

Jesus Broke the Curse

One woman's dramatic encounter with Christ shows us that he came to deliver women from spiritual oppression.

We do not know her name. Usually we refer to her as “the woman with the issue of blood.” But those words from the King James Bible seem archaic today and make her seem faceless and distant. She was a real person, and her pain was intense.

I sometimes imagine that this fragile shell of a woman was called “Mara”—the Hebrew word for bitter. Chronic sickness had disfigured her life. Yet Christ got so close to her pain that she dared to touch Him, and her healing has provided inspiration for countless sermons ever since.

You know the story. Her appearance in the Gospel of Mark is brief, but her encounter with Jesus, described in Mark 5:25-34, is one of the most poignant in the New Testament. I fear we miss the impact of this woman's story because we don't realize what she endured or what her healing truly signifies.

The Bible tells us that she had been bleeding for 12 years. We don't know the nature of her illness, but it is probable she had some type of female problem—almost like a 12-year-long menstrual period. She undoubtedly experienced chronic fatigue, lack of energy and crippling grief.

We don't know the cause of her illness, either. But it is likely she could not bear children because of it, and her childlessness would have brought even more of a stigma in a primitive Jewish society than the illness itself.

Perhaps she had suffered a painful miscarriage at one point. Perhaps her husband divorced her because she could not bear children. The Bible doesn't tell us the details.

However, we do know that she “endured much at the hands of many physicians” and that she “spent all that she had” on doctors (Mark 5:26, NASB)—meaning that she was destitute and may have been forced to beg. The gospel account also says that the questionable medical help made her physical condition worse, not better.

In the time of Jesus, medical care for women in Mara’s condition was crude if not barbaric. All the doctors in Jerusalem were men, of course. And their “treatments” were nothing more than experiments based on superstition and flawed science.

The Talmud and other Jewish writings prescribed various cures for ailments—including one that called for ingesting dust mixed with human waste. Mara may have been forced to eat such toxic substances to find a cure. For her, doctor visits were torture.

Yet the Gospel account tells us that when she heard that Jesus was passing near her neighborhood, she mustered up the courage to press through the crowd to reach Him. Did she do this simply because she was desperate? I believe there is much more to this story. But we must read between the lines.

This anguished woman had been brushed aside by rabbis, abused by doctors and shunned by men on the street. Why then would she suddenly feel the confidence to approach the rabbi named Jesus?

I wonder if Mara had talked to others about Him. Surely she had heard the reports of His healing power. Perhaps she also had met Mary of Bethany in the marketplace or had talked to Mary Magdalene in an alley.

What set this Teacher apart from all the religious leaders in Israel? And why would Mara have dared to approach Him when she knew that all other rabbis would have rebuked her—and perhaps punished her publicly—for touching a holy man?

1. She knew Jesus was approachable. Rabbis in Israel were generally aloof and inaccessible—and they kept their distance from women. Ancient Jewish traditions instructed men to walk on the other side of the street when they saw a woman approaching. Superstition said that it was bad luck for a woman who was menstruating to pass between two men.

The rabbis viewed women as the source of all evil. They taught that because Eve was deceived in the Garden of Eden, all females were guilty of ruining Creation. (Ironically, they did not pass Adam's guilt on to all males.) Women were considered deceitful, lazy, fickle and ignorant—and prone to immorality and witchcraft.

Women in ancient Israel were required to stay veiled and silent. Under the best of circumstances they were not to be seen associating with a rabbi. A menstruating woman—who was considered ceremonially unclean—was expected to stay as far away as possible from a man of God.

Yet Mara touched Jesus. I wonder if she had heard from Mary of Bethany that this rabbi encouraged women to sit at His feet and learn from the Scriptures—when other rabbis in Israel did not allow women to participate in any form of religious instruction. Perhaps Mara met the Samaritan woman, who carried on a lively theological discussion with Jesus at Jacob's well.

Or maybe she talked with the old woman whose back was healed by Jesus in the Temple (see Luke 13:10-17). Jesus broke every religious rule of His day when he called that disfigured saint from the women's section in the back of the sanctuary and allowed her to come to the front—where she declared her praises to God.

Jesus created a scandal whenever He interacted with women. Why? He intentionally broke every religious rule about women because part of His mission on Earth was the dismantling of an ancient curse.

2. She knew that Jesus cared for her. Other rabbis in Israel would have shown no compassion for a woman in Mara's condition. Jewish men often recited this prayer: "Lord, I thank You that I am not a Gentile. I thank You that I am not a woman. I thank You that I am not a slave."

But Jesus didn't say that self-righteous prayer. He didn't view women with disdain. In fact, He had women followers (which was taboo in Israel), and he developed close friendships with some of those women. He even allowed them to see Him crying.

When a certain immoral woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair, Jesus did not chastise her like other rabbis would have done (see Luke 7:36-50). He spoke to her tenderly and declared that her sins were forgiven. When a nameless woman was accused of adultery by a group of sanctimonious Jewish men (see John 8:1-11), Jesus rushed to her defense and rebuked her accusers.

Mara knew that Jesus was different!

3. She knew Jesus wasn't afraid of her condition. Mara risked her life when she stepped into the dusty street and pressed toward Jesus' entourage. People who knew her were probably dumbstruck by her forwardness. Some of the men escorting Jesus probably shouted at her, "Go away, sick woman!"

But Mara knew that her bleeding was not repulsive to Jesus. Something deep inside told her that this rabbi wasn't concerned about contagion. She said to herself, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well" (Mark 5:28). Staying low to the ground, unseen by Jesus' disciples, she reached through dozens of scurrying feet and grabbed the hem of Jesus' robe.

Her miracle came instantly. Her throbbing pain subsided. The hemorrhaging stopped, and the soreness that had crippled her body for more than a decade vanished. Perhaps she began to sob, but fear undoubtedly gripped her when she realized that

Jesus had stopped to ask who had touched Him.

Would He rebuke her? Would He give her a stern lecture about Moses' laws of hygiene? Would He banish her to the edge of town and tell her never to come near Him again?

That would have been the reaction of any other rabbi in Jerusalem. But that is not what Jesus did.

His disciples were amazed by His question. Why would Jesus ask, "Who touched Me?" when everyone was seeking His attention? But Jesus knew what had happened to Mara. When she reluctantly made eye contact with Him, all the compassion in the universe stared back at her.

As she knelt at His feet, trembling yet overwhelmed that her pain was gone, she heard Him speak. His tone was not angry. "'Daughter,'" He said, breaking yet another religious rule that forbade rabbis to address women in an endearing manner. "'Your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction'" (v. 34).

Not only was Mara healed but also Jesus affirmed His love for her in front of everyone else. The doctors who had taken her money may have witnessed the scene. The rabbis who smugly avoided her may have been there to hear Jesus encourage her. The men who had spat on her and called her names probably hung their heads in shame.

Rabbi Jesus had spoken. He had changed all the rules.

THE POWER OF REDEMPTION

Mara's healing is significant because it was a prophetic sign of what Jesus came to do for all women. We miss the full meaning when we view the story as a mere display of the Messiah's power over sickness.

Mara's chronic pain represents the state of all women under the curse of sin. No doubt she was familiar with the story of

mankind's rebellion in the Garden of Eden. She had heard the local rabbi read the story from the scrolls of Moses.

After Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, God described to Eve how the curse of sin would affect her. He said: "'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you'" (Gen. 3:16).

Mara certainly knew the pain of Genesis 3:16. She probably winced when she heard those words as she listened from the back of the synagogue, where all women were sequestered in Jesus' day. Mara had lived that verse. It described her existence.

Genesis 3:16 is a clear, prophetic description of how women would suffer in a fallen world without a Savior. The pain it describes is not limited to that of childbirth. It embodies all forms of feminine pain: miscarriage, infertility, rape, abuse, incest, sexual slavery, domestic violence, economic prejudice and even religious chauvinism.

Genesis 3:16 is not God's perfect plan for women. On the contrary, it is the reason women in Islamic countries are stoned in broad daylight by their own husbands. It is the reason the genitals of African girls are brutally mutilated. It is the reason Latino women suffer under the power of machismo. It is the reason women around the world still do not have access to education, health care or civil freedom.

Yet there is good news. When Jesus the Messiah came to Earth, He did not come to set only men free. He came to touch all the Maras of the world. He liberated women from the power of sin's curse. He defended them, bound up their wounds, stopped their internal bleeding, removed their chronic pain and restored their lost dignity.

Jesus was not afraid to identify with women, and He did not refuse when God laid the essence of that feminine pain on Him

at Calvary. John 3:16 says He came because God “so loved the world.” I like to remind women that John 3:16 has nullified Genesis 3:16!

Mara experienced this redemption 2,000 years ago. I pray that in our lifetime millions of women around the world will come to understand that the rabbi named Jesus is like no other.

Read a companion devotional.

J. Lee Grady is a contributing editor and former editor of Charisma.