

EXCERPT



His Face like Mine

Finding God's Love in Our Wounds

July 16, 2024 | \$18, 224 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0908-6

Lord, Would You Make Me Whole?

On November 17, 1988, in Lexington, North Carolina, I was born with a rare craniofacial disorder called Goldenhar syndrome. Put bluntly, the left side of my face and parts of my body were badly broken.

Nurses would return every few minutes with a new discovery of something broken within me. "I'm sorry, Mr. Joyce, his left ear is severely underdeveloped."

"His left jaw doesn't seem to be formed, and his left cheekbone is missing."

"He has two holes in his heart. Scoliosis of the spine. Skin tags."

It went on. By the fourth or fifth appearance, the nurses couldn't even hide their tears as they prepared to impart more bad news. Dad retired to the hospital chapel while Mom slept. He never did tell me exactly what he said in that chapel—only that he and God had it out and that he prayed harder than he'd ever prayed before.

My childhood was full of doctor visits and hospital stays. I've lost count of the number of surgeries I've endured. And though my parents knew God gave them this child with a different face for a reason, they still couldn't help but continue the prayer my dad began the day I was born. It was a wonderfully childlike prayer only parents truly know because it was straight from the soul. The words shifted and stumbled and failed. But the ask was pure and powerful and always the same.

Lord, would you make our son whole?

Can you relate? True, my physical abnormalities placed me in a category to which few belong. But isn't wholeness what we all long for?

And don't we all feel that there's a brokenness in our lives, a woundedness in our souls, that isn't quite whole?

We all suffer from this sense that there's something wrong. That we're incomplete. That we can't get it right. That we aren't quite *enough*. For God. For others. For ourselves.

The cause of your wounds, like mine, may be something physical you've carried since you were born. It may have come from a less than ideal home life or family. Maybe a season of abuse. A parent who abandoned you, a husband who rejected you, a wife who betrayed you, a church that lied to you, a teacher or coach who belittled you, a friend who turned on you and, yes, even a God who, at least in your eyes, wasn't there for you in your darkest hour.

Whatever wound was inflicted upon your soul, you find yourself feeling painfully less than whole. What's worse: these wounds calcify into beliefs and attitudes that form habits and lifestyles that only make the pain worse. The unique pain you carry may lead you to inflict painful wounds onto others too, even if unintentionally.

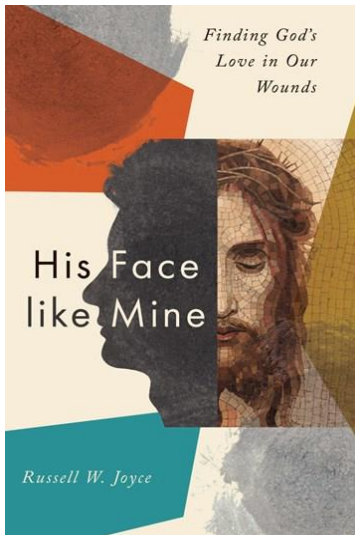


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That rejection may lead you to reject yourself and others. That abuse may lead you to abuse yourself and others. That gruesome word spoken over you has spun a web of lies so thick in your mind and heart you can't even begin to cut through it to see the sun shining on anyone's face, much less your own. It perpetuates itself. It grows deeper, darker, lonelier, and wider, making you feel like there's no way out.

Lord, would you make me whole? That's your prayer. That's mine. Though degrees may vary, that's all of us. But as a pastor and, more importantly, a follower of Jesus, I've learned that Jesus came to the earth for one reason: our wholeness. God is not scared away by our wounded souls. In fact, he's acquainted with them even more intimately than we dare fathom. And the wholeness and freedom we're so desperate for are right in front of us if we have the courage to look.

I learned much of this when I served as a church planter and pastor in Brooklyn, New York, from 2015 to 2021. I was twenty-seven years old at the start of that journey and, in many ways, I was trying to learn to ride a bike while putting it together. (FYI, bikes work better if they're assembled first.)

You might wonder what you have in common with the trials and tribulations of a pastor. Let me tell you a secret: even though not all humans are pastors, all pastors are—believe it or not—human! In that life-changing season, God met me in my soul's human woundedness and healed me. I believe he longs to do this in all of us, no matter where we find ourselves.

As we begin this journey together, understand this: our quests for wholeness aren't so much about circumstances or vocation as they are about *perspectives*—ours and God's. Dad said often he'd put me to bed at night, kiss me, and tell me he loved me. No sooner had he closed my door than his heart would begin to pour out in grief, crying for God to heal me. He'd beg God to switch our places. *Heal him. Give me the burden.* He prayed that he'd go to my bedside the next morning to find I had grown an ear, a jaw, a cheekbone.

That was his prayer for years. Until one day, around my twelfth birthday, God spoke back. Dad's heart was heavy, and he began to pour forth the familiar lament: *Lord, heal my son. Jesus, make my son whole. God, you can do anything. Will you please just make my son whole!*

With that last utterance, something moved inside my father. It was fast. But as soon as he felt the shift, a knowledge filled him, spilling upward and outward. The knowledge was an answer to his prayer. It spoke right back to him in no uncertain terms.

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

The response: *But can you not see it? I already have.*

Heal my son, God.

Look closer. It's done.



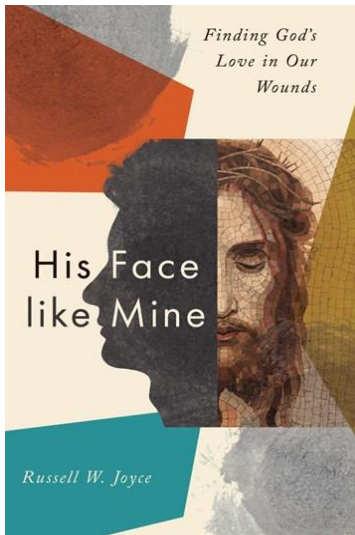
-adapted from the introduction

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Q & A



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"To have been the beneficiary of sitting in the front row—getting to watch Russell Joyce shine his light for all to see—is one of the greatest gifts of my life. His Face like Mine adds to this story. Joyce's brilliant, vulnerable, and fierce exploration of the power of wounds and scars will leave you breathless. If we are healed by Christ's stripes, then this book gives us a door to the doctor's office. Must read."

A. J. Swodoba, associate professor of Bible and theology at Bushnell University and author of *A Gift of Thorns*

The World Needs You to Boast in Your Scars

What experience led you to share your story in *His Face Like Mine*?

Russell Joyce: A profound encounter with God which came through a moment with my fiancée (now wife). In this encounter, and subsequent encounters that followed this same template, I became aware how little my soul understood, believed, or had experienced God's grace. It was out of these moments I also became aware that I wasn't alone in this. So many people, so many Christians and especially Christians in the West, I believe, haven't experienced God's true gracious love in their real, lived lives. And the main reason they haven't, as I discovered for myself, is because the primary place where God's love becomes real and transformative is in the space of our deepest, most shameful wounds. I wrote this book because I want people to be free as the Good News embodied in Jesus shows us true freedom. For what it's worth, I also sensed the Lord ask me to turn that moment and story into a book.

What message is at the heart of this book?

Russell: God's love embodied in Jesus is most clearly revealed and powerfully experienced at the site of our deepest wounds. Complete freedom in our lives cannot come until it arises from ground zero of the most broken and painful places in our hearts and histories. This is not a new idea. St Athanasius said that "God became like us that we might become like him." Justification is realizing what it means that God actually became like the real us. This story focuses on that idea and question. What is the 'real us' that God became? And if we met God in that place, what love would overwhelm our lives, bring lasting healing to our souls, and allow us space 'to become like him' (sanctification). This book is nothing more than a testimony to the good news of Jesus's grace. What makes it new is that it's from a fresh perspective and personal story and a willingness to push into vulnerable candor, revealing my own wounds and scars, in an attempt at encouraging others to do the same with God in their lives.

What do you hope readers discover in *His Face Like Mine*?

Russell:

- The place where you'll encounter God's love most profoundly is in your deepest wounds.
- True gospel freedom is only possible when you meet Jesus (God's love) in your deepest wounds.
- Wounds healed by Jesus's love become scars and scars are our proof that the good news is true.
- The world needs you to boast in your scars because through them shine the truth of Jesus's love and power.
- The greatest gift the church has to offer the world is our lives' scars (i.e. our testimony).



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