with performance. More activities and projects done well equals more love.*

My first-grade report card and ribbons for deportment and excellence brought me the love and affirmation I needed—if only for a few days. As an emotionally abused six-year-old, I vowed to be perfect, equating that perfection with love and significance. Performance orientation had not only shaped my entire adult life but also my life as a believer; now I was seeking love and significance from my church rather than from my parents.

I had to face the truth, and I responded in prayer, asking God for forgiveness, renouncing the lie I had come to believe, and inviting Him into my pain and woundedness to bring much-needed healing. I also asked Him to show me how to live free in this area. Then, I opened my Bible and my eyes fell to Matthew 11:28–30:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t

lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly (*The Message*).

Another invitation from God—to learn the “unforced rhythms of grace... to live freely and lightly.” *What did that look like in my life?* That became the focus of the remainder of my weekend. I spent the next 24 hours in silence and solitude, listening prayer, journaling, and horseback riding through the woods, meditating on God's Word.

I returned home, realizing two things: while my transformation that weekend ran deep, I had several choices to make that would eventually determine whether I realized the fullness of God's healing. Lifelong patterns die hard, and I struggled to prune my schedule and restore relationships after returning home.

For me, a sabbatical was God's chosen container to learn how to move from *doing for* God to *being with* God. I sensed God asking me to lay down my writing, speaking, teaching, and serving for a year to experience the reality of Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God” (NIV).

My healing journey, like Melissa's is ongoing. It is a process that will probably continue through most of my life. Healing does not just naturally happen over time. We must actively participate in the healing process, carving out space in our schedule to tend to our emotional pain and woundedness in God's presence. We must face areas of pain and darkness in our lives head-on, and be willing to act on the truth God reveals, seeking discernment and understanding as to what that looks like in our individual lives and circumstances.

God alone brings healing. But we must respond to His invitation and participate in our healing.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

JAN JOHNSON: *You seemed to behave very intentionally with “Melissa.” What do you remind yourself of/make sure you remember when you engage in healing prayer?*

MARY YERKES: *“Melissa” and I have a spiritual friendship of many years, and I had just begun coaching her around an issue she was struggling with at work. During the course of our conversation, God revealed what I believe*

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However, as a leader in my church for more than 20 years, that was easier said than done. On my way into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, it was usual for several people to stop me, asking for prayer or to meet for lunch or coffee to talk about challenges and problems they were facing.

I soon realized a time of sabbatical would not be possible at my home church. So I did something unusual. I temporarily walked away from my congregation and spent the next year worshipping at a liturgical church nearby. I reveled in the use of symbols and liturgy to worship God and found healing with a group of people who gave their love and affirmation freely, expecting little in return.

A little over a year later, I returned to my home church a different woman. I ministered and served, but I stayed within my physical and emotional boundaries. Soon, younger, emerging leaders started coming to me, looking for spiritual direction and companionship. Inner healing not only changed my life, it also changed the lives of those around me.

was the root issue. We talked about a string of destructive events that occurred during her childhood, along with the lies she had come to believe about herself and the coping mechanisms she had developed to survive. We then prayed. The work situation naturally resolved itself within a few weeks.

Let me put it this way. I think of our brokenness as a tangled ball of yarn. In our finite nature, we don't know which string to pull to straighten out the mess. If we move in our own human understanding and effort, we can add to the trauma in others' lives. Nevertheless, God knows just which string to pull first.

Simply put, God initiates the healing, and we participate in the process.

Generally, I engage in healing prayer only within the context of a structured relationship—spiritual direction, mentoring, or coaching for spiritual formation. I walk alongside someone for six months to a year. We meet a few times a month, addressing whatever issues surface. Together and individually, we engage in listening prayer





HEALING EXPERIMENT

Schedule a short retreat at a nearby retreat center or monastery. A weekend away is ideal. Take your Bible, journal, and books for formational reading.

Once there, assume a posture of listening prayer. Accept that God loves you and rest in His presence. Meditate on Psalm 131. Compose and quiet your soul. Just as a weaned child rests against his mother, rest in God's loving embrace.

In prayer, ask God where to begin. Questions like these might help: "Jesus, where in my life is there an area of bondage, a persistent painful emotion, or an overreaction to a person or event?" "What wounds and memories from my past shape my life today in ways that are not keeping with your Word?" "Are there people I need to forgive?"

Wait in God's presence, paying attention to what thoughts and emotions surface. Avoid over-analyzing your thoughts as this can stifle the healing process. Some individuals prefer to journal their thoughts or answers to the above questions.

As wounded areas and dysfunctional patterns of behavior surface, ask God to reveal the origin and effects of each wounding incident that comes to mind.

Ask God what lie you came to believe because of the wounding event and how it affects your life and relationships.

Ask God if there is anyone you need to forgive. Sometimes, you may need to forgive yourself or even God for not intervening in a way that you wanted Him to at the time.

Invite Jesus into your pain, renouncing the lie you believed about yourself and others, as well as any dysfunctional coping mechanisms you developed to manage your pain.

As a painful memory comes to mind, ask Jesus where He was during that wounding event and what He would like to speak to you.

Then ask Him what action He would have you take because of what He has shown you. Commit to being intentional about following through.

If nothing comes to mind as you seek God for healing, it is possible other things need to occur in your life before you are ready for healing prayer. In some instances, such as cases of severe abuse, you may need professional counseling before you are able to bring your pain into the light of God's presence. Scripture tells us there is a time to heal Eccl. 3:3). If it is not God's time for healing, accept His redirection and trust that God will lead you toward wholeness as you continue to seek Him.



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and spiritual disciplines, with an eye toward spiritual and personal transformation and growth.

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JJ: *What first drew you to be interested in healing prayer?*

MY: *As an abuse survivor who spent most of my early years just trying to keep it together, my early interest in healing prayer stemmed from my own need for emotional healing. I actively sought answers and deliverance from childhood trauma and unhealthy coping mechanisms. I found those answers in healing prayer, counseling, and authentic community.*

God also clearly called me to a ministry of healing prayer shortly after coming to faith. One of my primary gifts is a gift of discernment, which has been key when ministering to others. In the early years of ministry, I partnered with an experienced healing prayer practitioner, who taught me what she had learned through years of experience. Of course, I also learned as I ministered to others.

JJ: *What would you say are the best two books or resources on healing prayer?*

MY: *Listening and Inner-Healing Prayer by Rusty Rustenbach, released by NavPress in 2011, is a good primer on healing prayer. In the book, the author lays a foundation for inner-healing and listening prayer, provides basic steps in the prayer process, and explains how to facilitate inner healing for others.*

Another helpful book, which came out of the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s, is Healing for Damaged Emotions, by David A. Seamands. The accompanying workbook is especially helpful, and I highly recommend it.

Although healing prayer was a key emphasis during the Charismatic Movement, interest in the topics seems to have waned in recent years. However, I am seeing renewed interest in the topic as a new generation journeys toward wholeness. I see spiritual formation and healing prayer as going hand-in-hand, and I hope we see more of it in the years ahead.

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