

Dr. Bruce Humphrey  
February 15, 2009

**Kate and Nan (Feb 2)**  
Ephesians 4:14-16 and Genesis 4:19-24

“The truth is, Mack, the real reason you did not tell Nan was not because you were trying to save her from pain. The real reason is that you were afraid of having to deal with the emotions you might encounter... You tell her Mackenzie... ask her forgiveness and you let her forgiveness heal you.... Take the risk of honesty.” (p. 188)

We only have a couple weeks left to the conclusion of this series of messages on *The Shack*. This week we move from personal healing in the shack to the healing needed in his relationships with his wife and daughter. What is it like to seek healing in our relationships?

I was sitting in the counselor’s office listening to his advice regarding our oldest son’s depression. “As the perceived problem, your son...” The counselor continued to explain to me about a therapy plan for our oldest son’s struggles following a coma. The therapist was still talking, but the words were fading into something resembling Charlie Brown’s teacher inside my head. “Wa waw, wa wa waw...” I was stuck on the phrase, “perceived problem.” What was he saying? Our son wasn’t the real problem? Was the counselor blaming me for our son’s depression? Was I a failure as a father?

Over the next few months our oldest son and I moved into intense therapy with the counselor. I learned the language of family systems. The therapist explained that some of the dynamics in our son’s life were rooted in our larger family dynamics. Nate had learned to play his role as the troubled loner. We knew how to be a family of three healthy children, two parents, plus one troubled loner. By keeping him as the black sheep, it freed the rest of our family to be healthy as a unit of five. The therapist explained that a family system will work to achieve homeostasis, an organism that protects itself by keeping things the same. If our son tried to get emotionally and psychologically healthy, the family system would keep trying to force him back into his role as the troubled kid. Nate’s only hope for change was for our entire family system to change.

As our son became healthy I watched this play out in my life. For years our family was in the habit of walking through malls as five plus one. Nate consistently lagged behind the rest of the family. Five plus one. Then his healing began kicking in. He went on medication. He explored new options in counseling. He came out of his depression and reconnected with the family. There was just one problem. We didn’t yet know how to be a family of six. For so many years we had been five plus one that I unintentionally took over our son’s role.

A couple months into his recovery our family was walking through a mall. Suddenly I realized what was happening. Kate was walking with all four children bantering and laughing, teasing and talking. However, I was lagging behind. I had taken over the role of the depressed, disconnected family member. We were unintentionally protecting what we knew—five plus one.

I love the way *The Shack* invites us to explore how God not only heals individuals but offers to heal the relationships surrounding us. As Mack explores his own emotional healing, he realizes that he should have included his wife, Nan, and their daughter, Kate, in the healing process. When he tries to excuse himself by saying Nan would not have

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wanted to go through the pain, God gently pushes back that maybe he is using an old coping mechanism that is no longer needed.

Let's explore this idea that God can heal our relationships by healing our faulty coping systems.

*Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other, Zillah.*

*Adah gave birth to Jubal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.*

*His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.*

*As for Zillah, she also gave birth to Tubal-cain, the forger of all implements of bronze and iron; and the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.*

*Lamech said to his wives,  
"Adah and Zillah,  
Listen to my voice,  
You wives of Lamech,  
Give heed to my speech,  
For I have killed a man for wounding me;  
And a boy for striking me;  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."*

Genesis 4:19-24

One of the signs of healthy relationships is our ability to trust each other with the truth. I love the story told by Stephen M. R. Covey about his famous dad, Stephen Covey, on the way home from a ski weekend. Exhausted from having spent the weekend skiing with grandchildren, Stephen Covey negotiated with his wife to have her drive the first part of the trip and let him sleep in the back seat. Then he would take over driving the rest of the way. When Sandra was exhausted and could go no further she awakened him and asked him to take over driving. He was a bit groggy as he climbed into the driver's seat. Meanwhile, Sandra walked around the back of the car to climb in the back seat on the passenger side. Trying to negotiate her way into the back seat with a sore knee, she recalled that their car had a feature allowing the driver to lower the chassis. She asked him to lower the car and closed the door so he could turn on the mechanism to lower it. As she stood there waiting for him to lower the car, he drove away.

A driver happened to see Sandra standing in the snow as Stephen Covey drove away. Assuming she was being abandoned, the driver called the highway patrol to report that there was a woman abandoned on the side of the road. When the highway patrolman arrived a few minutes later, he invited her into the warmth of his car as he began questioning her. "Did you have a fight ma'am?" When she assured the patrolman that her husband did not mean to abandon her, he was skeptical. "Why would he simply drive away without you?"

Sandra Covey tried to explain that Stephen must have thought she was already in the back seat. She remembered that the cell phone was in the car so the patrolman dialed the phone number. “Sir, this is the highway patrol, please pull over immediately. I need to know your exact location.” Stephen Covey explained that he had recently taken over the driving and was not sure of his location. “Let me ask my wife where we are.” Calling into the back seat, he continued driving as he called, “Sandra! There is a highway patrolman on the phone and he wants to know our exact location.”

Covey pulled over to search the blankets in the back seat. “My wife is missing!” The highway patrolman explained that she was with him. “With you? Well how did she get there?” Eventually they figured out what happened and reconnected.<sup>1</sup>

Think with me about the trust and truth factors in this story. What was the difference between the trust of Sandra and distrust of the highway patrolman? She knew her husband and over the years had built a healthy trusting relationship. The patrolman did not have this same basis for trust since he had no relationship with them.

One of the signs of healthy relationships is our ability to trust each other with the truth. In unhealthy relationships, we tell ourselves and each other lies under the guise of protecting the other person. In the book, Mack had learned an unhealthy coping technique to survive his abusive father. He learned to bottle up his emotions and not be vulnerable with his wife. Remember that Mack admits having poisoned his own father at the beginning of the book? Without having grown up in a healthy home with positive trusting healthy relationships, he holds onto the coping mechanism that worked to survive his childhood, but those same coping techniques do not work for healthy family life as an adult.

Mack tells Papa that he could not have told Nan about the invitation to the shack because she would not have been able to handle it. The truth was that he did not want to share with her his own wounded emotions. He can't share with his wife what is really happening inside. He recognizes that they losing their daughter, Kate, who still feels guilty for Missy's death. Instead of a healthy family working through the pain and honestly seeking healing together, they have been pulling apart.

When relationships are stressed to the limits during a tragedy, we often turn to familiar unhealthy coping techniques. Anger brings out anger. When we feel hurt we tend to hurt others, even those close to us. Violence begets violence. In fact, anger can turn into a violent over-reaction. This cycle goes back to one of the earliest families in the Bible.

In Genesis 4 we meet Lamech, the first man to marry two wives. Lamech is a wounded personality. An angry man, he boasts to his wives that when he is wronged he takes revenge by killing his enemy. “I have killed a man for wounding me... If Cain is avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech is avenged seventy-seven fold!”

Sadly, his coping not only hurts his enemy, but also his own family. How does his faulty coping impact his own family dynamics? His family issues show up in the names of his two wives and how he treats them. Contrast God's intention for the first woman in the garden with Lamech's wives. God explained to Adam that the woman was intended to be his “helper-partner.” The Hebrew is a compound word literally meaning, “to save” and “to be strong.” This compound word is used 21 times in the Hebrew scriptures, 17 of those times the word refers to God. God's intended role for a wife is to

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2006) 72-75.

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be a strong woman who helps save her family. However, watch what happens when a family becomes unhealthy. Lamech's two wives' names literally mean "ornament," and "shadow." Instead of a wife being a partner who is strong and helps save the family, his wives have become nothing more to him than a hood ornament and his own shadow. This was not God's intention for healthy families.<sup>2</sup>

*The Shack* invites us to consider what unhealthy coping techniques we may have learned that are not getting us the love we need. We all need love. But some of us may have let ourselves remain stuck in the roles of an unhealthy family. Do we avoid pain by shutting down relationships and barricading ourselves against others? Do we let people keep hurting us by failing to maintain appropriate healthy boundaries? All of these are coping techniques that may help us survive at one stage of life but are set up for failure in the long run.

God invites us to speak the truth in love. Only truth and love bring healing for the long run. Near the end of the book we see Mack, with his wife Nan standing nearby, talking with his daughter Kate who has been blaming herself for Missy's death.

"I want to talk to you about Missy."

Kate jerked back ... instinctively she tried to pull her hand away, but Mack held tight.... Nan came up and put her arm around her. Kate was trembling....

"Katie, it wasn't your fault."

Now she hesitated.... "What's not my fault?"

Again, it took effort to get the words out but she clearly heard. "That we lost Missy." Tears rolled down his cheeks as he struggled with those simple words....

"Honey, no one blames you for what happened."

Her silence lasted only a few seconds longer before the dam burst. "But if I hadn't been careless in the canoe, you wouldn't have had to...."

Mack interrupted with a hand on her arm. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, honey. It's not your fault." When Kate doubts his loving words Mack continues his explanation.

"None of us meant for this to happen, Kate. It just happened, and we'll learn to live through it. But we'll learn together. Okay?"

There is the key. "We'll learn together." The only way we learn to speak the truth in love... is to learn together.

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<sup>2</sup> James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth believing In* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008) 65, 94.