

JOURNEY TOWARD HEALING

hope for victims of sexual abuse

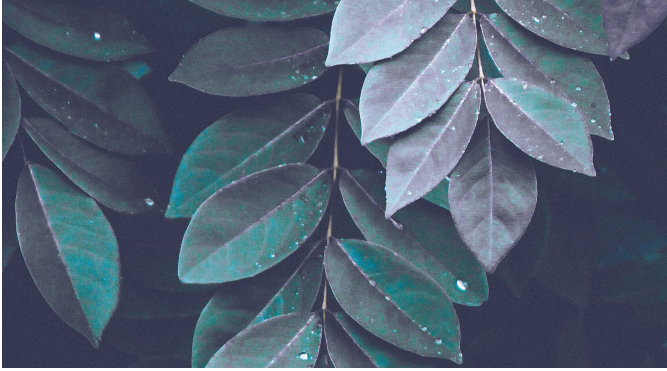
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MURDER, MOTHERHOOD, AND MIRACULOUS GRACE

WHEN DEBRA MOERKE AND her husband decided to become foster parents, they never imagined how their lives would change. Their home was full of children, brimming with both challenges and blessings. Debra became especially close to one little girl: four-year-old Hannah. She did everything she could to help Hannah learn to trust—to love her and teach her to feel safe. But when Hannah went back to her birth mother, Karen, it wasn't long before one of Debra's worst fears came true.

Overwhelmed with horror and grief, Debra didn't think she could take anymore, but then she received a phone call from prison. Karen, facing a life sentence, was pregnant, and she had a shocking question to ask . . .



DEBRA MOERKE and her husband, Al, were foster parents for eighteen years, taking in more than 140 children. Debra has served as the director of women's and children's ministries of the Central Wyoming Rescue Mission; the executive director of a Christian crisis pregnancy and counseling center; a jail guard; and a jail chaplain. In 2017 she graduated from Gateway Seminary in California with a certificate in Christian ministries. She is currently an associate real estate broker and owner of Stratton Real Estate. Debra and Al live in Casper, Wyoming and have six children and seven grandchildren.

CHAPTER 4

Inklings of the Past

“You’re *It!*” I heard Kyle declaring his victory, followed by Kyra’s giggles.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Helen’s voice rang through the house. She had organized a game of hide-and-seek to keep some of the children occupied on this frigid Friday afternoon in January 1997. From the kitchen where I was preparing dinner, I heard the stampede of little feet running toward the family room. After dinner, Karen would be picking them up for another overnigher.

“Kyra is *It* now,” Helen announced. “Kyra, count to twenty while everyone hides again. Don’t count so fast this time.”

Then I heard Hannah’s familiar giggles coming from Sadie’s room. “That’s perfect, Hannah. Now smile!” Sadie had set up a pretend photo shoot in her bedroom for Hannah in dress-up clothes—a favorite pastime.

Charles wandered into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Hamburgers. Are you hungry?”

He nodded as he poured himself a glass of milk, then blurted out what he must have been struggling with for weeks.

“Mom, why is Karen still allowed to have unsupervised visits with her kids after Hannah got that black eye? I don’t get it.”

“Well, it could have been an accident. We only know what Hannah and Karen told us.” Charles looked at me doubtfully, but I continued my less-than-convincing reasoning. “Ellen made a note of the injury, questioned Karen, and seemed reasonably convinced Hannah slipped

in the tub. And Hannah did go willingly to the Christmas overnight at her mother's. Our responsibility is to observe and listen to the children after their visits. Hopefully, nothing like that will happen again."

Charles couldn't hide his frustration. "It isn't right, Mom. Why do these bad parents always get second chances? How many hurt kids have we seen over the years go back to these parents? How come they get away with it? It isn't fair!"

I looked at my son's troubled face. We'd had this conversation before, and I knew we'd have it again. In fact, I'd had many similar conversations with all my kids. Charles was very protective of the foster kids who moved through our home. He'd seen a lot in his ten years, as had all of my kids—children with cigarette burns, bruised bodies, and traumatized psyches. He wanted justice for each one, demanding punishment for abusive and neglectful parents and instant, permanent removal of the kids from their homes. Visitations and counseling and the complexities of rehabilitating and reuniting families were beyond his comprehension. I was proud of my son for caring so deeply and for his strong sense of right and wrong.

"The reason such kids wind up with us is because their parents are *not* getting away with it," I tried to explain. "When the authorities discover a child has been abused or isn't in a safe environment, they do intervene. That's why they need families like ours who will welcome these kids and love and care for them while DFS tries to figure out the truth, what the problems are, if they can be fixed or helped, or if children need to be adopted by new families. It takes time and a lot of work for them to discover what's really going on in these homes and what the best solutions are. It's a difficult, messy process, isn't it?"

"Do *you* think the Bower kids are safe with Karen?"

"That's what their time with us is all about," I said, aware that I was avoiding the question that was worrying me. "While DFS is figuring that out, we'll keep doing our part. We report what we see and hear. And we show the children what a healthy family looks like. We love

them and care for them and make sure they know they are special to us and to God. And as hard as it is sometimes, all we can do is play our part the best we know how.”

Apparently satisfied for the moment, Charles finished his glass of milk and left the kitchen, leaving me to ponder the Bower kids while I defrosted the ground beef.

In the nearly seven months since the Bower siblings had arrived, I'd come to love them all. It hadn't taken long to decipher their family dynamics. Kyle and Kyra were buddies, doing most things together. At six and five they were both well-mannered and obedient. They were doing well in school and got along with everyone in the family, although I always sensed they had a strong filter in place, carefully choosing their words to make a good impression.

Kyle clearly held some sway over Kyra, Hannah, and Andrew. He had “the look” down and could often stop the other three in their tracks if their behavior disturbed him. He was the most serious and clearly felt responsible for what they all did—a heavy weight for a six-year-old to bear.

Kyra always wanted to be seen in a positive light. She flashed her “perfect child” smile often. In so many ways she reminded me of Karen. She could be soft-spoken and sweet, but she, too, used “the look” on her younger sister and brother when they got out of line. Sometimes, if Hannah cried or whined, Kyra would stand silently in front of her, her presence and demeanor communicating disapproval. Immediately, Hannah would go quiet. Kyra also had a defiant side, and would stand her ground if she felt she was being treated unjustly.

Hannah was by far the most affectionate, freely giving hugs. She loved holding hands, cuddling with us, and being tickled. Her giggles always made me smile. She had bonded deeply with each of us from the start, and that bond was growing deeper each day.

The night before, when Al was sitting in his recliner, Hannah had walked over with a book.

“Would you read to me?” she asked. When he pulled her up into his lap and started reading, she snuggled into him like a little teddy bear.

For all the ways that Kyle and Kyra seemed to have strong filters in place, Hannah had none. She was the most emotional of the siblings, easily hurt and brought to tears. Whatever she felt was evident for all to see—anxiety and excitement, fear and delight, joy and sadness.

Andrew was a bundle of playful energy. He always seemed to bounce through a room rather than walk—when he wasn’t bouncing on a bed. That morning I’d had to intervene in a tiff between him and Hannah because after she’d made her bed, he’d crawled up and bounced on it, messing it up to her dismay. But he was so adorable and smiley it was hard to be stern with him for more than a minute. He definitely had a mischievous and sneaky side. I’d catch him sneaking cookies from the cupboard or find crackers, cookies, even cheese stashed under his pillow or his bed. I wasn’t surprised. Many foster children hoard food, sometimes a symptom of having grown up with too little to eat, but often a sign of unmet emotional needs. They stock and hide things they find soothing, demonstrating their fear that their needs won’t be met unless they take matters into their own hands.

Baby Ally’s personality was still developing, but so far she was all cuddles and smiles.

Yes, these five unique children have worked their way into the fabric of our lives.

When dinner was ready I called everyone to the table.

After taking his first bite, Andrew announced, “Mmm-mmm. Debwa, you sure are a good cooker!” This was one of his favorite phrases at the table.

“I love cooking for you, Andrew, because you appreciate it more than anybody I know,” I said. He beamed.

After dinner, Sadie and Helen helped me make sure that each child had packed his or her toothbrushes, pajamas, and a fresh change of clothes in anticipation of Karen’s arrival. As usual, Kyle and Kyra were

excited about their visit with their mom. Andrew grew quieter than normal but was compliant. Hannah, though she didn't protest this time, moved slowly and was withdrawn. After she finished packing she attached herself to me, literally, by wrapping her arms around my legs as I finished wiping down the kitchen counter. I picked her up and hugged her close, and she buried her face in my neck.

"Mom's here!" Kyra called out from the front door where she'd been keeping watch.

Hannah and I both stiffened. I set her down, knelt down to be eye-to-eye with her, and whispered, "I will see you tomorrow after dinner. I will come to pick you up, okay? Remember that I love you, and Jesus loves you more."

I took her face in my hands and kissed both cheeks. She didn't respond—just sadly looked into my eyes.

Kyle opened the door for Karen, and he and Kyra hugged her waist. Andrew followed their example. I took Hannah's hand and walked her over to the door as Helen handed Ally to Karen. "Okay, everybody grab your bags," I instructed. "Have fun!" I let go of Hannah's hand as the family headed out the door, Hannah trailing last in line.

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The children continued their unsupervised visits during February and March. While there were no additional "accidents" that raised suspicions, Andrew and especially Hannah continued to demonstrate reluctance before the visits and moodiness after them. Sometimes Hannah would plead tearfully, asking if she could stay home with me. It was agonizing to send her on those days, wondering what was behind her distress. Was she being mistreated? What was happening during these visits? Or was it the past that Hannah was responding to?

Several times when the children returned from the visits, the younger ones would start to blurt out something that was said or done and were immediately silenced by the older two's threatening looks.

One evening while I was bathing Hannah, she chattered nonstop about all sorts of things. My ears perked up when she mentioned going to Mommy's house. Suddenly, she clammed up.

"Did something happen at Mommy's house?" I asked.

"I'll be in big, big trouble if I tell," she said.

I never pressured any of them to talk, not wanting to encourage them to go against something their mother may have told them. There is such a fine line for a foster parent between seeking the truth and disrupting the birth parent's authority. There is a time to speak up and a time to be silent. I wouldn't place the weight of pressure on them. I did discuss, however, each observation with the caseworker.

Though the children were mum about their visits, Karen had continued to open up to me about the past, especially her past with William—the man with whom, by the court instructions, she was not to associate. Karen had recently admitted to me that this man so hated the father of Hannah and Andrew, and so resented that Karen ever had a relationship with him, that far worse than shunning them, he'd usually been harsh and unkind to them, often screaming at them and wanting them sent to another room when he visited. She'd even revealed that he had an explosive temper, not only toward the children but toward Karen as well. Yet Karen had been so deeply enmeshed with him that rather than cut off her relationship with him she had worked hard to appease him, wanting him to be a part of her life. I couldn't help but wonder if she was defying DFS and seeing him now.

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One day when I was at the mall picking up a few things I ran into a friend of Karen's named Lisa. I'd met Lisa a few times at Karen's home when I'd dropped the children off for visits. I liked her. She seemed levelheaded and appeared to care about the children.

"How are things going with the Bower children?" she asked.

Not wanting to betray any confidences, I kept my answer light. “Just fine. How do you think they are going?”

Lisa’s face darkened. “Debra, to be honest, I’ve been relieved they are with you and that DFS is telling Karen to stay clear of William. He’s a wretched influence on Karen and has been cruel to Hannah and Andrew. He’s bad news.”

“Sounds like he’s been a real source of trouble. If you don’t mind me asking, how was he cruel to Hannah and Andrew?”

Maybe I’ll finally get some answers.

Lisa described a grotesque picture of abuse. If Hannah or Andrew would whine or fuss or irritate William, he would grab them, put duct tape over their mouths, bind their hands together, and put them into a closet and close the door, leaving them there, sometimes for hours at a time.

“Karen wouldn’t intervene,” she told me. “Her relationship with this man is so dysfunctional, so tragically misguided, that she’d rather placate him than protect her own children. I’d talk to her ’til I was blue in the face, but she’d never stand up to him. Recently, I warned her that she’d better not let anything like that happen again. I hope she is staying away from him.”

I wasn’t shocked. I’d heard much worse over the years and seen the results on tiny bodies. I hadn’t become desensitized to cruelty to children—I still felt a shudder deep in my soul—but I didn’t gasp or rage or rant. I closed my eyes for a moment and let the ugly truth sink in.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said. “This answers some big questions.”

I called Ellen later that day and told her what I’d learned. She didn’t sound surprised, which made me wonder if perhaps DFS had already known. Maybe this was one of the reasons they’d mandated that Karen not associate with William and not expose the children to him.

“William is trouble all around,” Ellen said. “It’s good that Karen seems to be keeping her word about not seeing him. Have the children reported any encounters with him?”

“No. The children say nothing about what goes on during home visits,” I said. “I heard this from a friend of Karen’s.”

“I’ll make sure it’s noted in the file,” she assured me.

Several days later, I drove the children to Karen’s house for their half-day visit, hoping for a chance to talk with Karen. Once the children were off playing in the living room, I had a few minutes alone with Karen in the kitchen.

“I have a question for you,” I said. “It’s about William and the kids.”

“Okay,” Karen said cautiously.

“Were there times when William would bind Hannah and Andrew with duct tape and put them in the closet?”

Karen looked away, then said in a quiet voice, “Yeah. . . well . . . that happened . . . sometimes.” She looked down at the kitchen floor. “That was something that William started. I wasn’t in favor of it, but you don’t argue with William.”

Her response confirmed my fears. This wasn’t an isolated instance. This was a pattern—something that had happened repeatedly.

“Who told you?” Karen asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” I said, “but it wasn’t any of the children.”

She didn’t push me to know more. Just then, Kyra came into the kitchen, so we changed the subject. I left a few minutes later, wondering what other secrets this family was keeping.

• • •

Now that I realized how severely Hannah and Andrew had suffered before being removed from their mother, I understood why their relationship with her was broken. This family’s secrets were far more sinister and dark than I’d first imagined.

The trust that should exist between mother and child had been shattered. Karen had violated her role as protector and nurturer of Hannah and Andrew. And because Kyle and Kyra had witnessed abuse of the younger children with the willing compliance of their mother, Karen

had severely damaged their understanding of the value of their siblings. All four children had repeatedly seen their mother welcome this threatening, menacing, and vengeful man into their home, tolerate his behavior, and silently go along with it.

I was weighed down by so many questions now. If William's control over Karen had been so powerful, was she being successful now at staying away from him? When the children were with their mother, did they worry that William would show up unexpectedly? Was this what frightened Hannah and Andrew? Could this be why they came home moody and sullen? How had William's influence twisted and damaged Karen's ability to love and nurture them? Was she capable of treating Hannah and Andrew in a healthy, loving way?

I recalled several times when Karen initially acted with kindness to all of the children, but then changed her treatment of Hannah. Karen would first make Hannah laugh, but then her expression would become intimidating. Hannah's smile would vanish, and she would become reserved with her head down. I never knew what was going on between the two of them, but it wasn't good.

All four children were well behaved, but guarded with their mother. It was as if they didn't know where the line of true affection and indifference was drawn. The unspoken clues to figure that out appeared to be different for Hannah and Andrew than for Kyle and Kyra.

I now had a much clearer understanding of how to pray for the Bower kids. Hannah and Andrew needed healing from their past abuse and courage during the unsupervised visits with their mother. They needed Karen to develop a consistent bond of trust with them that they could count on. Kyle and Kyra needed to realize that their mother's treatment of their younger siblings was wrong; instead, they should show empathy and treat Hannah and Andrew lovingly. It was important that our family model this for them in every way that we could.

My prayers for Karen included new requests as well—that God would keep her away from William and any other evil influence, that

she would recognize the wrongness of her past actions, and that she would develop a nurturing heart. I decided to invite Karen to church again, not just as a way for her to see her children, but also so she might learn of Jesus and his love for her.

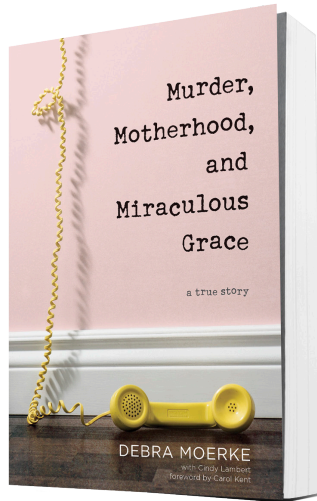
I was grateful to the Lord that he had shown me long ago how to handle my bedtime prayers for the children we fostered. When I became a new Christian, I heard a powerful sermon on “honor thy mother and thy father.” As a result, Al and I had committed to teach our own children to honor us as their parents, but meditating on that sermon made me realize there was some work I needed to do in my own heart. There were things for which I had not forgiven my parents. They may not have been big, horrendous things, but they were unresolved in my heart. Over time and with much prayer I’d learned to forgive and honor them.

Al and I believed we had a spiritual responsibility to teach our foster children how to honor their parents, but early on we struggled with that. How could these children who had been neglected or abused honor their parents? After much soul-searching, we decided we could explain that abuse is wrong and that parents aren’t supposed to hurt their children, but we could also ask God to change them. When I prayed with each child at night, whichever children we had, I would name their parents, asking God to watch over them and to turn their hearts to him, to work in their lives and help them to be better parents. I prayed for the children to want to honor and respect their parents.

Committing our foster children and their parents to God and giving up any control I may have thought I had in their lives was often a wrestling match I would have with God. I knew, just like with my own family, I had to surrender them into the Father’s hands. Only he knew their hearts. Only he knew their needs. My power to protect any of them was limited.

One night, soon after learning about William’s abuse of Hannah and Andrew, I said these words at Hannah’s bedside. “Dear Jesus, thank you

that you love Hannah and want only the best for her. We pray for her mommy, Karen. Watch over her and help her to be a better mommy. Help her make sure that no one ever hurts Hannah again. And help Hannah to be able to tell someone if anything bad or scary happens to her. Let Hannah know that you are always with her and that you love her. Amen.”



Murder, Motherhood, and Miraculous Grace is an incredible true story of faith, family, and a journey toward seemingly impossible forgiveness. A story that tests the limits of the human heart, it's ultimately a life-affirming testament to how unconditional love and relentless obedience can transform even the darkest nights into mornings of hope.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/murder-motherhood-and-miraculous-grace/9781496433312>

THE WOUNDED HEART

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED childhood sexual abuse and those who love and care for them, *The Wounded Heart* offers a tender, compassionate window into the psychological effects of abuse and the theological foundations for healing.

Thirty years ago, with great courage and vision, Dan Allender brought Christians to the table to acknowledge, understand, and help victims heal from their experience of the evil of sexual abuse. His work continues to help victims and those who love them to honestly acknowledge their abuse, take responsibility for their healing, and learn to love bravely in defiance of their trauma.



DR. DAN ALLENDER has pioneered a unique and innovative approach to trauma and abuse therapy over the past 30 years. Dan taught at Grace Theological Seminary and Colorado Christian University. He helped found and serves as professor of counseling psychology at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. He is the author of *The Wounded Heart*, *The Healing Path*, *To Be Told*, and *God Loves Sex*, and he has co-authored several books with Dr. Tremper Longman, including *Intimate Allies*, *The Cry of the Soul*, *Bold Love*, and *Bold Purpose*.

He travels and speaks extensively to present his unique perspective on sexual abuse recovery, love and forgiveness, worship, and other related topics.

CHAPTER 2

Facing the Enemy

Shame, Brokenness, and Sanctification

The war has begun, but who is the enemy? The question seems too simple. Let me tell you why. Some time ago, I was inflicted with the male counterpart of childbirth: a kidney stone. If you had asked me to describe my enemy (assuming I could answer at all), I would have looked incredulous and shouted, “My pain!”—referring, of course, to the searing pain that was signaling the end of my existence. The effect of intense anguish is interesting: It dispels all thoughts other than the desire for relief. *The enemy is the pain and whatever is responsible for it.*

To ask an abused person, “Who is your enemy?” invites the same kind of response. The enemy is the pain of abuse and the person responsible for causing that pain! The pain would not be there if the abuser had not committed the crime. The enemy is obvious. *Or so it seems.* But notice what happens when the enemy is the abuser. The victim is caught in a vicious reactionary cycle of either fight or flight. To diminish the poison of the abuse, all that can be done is to forget, overcome, master, or retaliate against the abuser who brought the pain into the soul. It is not only an endless war, but a futile one. Imagine trying to forget someone. The effort itself focuses attention on the person you long to forget. The energy enlisted and expended in trying to forget dooms the enterprise before it begins.

Similarly, a commitment never to be hurt again by the abuser (or anyone else like him) creates a hard, inflexible exterior and, in turn, leads to the loneliness that the hardness was developed to avoid. The victim's defensive armor will add more pain to her soul, and her pain will strengthen her resolve never to be hurt, inevitably increasing the wintry ice in her heart. The protection against pain, in fact, intensifies the pain that it was supposed to decrease.

If the enemy is the abuser, hated or excused, then he will continue to play out his heinous role, years later, by eliciting an endless, reactive response. There are two possible strategies to deal with the foe: fight or flight. The two options seem very different. One involves frontal attack and the other is face-saving retreat. The strategy of fight (angry, man-hating zeal) and the strategy of flight (quiet complacency) are in fact more alike than different: Both are an attempt to avoid the internal battle. The energy that fuels the vindictive attack or stagnant submission is a desire to escape the wounded heart. Any battle fought against this enemy (and he does deserve to be called an enemy) will lead to hopeless despair. It is like fighting a phantom, a ghost that cannot be punched, stabbed, or otherwise killed. The abuser is a problem, but (this is good news) he is not the major one.

Who, then, or what, is the real foe? Simply put, *the problem is in the victim*, leading to broken relationships, loneliness, depression, eating disorders, promiscuity, sexual coldness, and frightening rage. Something is wrong inside. Nothing can quite manage to cover it up: smiles, busy schedules, successful Christian living—nothing soothes the battle raging deep within the soul.

I once asked a woman who was raped by her father and later by her husband to define the essence of her struggle in life. With a biting snarl and a caustic tone that communicated strong hatred (betrayed only by the sadness in her eyes), she said, "If I could only rid myself of my hunger for a man, I could be happy." Her words might be elaborated as follows: "If I could only find a way not to hunger for relationship,

if I could deaden my soul to what I was made for—the longing to be pursued, embraced, known, and enjoyed—then I could live without sorrow.” *Her enemy was her longings.*

Let me state an important observation: I have never worked with an abused man or woman who did not hate or mistrust the hunger for intimacy. In most victims, the essence of the battle is a hatred of their hunger for love and a strong distaste for any passion that might lead to a vulnerable expression of desire. The same woman, in tears, said, “I only wish I had not wanted my father’s love. I could have found some way out, if I hadn’t been so weak and stupid.” *The enemy, or so it feels, is the passion to be lovingly pursued and nourishingly touched by a person whose heart is utterly disposed to do us good.* Such people (if they exist at all) are rare; it is therefore easier to hate the hunger than to wait expectantly for the day of satisfaction.

The abused woman has plenty of reasons to despise her own passion. Hating her longings starts a self-annihilating civil war that kills her soul. But the enemy is not really the longings of her heart any more than it is the abuser. Neither is responsible for sabotaging life and love; yet something is deadening the soul. What is it?

Ultimately, the enemy is the prowling beast that attempts to devour and destroy the beauty of God’s Kingdom. The enemy is *sin*, that fallen, autonomous striving for life that refuses to bow to God. *The enemy is the internal reality that will not cry out to God in humble, broken dependence.* It is the victim’s subtle or blatant determination to make life work on her own by refusing to acknowledge or let God fulfill her deepest longings.

The enemy is the same for the abused person as it is for those who have not been sexually abused: a determined, reliable inclination to pursue false gods, to find life apart from dynamic, moment-by-moment relationship with the Lord of life. For the abused person, however, the past grievous violation of trust and intimacy even more dramatically inflames her determination to live without the pain of unmet

longings—and thus without the raging thirst of a soul that pants for God alone.

The issues that are found in all of our lives are more intensely and dramatically present in the struggles of those who have been sexually abused. An understanding of sexual abuse, therefore, will help make clear what happens to anyone's soul when he or she is sinned against, whether "normally" and inevitably or severely, when abuse occurs. Victimization provides a rich soil in which the issues of sin are intertwined with legitimate feelings of anger, hurt, and disappointment. When a person is victimized, her inherent commitment to depend on her own resources swings into action. The determination to make it against all odds begins a frightening cycle involving the elements of shame and contempt.

Shame and contempt are not well-understood terms, and their role in the experience of sexual abuse takes time to comprehend. This chapter will deal with shame, and the next chapter will examine contempt. To set the scene for an understanding of these concepts, it is important to understand what it means to be a person, a sinful person, a fallen image bearer.

MAN: A PERSON OF DIGNITY AND DEPRAVITY

Man, as Francis Schaeffer has put it, is a glorious ruin, a stately castle, intricately and masterfully constructed by the hand of an Artisan who designed His work with no thought of expense or practicality. A proper concern for God's own glory and majesty was His only guiding force in creating a person. The castle, however, was given a life of its own, capable of rearranging itself. When man (speaking of both men and women) took it on himself to be as God, he ruined everything. Crumbling walls, rotten wood, and overgrown gardens: The decay became so extensive that only one with the eyes of a craftsman could see the structural beauty that remained underneath the overgrown foliage and overthrown walls.

Nevertheless, it has glory in its form and composition. Man is an amalgamation of dignity and depravity, a glorious ruin.

Dignity

Man, bearing the image of God, was made to be like God in his capacity to relate and his capacity to rule. In these capacities lies his dignity.

God is a personal and relational being. He has existed forever in perfect relationship with Himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have loved and honored one another from eternity to eternity. Man is like God in that he was made to be in relationship with God and God's creation. God has designed man to enjoy intimacy, to deeply desire to be known and to know. Man's capacity for enjoyment and the longing to realize his capacities draws man into deeper and deeper relationship with God and His creation.

God is the designer, creator, and owner of the cosmos. One need only consider the staggering array of creatures, their often-bizarre form and blinding color, to be stunned by the mind of the Creator. And over this zoological kaleidoscope, man was put in charge to be God's manager and foreman. Man is not a creator who makes something out of nothing, but he was made to be an inventive, imaginative user of all that God made. The longing to see our life count or matter, the passion to make a dent in the world, to influence another person because of our presence, is a God-designed passion built into every man and woman. Man's person and position was indeed glorious and rich with dignity.

Depravity

Another aspect of man must be considered, however: depravity. The ruin of the glory was sin. The fall into sin was the most absurd, groundless, unexplainable violation of glory known to man. How could man, who had all but one thing—absolute authority and knowledge—desire to own more? There is no answer, because words and logic can never

capture something so patently crazy. The choice to abandon vulnerable dependence on the word of God brought man to ruin.

Through all the centuries since that day, we have maintained our commitment to strive for autonomous, independent control over life, suppressing the knowledge of God in unrighteousness. This depravity shows itself in murder and immorality and in every endeavor of life, including witnessing to our neighbor, laughing with our friends, and kissing our spouse. To understand the depth and extent of sin is to comprehend that our motives, as fallen but regenerate beings, are stained by sin, even as we attempt to honorably love God and others. The glory of the Cross is that in spite of every act, thought, or feeling being stained by the Fall, our regenerate deeds are cleansed under the righteousness of our Elder Brother's sacrifice.

Every person enjoys dignity and suffers from depravity. The structure of personality is a result of the interaction of these two dynamics. Dignity and depravity may be the raw elements of the human personality, but another reality serves as a driving force that motivates fallen man: *shame*.¹ Shame lurks as another powerful enemy to the damaged soul that gasps for life.

SHAME: THE DREAD OF BEING KNOWN

For most people, shame is another word for embarrassment. Everyone knows that embarrassment is unpleasant, but hardly life threatening. Years of careful grooming and mastery have enabled us to avoid embarrassment, or if we are caught, to melt into our surroundings as adroitly as a chameleon. No wonder little is known about the experience of embarrassment, let alone its more hideous counterpart: shame.

Shame is a silent killer, much the way that high blood pressure is a quiet, symptom-free destroyer. Fortunately, shame has a set of symptoms that can be discerned, once the eyes are open to its presence and

operation. But, like heart disease, it is easy to ignore the problem or to mislabel it as heartburn or a minor chest pain.

Shame has the power to take our breath away and replace it with the stale air of condemnation and disgust. A section of a letter from a friend illustrates the point:

Sharing the fact of my abuse with them [a small Bible study group] elicited a cold silence that violently rattled the chains of shame deep within me. It was almost as if my disclosure of the abuse produced a shame that reached out and swallowed us all. It was only grace that enabled me to cling tenaciously to the knowledge that I am not a lesbian and that there is no shame in deeply longing to be loved. As I reflect on that evening with my friends, I believe I understand how my shame in actuality deeply touched long-ignored wounds in the souls of my friends.

Unlike other feelings that relinquish some of their power by putting words to the inner sensation, shame has the propensity to increase in intensity when it is first acknowledged. The mere discussion of shame awakens the undealt-with shame in others. For that reason, shame is a shameful topic, one that most people would prefer to ignore.

All of us, not just sexual abuse victims, have lived with the bitter taste of shame. Our memories need only return to grade school or junior high to recall at least a few stories of insufferable shame. I will never forget the boy in eighth grade who was sent to the drugstore to purchase paper napkins for the class float. He returned with a huge box of sanitary napkins. I recall the stunned look of horror on the face of the teacher and the snickering laughter and smirking eyes of the girls. I was as unaware of the ribald humor in the purchase as was the boy who made it. I didn't know what a sanitary napkin was, but I was sure

of one thing: I would never volunteer for any service, if the result could be so devastating.

It was not my shame, but I borrowed it and swore I would never do anything so stupid. I knew I was just as dumb in the ways of the world, so I chose to never do anything that required a risk of exposure. During gym, I went out to the track confident that I would be picked in the first or second draft when a team was chosen for a sporting event. I was a good athlete. But at lunch, I avoided the athletic track when boys were sizing up girls and girls were giggling about boys. I was shy and awkward. I learned in many situations that a girl could expose my sophomoric inexperience, and I would not knowingly walk into my own disgrace.

Shame is a potential reality at every stage of life. The pressure to perform, to do well, to succeed can alternately be looked at as a desire not to fail, because every failure lands in the rubble of shame. A major partner in a prestigious law firm remarked that he owed his entire career to shame. The hundreds of hours spent on a case were designed to ensure that no one knew more or was better prepared for a trial. What was the motivation? “I cannot handle being beaten. Whenever I lose, I feel as if someone took my pants off in front of all my peers.” He was describing the experience of shame. The shame he felt at losing a case cannot be considered righteous and consistent with God’s purpose for his life. The lawyer’s shame at defeat implies that his real motive in doing well has little to do with serving Christ or using his abilities to their utmost; rather, he is compelled by a drive to win. His god is success, peer prestige, financial rewards, and—more likely—the thrill of conquering others.

WHAT IS SHAME?

Why are we so prone to feel shame over failure or making a mistake when we rarely experience shame over yelling at our spouse or snubbing

a friend? An answer to that question will help us begin to understand, to a degree, why a woman who has been sexually abused feels shame over something that was not her fault.

Shame has been called by Jean-Paul Sartre “a hemorrhage of the soul.” It is an awful experience to be aware that we are seen as deficient and undesirable by someone whom we hope will deeply enjoy us. Shame seems to involve at least four important elements: exposure, revelation, dread of the consequences, and empowering trust.

The Exposure

Shame is an experience of the eyes. If I were to commit a normal but socially vulgar act (like nose picking) in private, I would not feel shame; but if caught in that act by someone I know, I would likely feel shame. Shame is an interpersonal affect; it requires the presence of another, in fact or in imagination, for its blow to be felt.

Consider the account of the Fall in the third chapter of Genesis. We are told that Adam and Eve were naked and felt no shame (see Genesis 2:25). Their nakedness, a description of their physical appearance, equally implies an absence of conflict and the presence of gentle, loving involvement. Then the evil one tempted Eve to question God’s right to require dependent, vulnerable trust; he persuaded her that she had the right to be as God, knowing good and evil. The man and woman ate, and they became self-conscious. They saw their nakedness and sought leaves to cover their raw shame and betrayal. They knew that their rebellion deserved death, and they fled from the presence of God.

Their capacity to feel shame did not lead to change or a return to the Creator. It led to the opposite: an attempt to hide behind a bush. God discovered their hideout by asking Adam a series of questions designed to expose their rebellion and shame. The exposure, however, led to an arrogant attack against God. Listen to the narrative:

The LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

GENESIS 3:9-12, NIV

Imagine telling the Lord God, “Don’t blame me. It’s not my fault; You made her. If You had not created this woman, then I would not be in this mess. It’s ultimately a failure of Your creation. You, God, and the woman You made are the cause of the Fall.”

Exposure, more often than not, leads to shame. The natural response of an autonomous (independent and self-reliant) heart is to hide behind fig leaves or any convenient bush. If that does not work and if we are discovered again, we will resort to vicious condemnation of the Creator or His creation. As children of Adam and Eve, we bear not only their likeness to God as image bearers but also their desire to be autonomous and their propensity to hide, blame, and attack when caught. As a result of the Fall, we despise standing vulnerable before God and others; therefore, we find countless ways to flee from His presence and avoid being seen.

Shame is a dreaded, deep-seated, long-held terror come true: What we have feared has actually come about. We’ve been found out. The dark secret—and there are many in every life—that may involve a past sexual indiscretion, thought, or behavior, a past disloyalty, a failure of conscience, a violent act, a cruel outburst, or a personal failure is known. All our elaborate defenses, disguises, and personality traits are held in bondage to the goal of not being known, because to be known is to be caught naked and defenseless.

As I have said, everyone experiences shame to some degree. But

sexually abused people often feel marked for life. The exposure of the past abuse sets them apart from normal, supposedly unstained, undamaged people. (It is not unlike the segregation that minority groups feel when they are set apart because of a difference in appearance or in the color of their skin.) The stain of the abuse seems to color the perspective of anyone who learns of the victims' past. Therefore, to avoid the awkwardness of other peoples' discomfort, the patronizing support of those who do not understand the internal damage, and worse, the subtle implication that it was their fault, it seems better to hide behind the cloak of denial.

The Revelation

Shame exposes pretense and subterfuge; like a play, the curtain parts and on center stage for all to see is a sight that provokes condemnation and disgust: *I am naked and I am mortified*. What is seen in the revelation? It depends on whether the experience causes legitimate or illegitimate shame.

Shame is not an easy topic. It involves a universal experience most people would like to ignore, but it is also a complex concept. Shame can be a result of the exposure of sin, therefore legitimate and desirable. However, even the exposure of sin may provoke an experience of shame that is too intense and self-absorbing to be from God. On the other hand, much of the shame we experience is not due to the exposure of our sin but to the revelation of some deficiency (or better said, perceived deficiency) in our dignity. The difference between illegitimate and legitimate shame is found in the object of the exposure. *Legitimate shame exposes depravity, and illegitimate shame shines a light on some element of dignity*.

A man who feels shame when he trips in front of a group of people has been seen as clumsy. His longing (an aspect of his dignity) to be viewed as competent and in control has been disappointed because of

his deficiency. Now, exactly why would he feel shame at something as inadvertent as tripping over a step? The answer involves an obvious observation: We blame wounds to our dignity, by others and ourselves, for most of the pain in life. We were called lazy when we forgot to make our beds, ugly when we failed to get a date, stupid when we did not excel in school. Each attack ignored our depravity and zeroed in on some aspect of our dignity. Now when our dignity is ignored or demeaned, we will feel exposed as undesirable, and we will likely hate whatever part of us has caused the pain. If it is our nose, then we will hate our face; if it is our ethnic name or culture, then we will want to blend with the light-skinned and blond people who are most highly valued. *But the part of ourselves we hate the most is our longing to be wanted and enjoyed.* If we didn't want, then we would not care. If we did not care, then we could not be shamed by others' rejection.

This will help us begin to understand why shame is such a significant part of sexual abuse. Consider the damage done to the soul when the abuse is fused with the legitimate longings of the heart. The flower of deep longing for love is somehow hideously intertwined with the weed of abuse. Longings are wed to abuse, abuse begets shame, and shame is inextricably related to a hatred for one's own hungry soul. Any significant abuse causes the victim to despise the way he or she's been made: a person wired for deep, satisfying, eternal involvement with others and God.

A young woman I worked with felt nausea every time her boyfriend embraced her and showed any signs of physical warmth. When she was fourteen, she was forced to engage in oral sex with her older brother. She did not believe that her past sexual abuse had anything to do with her sick stomach; she saw it as a quirk in her personality, but one that was not a big deal. Her reason for seeing me was a ten-year bout with depression. The depression seemed more severe when anything positive happened in her life.

One event will help set the scene. Her boss gave her an unexpected

raise because of her significant contribution to the company. After she left work, she was filled with dread. She began to wonder if he was setting her up for an affair. She spun from those thoughts to a terror about several projects that she knew she had yet to complete. Soon she was in a maelstrom of doubt and despair. She was surely going to be found out. Her peers at work would laugh at the thought that she had been rewarded for work that others did as a normal part of their day. Before the day was over she was in a full-blown depression. The route to understanding her despair became clear many months after this event.

This woman could not bear praise or success. Good events set off a hunger for what she knew she would eventually lose. She later recalled praying for hours that her brother would not come into her room, demanding oral sex. Many evenings would pass, and she would relax and enjoy the stillness of the night, only to hear her brother's door open and the creaking of his footsteps that signaled a night of horror.

One night she begged him to leave her alone. Never before had she allowed the full weight of her longing for a clean, loving relationship to grip her, and she wept. That night he raped her. After that sickening violation, she decided never to pray or want or hope again for anything. Her longings for relief were shattered. Her dignity was assaulted, and the horror of the abuse was intertwined with the hunger for an advocate who would tenderly wash her wounds and comfort her.

In a deeply sad and perverse way, the only relief she found was in destroying her desire for escape. Now, years later, whenever some delightful event occurred, she felt herself tighten and flee from the rising desire for more. Whenever the desire to be loved and to be enjoyed was aroused in any setting, she experienced a wave of nausea and shame. Longings and shame were wed to her sense of being a woman whose only worth was in being used for someone else's pleasure.

A good rule of thumb can summarize the major point of the story: *We ignore the issue of depravity and feel shame about our longing for what God intended us to enjoy.* It should be so different. We should feel shame

when we have verbally, emotionally, or physically demeaned or slighted another human being, thus violating our relationship with them and the Lord. We should be heartbroken, humbled, shamed when we do not worship the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. But instead, we often ignore our failure toward others and others' failure toward us. We feel shame when our longings surface and we are failed or we fail. A godly response in the face of abuse is to grieve—for the perpetrator's sin and for the damage done to our soul; but the natural response is to cower in shame, condemning our own soul for being so foolish as to hope, want, or risk.

Illegitimate shame comes when we have failed to achieve what our heart craves (the longings that reflect our dignity) and we feel we are at fault because if we had not done . . . , or if we had only done . . . , then we would not be empty, alone, and exposed. Legitimate shame involves the exposure of depravity. If our heart does not flee to self-justification or denial, and the Spirit of God lives within us, then we will be nudged into the light of His presence and seared by His penetrating eyes. It is God's kindness to orchestrate the events of our life so that our heart will be tested and then humbled, so that our heart will hunger for the kind of bread that comes only from the hand of God (see Deuteronomy 8:2-7, 15-18). Legitimate shame is the same inner experience as biblical humbling. It is the recognition of our state as desperate and our response to our rebellious condition as deplorable, deserving condemnation and death.

The story of the prodigal son is a picture of biblical humbling (see Luke 15:11-32). He was forced to see his desperate condition through God's testing and orchestration of events. His belly ached, and he knew his condition was deplorable. He was eating food given to unclean animals that his people would not eat. He humbled himself and returned to his father. He took the risk that he would be sent away or mocked. What he found was the riches of mercy that must have undone the remaining remnants of pride. Legitimate shame, in other words, always

leads to a sense of being lifted up by God to possess what is surprising, unnerving, and undeserved (see James 4:9-10).

One of the best descriptions of the power of shame is found in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. One of the shadowy bus travelers from a type of hell suffered from an overriding commitment to hide from the sight of others. The dialogue between this shadowy ghost and an angel spirit is worthy of reflection:

“How *can* I go out like this among a lot of people with real solid bodies? It's far worse than going out with nothing on would have been on Earth. Have everyone staring *through* me.”

“Oh, I see. But we were all a bit ghostly when we first arrived, you know. That'll wear off. Just come out and try.”

“But they'll see me.”

“What does it matter if they do?”

“I'd rather die.”

“But you've died already. There's no good in trying to go back to that.”

The Ghost made a sound something between a sob and a snarl. “I wish I'd never been born,” it said. “What *are* we born for?”

“For infinite happiness,” said the Spirit. “You can step out into it at any moment . . .”

“But I tell you, they'll *see* me.”

“An hour hence and you will not care. A day hence and you will laugh at it. Don't you remember on earth—there were things too hot to touch with your finger but you could drink them all right? Shame is like that. If you will accept it—if you will drink the cup to the bottom—you will find it very nourishing; but try to do anything else with it and it scalds.”²

The ghost battled with the shame of being seen and known. The spirit offered life, but the process involved embracing shame—in fact, drinking the hot liquid so that it would transform the soul from death to life. If it was handled without being embraced, it would destroy; if consumed, it would harm, but eventually bring perspective and relief.

Shame is an excellent path to exposing how we really feel about ourselves, what we demand of ourselves and others, and where we believe life can be found. It unearths the strategies we use to deal with a world that is not under our control.

The Dread of the Consequences

Another element involved in shame is the anticipated outcome of being found out: *rejection*. Rejection is almost always a by-product of being seen as deficient, even when the exposure involves a failure of minor proportions. A friend I know ruminated in shame all day over a failure to respond to an invitation on time. She saw it as a blunder that would be remembered for years by the mavens of the social circle she so desperately desired to join. Her blunder was not a sin; nevertheless, her soiled dignity would be like a mark of Cain, haunting her all over the earth.

If life and continued relationship with our false god depends on the quality of our sacrifice, then performance is required for life. The tension to keep up the pretense will be overwhelming. If we are found lacking in whatever is required, then we will pay the exacting cost of failure. The cost can be our life or reason for living; therefore, it is often not that great a sacrifice to give up our family, health, or relationship with God in order to achieve momentary relief from the pressure.

The dread in being found out is sufficient to fuel radical denial, workaholicism, perfectionism, revictimization, and a host of other ills. But the fear is greater than simply losing relationship. It is the terror that if our dark soul is discovered, we will never be enjoyed, nor desired,

nor pursued by anyone. Let me illustrate. A fight I had with my wife ended in sharp words and angry accusations. I turned away from Becky in fury. Though she was only on the other side of the bed, she might as well have been on the other side of the universe. After a time, I knew my barbs were absurd, unfounded, and cruel. I could not imagine how she could ever talk with me again. I wanted to say I was sorry, but it seemed as empty as apologizing for murder. How could I have been so mean? What was she thinking? Would she even accept my apology? Shame filled my being like cold water rushing through the hull of a sinking ship. As irrational as it may be, given my godly wife, I could not imagine her wanting to be in relationship with me.

The triggering event and resulting shame is worse than being rejected, because rejection assumes a path by which to return to acceptability. The fear involved in shame is of permanent abandonment, or exile. Those who see our reprehensible core will be so disgusted and sickened that we will be a leper and an outcast forever.

Empowering Trust

The three elements of shame—exposure, revelation, and consequences—are relatively complex, but what complicates shame even more is the final aspect: *trust*. Shame is the outcome of a failure in trust. Trust is a giving of our soul to another with the hope that we will not be harmfully used. Such trust invests in another the power to determine whether or not we are acceptable and desirable. When trust, defined as *an empowering of another to determine our desirability and worth*, is absent, shame is usually not experienced, even with exposure of our dignity or depravity.

For example, I likely would not feel shame when I am caught performing a vulgar act unless I cared about your opinion of me. If I wanted to offend you, then to be caught doing something vulgar would delight me. Shame is experienced before the one I've entitled or given

the right to judge me. Ultimately, that is the prerogative of God alone. To give that privilege—in essence, the opportunity to bestow or retract life—to anyone other than God is idolatry. This concept helps clarify further the difference between legitimate and illegitimate shame.

Idolatry is placing our longings for what only God can provide in the hands of a creature instead of the Creator. When I live for my work or my wife, then I have made them my false god. When I am failed (and I can be absolutely sure that a false god will be impotent at the point of my greatest need), then I will experience the shame of failure and misplaced trust. The writers of Scripture are crystal clear that dependence on a false god will inevitably result in loss, pain, and shame (see Isaiah 42:17; 44:9-11). A false god will disappoint.

A friend recalled waiting for her father in an airport where she had a two-hour layover. Two days before her scheduled flight, they had planned on this meeting at the airport. As she waited for him, she was aware of a slight fear that he might forget and she cautioned herself against putting too much hope in her father, a bundle of energy who has time for everyone and everything but her. She waited with keen anticipation, rehearsing in her mind the things she wanted to share with him. Time passed; he did not appear. After an hour she quit looking and began to read a book. Every time she would look up to see if he was finally coming, she would feel a wave of self-hatred and shame. Her hope of connection with a man who was her false god—the one who could bestow or retract life—failed her, and she was ashamed.

Of what was she ashamed? The answer involves two interrelated forces: the ache of *disappointed longing* and *misplaced trust*. “I am alone and it is my/your fault. I should never have wanted you to come. If I could pretend that you are dead, then I could live without pain.” Longings that are raw and exposed make a person feel naked and shamefully alone.

The second aspect, misplaced trust, involves an exposure of folly. How could I be so foolish to think that a freshly cut tree, half used for

firewood and the other for my family idol, could ever rescue me from the hardships of life? How could I believe that an idol I fashion with my own hands can save my soul? A. W. Tozer said it well: “God’s gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.”³

The shame of folly is involved whenever our false god remains deaf and dumb, impotent to heal the wound of our heart. For example, the sexually abused man often puts his trust in his own strength after he has been violated. He develops a mind-set of invulnerability to compensate for the frightening time when he felt extremely powerless. A number of my male abuse clients were long-distance runners, avid weight lifters, and macho risk-takers. They often expressed the same attitude of control and invulnerability by refusing to feel any emotion that reflected weakness or to feel intimate (other than sexually) with any other person. Their demeanor was often cool, tough, and in control. The message was clear: “I’ve been violated once, and I will never again feel myself lose control. I will never feel that powerless again in the presence of another person.”

A policeman who had been raped by an older cousin literally trembled with anticipation every time he pulled a car over for a speeding offense. He wanted the person to resist him or challenge him so he could conquer his adversary. Whenever he was reprimanded by a superior or confronted by a peer, he felt an overwhelming urge to destroy them in a violent rage. His quiet demeanor—albeit slightly cocky and self-assured—covered over intense shame whenever someone belittled him. The false god of total control over others mocked him when he failed to perform well.

False gods are a diverse lot. They can include people, objects, or ideals. Central to a false god is the assurance that we will be protected by their ministrations, and when they fail us or we perceive that we have disappointed them, the combined shame of rebellious independence and naked aloneness floods our soul.

Legitimate shame is very different. If we have acknowledged God as the One, and the only One, who has the power to determine our acceptability, then we will feel only grief, not shame over loss or disappointment. The prophet Isaiah, speaking of the Suffering Servant, reflects that hope in a statement that is a foundation for dealing with injustice and wicked misuse:

I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.
Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me!
It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.
Who will condemn me?

ISAIAH 50:6-9, NIV

The Servant of God understood that faith was not a protective shield against the brutality of those who beat Him or the ignominy of those who pulled out His beard. In that culture, nothing could have been more shameful than having one's beard plucked. Nevertheless, no one could stand as His accuser and bring His soul to shame because the Father stood as His advocate and judge.

Legitimate shame (that is, facing our failure to trust God) is the basis of our return to the Father. For most, trusting God means relying

on Him to keep our body or our world intact. But that is not biblical trust at its essential core. Trust involves relying on Him for what is most essential to our being: the intactness of our soul. A return to the Father ensures that no one can shame or disgrace or possess our soul—that quintessential core of who we are that will live eternally with Him—no matter what is done to our body, reputation, or temporal security.

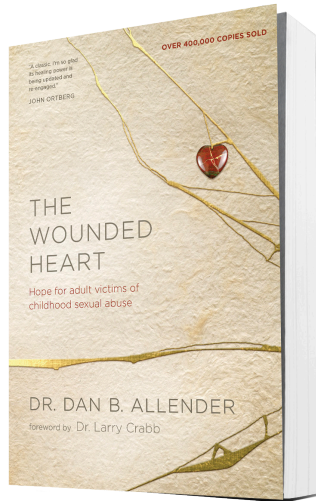
All of these factors make shame an experience that we avoid as readily as a room full of venomous snakes. Snakes can be avoided, but the potential for shame lingers like a dark cloud over every human encounter. The strategies devised to deal with our dread of exposure are as varied, complex, and idiosyncratic as the number of human beings. But one common denominator surfaces in every strategy: deflection of our sin through the use of contempt or, perhaps in more familiar language, blame-shifting.

In Genesis 3, Adam felt shame and used fig leaves to cover his nakedness. When he was discovered, he did not repent; instead, he blamed God and Eve for his fatal decision to eat of the fruit. He condemned God for His creation. *He poured his shame-based rage on God and through contempt nullified the need for humble repentance.* As Adam's children, we can discount our need for humbling by the same deflection. The abused person, facing deeper shame than most people, is even more apt to resort to radical deflection to hide her wound and her commitment to self-protection.

We now will turn to the role of contempt in deflecting the work of God.

ENDNOTES

1. Some readers may be misled to think shame is a category invented by modern secular psychology. It is true that secular psychology has made it a matter of significant discussion and research in the last several years, but it is first a matter of serious thought and reflection in the Bible. There are more references found in the Bible to shame than to any other emotion. It is no wonder because the Middle Eastern culture, then and now, is founded on the interplay of shame and honor. A more developed discussion of shame can be found in Dr. Dan B. Allender and Dr. Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul* (NavPress, 1994).
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 61-62, italics in the original.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982), 22.



The Wounded Heart has sold over 400,000 copies and has been the first book family, friends, counselors, pastors, and victims have turned to in search of Christian answers to the calamity of sexual abuse. With a new introduction reflecting on the ongoing importance of the book, and a companion workbook for personal and group recovery, *The Wounded Heart* continues to offer the bold assurance to sexual abuse victims that they can find their way to joy and hope in the comforting embrace of a good God.

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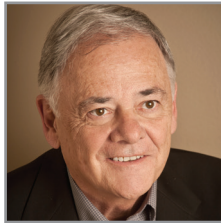
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DAVID STOOP, PHD, is a licensed clinical psychologist and Gold Medallion-winning author. He is the founder and director of the Center for Family Therapy in Newport Beach, California, and a cohost on the *New Life Live!* radio and TV programs. He is also an adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and editor of the bestselling *Life Recovery Bible*.

The Impact of Trauma

Some statements are obvious yet need to be said anyway, just so we don't miss the point. Here's an example: *Trauma causes people to do things they never would have done if the trauma hadn't happened.*

Obvious, right? But we've chosen to highlight it here in the hopes that it will break through, soak in, and become a factor in your ongoing journey to take your life back, find God's truth, and live accordingly.

During high school, I (Steve) made a staggering transition from being a pretty good guy who had made a few mistakes to being a very destructive person, both to myself and to others. I betrayed the people I cared for the most, and I ran away from the people who cared the most about me. I acted out compulsively and exhibited all sorts of addictive behaviors. I piled one mistake on top of another and wound up as a very messed-up young man, full of shame and with disconnected and superficial relationships. I was on a path that eventually led to an unplanned pregnancy, which I made worse by pressuring my girlfriend to have an abortion. That decision led to male postabortion syndrome, which at the time I had never heard of but which left me full of toxic shame and overwhelming regret. Through the course of all this trauma, I eventually made the decision to accept God's forgiveness for all I had done, forgive myself, and take my life back.

For years, when I looked back at my younger days, I hung my head in regret. I was amazed that, at a time when I had so much going for me and was so blessed in so many ways, I would veer off the path of righteousness and have no desire to get back on it. I would describe

myself as the worst of the worst because no one had abused me and no one had driven me to do anything wrong. In my arrogance, I had taken control of my own life—and then had driven it into the ditch. I had disregarded the counsel of others and messed up everything that was good and wonderful in my life, causing tremendous pain to some other people along the way.

Even after I came to terms with my shame and accepted God's grace and forgiveness during a prolonged process to take my life back, it was always a mystery to me how it all could have gone downhill so quickly. At one point, it felt almost as if I had gone off to war and suffered a traumatic battlefield injury, coming home a different and damaged person; but there was no war, I wasn't a soldier, and I had suffered no injury. But the change in my life had been that dramatic.

When attention deficit disorder (ADD) began to be explored and defined in the 1980s, I thought it might be an explanation for some of my struggles. A few years ago, I went to see Dr. Daniel Amen at the Amen Clinic in Southern California, where they had identified seven types of ADD. There they took a brain scan to determine which type, if any, I might have. I figured if they could diagnose the problem, I could better understand how to deal with it and make the best of it.

After the scan, Dr. Amen told me he didn't like what he had seen on the scan. I thought maybe he had identified an eighth type of ADD, perhaps a terminal form, and that I would be the first person ever to die from TADD—terminal attention deficit disorder. Things like that are always occurring to me . . . because I have ADD.

But that's not what Dr. Amen told me. He asked me whether I had ever suffered a significant brain trauma. The answer was no. Then he asked about automobile accidents. I remembered a rainy day when my father and I had driven to the dealership to trade in his year-old Pontiac for a brand-new one. (My dad bought a new car every year.) About three blocks from the dealership, we were at a red light when a man plowed into the rear of our car. I've had neck problems ever since

because of whiplash from that accident, but that didn't explain what Dr. Amen had seen on my CT scan.

Then he asked me about football, which I had played from seventh to twelfth grade. I was a center on the offensive line for many of those years, and then I played fullback, where I would run the ball and block for other players. Dr. Amen said that football was the most likely explanation for why my prefrontal cortex projected a flat image on the CT scan, rather than the oval shape that would be expected. And it was also the most likely explanation for why certain structures in my brain that should have appeared rounded like marshmallows looked more like flattened pancakes.

The center in football is kind of an anonymous player, but he is also one of the most likely to receive a head injury because the concentration required to snap the ball to the quarterback leaves the center more vulnerable to an undefended hit. In the era when I played football, the helmets were designed to prevent skull fractures, not brain injuries. On top of that, I really wasn't very good. So, when I was hit by an opposing player, it was not unlikely that my brain would have crashed against my skull. I would have taken the full force of the hit, and the other player would have experienced little resistance from me.

I took the diagnosis from Dr. Amen and had a further examination of my brain function by psychologist Rick Tansey, who operates a brainwave optimization program called Max My Brain. They hooked me up to some electrodes and recorded my brain-wave activity in the form of electrical currents. The results of the study were that the left side of my brain was about eight times hotter than the right side. Rick Tansey said it was "on fire." You might think that a lot of activity would be a good thing, but those parts of my brain were so active that in a sense they were paralyzed. When challenged, those parts shut down and I could not respond. This finding, combined with the brain scans taken by Dr. Amen, were fairly conclusive: My brain had suffered some type of trauma.

For the first time, I began to reflect on my last year of playing football, and I remembered feeling as if I had really gotten beaten up. When I compared my off-field behavior before my last season of football with my behavior after that season, it made sense that something had traumatized my brain. It helped me to understand how I could have seen such a dramatic change in my choices. Yes, I was a typical teenager at the time, prone to impulsive decisions and not thinking things through entirely. And yes, as a normal human, I was capable of messing up my life without needing any other factors to blame. But the evidence for some sort of trauma was real and compelling, and it made more sense out of my past and present decisions than anything else I had seen.

VARIOUS TYPES OF TRAUMA

Trauma occurs when an extremely stressful event destroys our sense of security, leaves us vulnerable, and maybe even reduces us to a state of helplessness. If you have been traumatized, you know what it feels like to be overwhelmed, to obsess about when the next dreaded catastrophic event might occur or about when you might be abandoned. You know what it's like to wait for the next insult or threat of physical harm, or to be lied to in a way that makes you question your sanity. Some of us have lived this way for years and have depleted every emotional or psychological reserve we ever had.

When we are traumatized, events happen unexpectedly, and we find ourselves unprepared to handle the shocking reality or horrific threat that we face. We shrink into believing that we are powerless to prevent further trauma, and we try to rid our minds of the memories of what occurred in previous episodes. When we have repeatedly been traumatized by a cruel or indifferent person or by difficult or uncontrollable circumstances, and when this string of traumatic events dates all the way back to childhood, it is easy to see the damage that can be done.

Even just one traumatic event can have a tremendous and lasting impact on our lives.

The traumas we see most often in counseling are caused by sexual, physical, or verbal abuse, including domestic violence and neglect. We also see bullying and gaslighting—a deceptive technique for controlling a relationship in which a person tries to distort and define reality for someone else. When we are repeatedly or continually coerced, manipulated, or put down, it's easy to see how life could start to seem impossible and how we could feel helpless, hopeless, and overwhelmed.

If you are wondering whether your own experience would be considered traumatic, here are some symptoms that often surface as a result of trauma:

- Muscle spasms, tension, and sharp pain
- Aches and pains in your organs, bones, and skin
- Fatigue, waking up tired, and never gaining energy throughout the day
- Being jumpy or easily startled
- Being constantly on edge or alert, and being upset by seemingly small things
- Racing or irregular heartbeat
- Sleep disturbances, including nightmares, insomnia, and frequent and early awakenings

All of these physical symptoms accompany reactive living, as well. Most trauma survivors live reactively and may also see psychological symptoms emerge:

- Withdrawal from others in an attempt to stay safe
- Feeling disconnected from God, others, and even reality
- Numbness that makes it difficult to respond quickly to stimulus
- Paralyzing shock that hinders normal, open reactions

- Complete disconnection and withdrawal from others
- Toxic shame, unrelenting guilt, and obsessive regret
- Inability to concentrate or focus; difficulty in making simple decisions
- Feeling confused or even crazy
- Compulsive, self-protective behaviors, such as lying, secrecy, or making excuses
- Depressive thoughts of hopelessness and extreme sadness
- Emotional augmentation resulting in the extremes of shame, regret, rage, and excessive irritability

THE TRAUMA BOND

One of the most unlikely results of trauma caused by another person is that we may form a bond with the perpetrator. Even though the person is toxic and unsafe, he or she exudes power and strength, which we may be drawn to. So we may cling to an abuser and return for more ill treatment rather than run for the door. If people ask us why we are so loyal to someone who is so cruel, it is very likely that we have become part of a trauma bond. Even when trauma is the primary feature of a relationship, we may stay attached to an abusive person who uses excitement, fear, sexual aggression, extreme behaviors, and risky situations to force us to cling and bond.

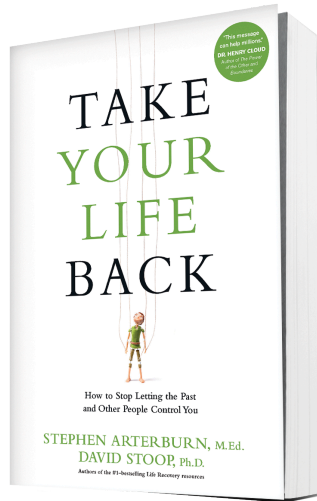
In reactive living, our reaction to a trauma-inducing individual is not a conscious choice. It feels like the *only* choice. We may feel foolish making this choice, but our fear wins out, and the bond continues. The longer this sick relationship lasts, the more devastating the consequences will be.

At the time we started working together, there was little talk in the mental health field about the impact of trauma on dysfunctional relationships. The focus was primarily on the role of the enabling codependent, who was often viewed as sicker than the trauma-inflicting

individual. Fortunately, someone finally noticed that these enabling or supportive behaviors were more complex than simple choices. In fact, these behaviors were not choices at all; they were predictable reactions to difficult people and predicaments.

What is not so different between enablers and trauma victims is that they both need help—and the sooner the better. And the right kind of help is available. There is no bias against enabling or dependency issues. We have a much more complete understanding of trauma and its effects on decision making. People who have been robbed of their freedom are treated with compassion and without judgment. We know why they may have put so much effort into concealing everything and trying to live invisibly. For anyone who has been traumatized, the help available today is far more compassionate and understanding than it was even five years ago.

If you have been hit hard by trauma, we hope you understand that it's possible to change the way you are reacting to it. We hope you will be able to reach out and find new strength and resources. Then you can move on rather than remain trapped by the trauma that has kept you locked away from the life of freedom and joy that you could be living.



Your past and current circumstances don't have to define you, and they don't have to determine the direction of your life. *Take Your Life Back* is the key to moving from reactive attitudes and behaviors to healthy, God-honoring responses that will help you live the life you were meant to live.

<https://www.tyndale.com//p/take-your-life-back/9781496413673>

ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE

ON THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE OFFERS hope and healing to men and women who have been traumatized by sexual abuse. Dr. Langberg's insights and the quotations from many survivors assure readers that they are not alone and that Christ, the Redeemer, can heal their deep wounds. Through stories, Scripture, questions, and encouragement, Dr. Langberg walks with survivors on the road to healing through Christ's love and power.



DR. DIANE LANGBERG is globally recognized for her forty-five years of clinical work with trauma victims. She has trained caregivers on six continents in responding to trauma and to the abuse of power. She directs her own counseling practice, is the author of numerous books, and is the coleader of the Global Trauma Recovery Institute housed at Biblical Theological Seminary. She serves on the board of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) and as cochair for the American Bible Society's Trauma Advisory Council. She and her husband have two sons and four grandchildren.

Telling Your Story

I suspect you had many thoughts and feelings as you read through the story in the previous chapter. There were probably particular parts of the story that you identified with more strongly because they remind you of parts of your own story. I also suspect that many of you have never told your own story before, and I encourage you to take the time to do that now.

Let me give you some suggestions before you start. When I ask the people who come to see me in my counseling office to do this, we first try to figure out ways to think about what to say and also ways to stay safe. This is even more crucial for those who have never before spoken about or even given thought to their own story.

First, you need to think of a safe place to write. Is it better for you to be home or outside or in a restaurant? Should someone be with you, or would you rather be alone? If you write at home, should you have the television on or some music to periodically distract you from what you are doing?

Many survivors are not used to thinking about what they prefer or what is comfortable for them. Either they think I am making much ado about nothing, or they simply won't know the answers. Even if you have no idea about how to answer such questions, I would like you to try. Guess, if necessary. The reason is that we are trying to begin some new patterns even now. One of those is learning to hear your own voice articulate what you prefer, what you fear, what alleviates those fears.

Abuse shuts us up. God gave you voice. I want to encourage you to exercise yours.

And that leads us to the reason why you should tell your story. I have been struck again and again through the years with the tremendous battle involved for my clients who are trying, often for the first time, to put their stories into words. Their struggle to find words is often slow and terrifying. At the same time there seems to be a drive to give witness to the truth, and it has been very clear that giving voice to their stories and the depth of their suffering has been a major vehicle for healing in their lives.

You will feel great ambivalence about telling your story. To speak the words leads back to the story—the story you are trying to forget. To tell is to return to the horror. The horror results in the tremendous desire/need to deny. To fail to speak is awful. To speak is equally awful because the telling makes the story real.

If you have experienced sexual abuse, you understand this all too well. Most survivors reach a place in life, maybe not until well into adulthood, where they feel compelled to speak. Often the thing that compels them is finding that they can no longer tolerate the destructive consequences of the abuse. So the survivor sets out to tell. And yet there is a great barrier to telling. Words fail. “It is much harder than I thought.” “You won’t believe it anyway.” “I cannot tell because then it will seem real, and it will swallow me up.”

One woman who struggled hard to tell her story explained why giving voice to what had happened seemed so difficult and pointless: “Being silenced began with saying, ‘No, I don’t want to’ but being forced to do it anyway. Then my abuser physically silenced me by pushing my face into the pillow. Sometimes he would strangle me until I fainted. He paid no attention to my voice. Maybe that is why I didn’t tell anyone about it. My voice was ineffectual. My voice was lost.”

I can assure you that although words are woefully inadequate to describe or capture the suffering of sexual abuse, even in their

inadequacy the words will help set you free. And although it may seem that speaking will only cause that which you fear to seem so large as to swallow you up, the experience of fighting silence with words will in time diminish the size of what you fear. To speak is to open the door and let a ray of light in. Yes, that light will expose what is terrifying and ugly. But that light will also enable you to see the way out. To speak is to tell the truth. Yes, that truth will confront you with thoughts and feelings you have worked hard to forget. But that truth will also work to set you free.

Now you have considered a safe place to sit and tell your story, and you have a reason why you should tell it. What are some other parameters that survivors have found helpful? Daytime hours are usually better than nighttime hours. Specific time slots help contain the emotions that are stirred up. For example, “I will work on my story Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from four to five in the afternoon.” Hold to those limits, and when you are finished, go walk, run, drive, or whatever helps you get distance from it.

Do you see all the new patterns this process involves? You are considering what is good and safe for you; the abuse ignored that. You are being called upon to speak the truth; the abuse silenced your voice. You are carefully setting parameters so the memories do not consume all of your life; the abuse was uncontrollable and uncontainable.

Will you be able to follow all of these ideas neatly and have them work just fine? No. Does that mean you will have failed? No. You are pushing against something old and dark and big. Change will come little by little.

You were not created by God to live in silence. We know from the existence of God’s Word—both written and living—that it is his nature to speak. You and I are created in the image of a God who speaks. To be made in the image of God is to have a voice and to express ourselves through that voice.

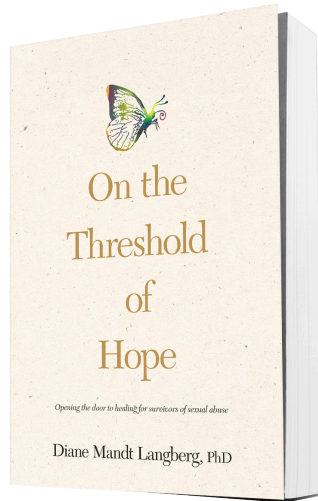
If you have suffered from sexual abuse, one of the results in your

life is that you have been shut up. Your voice has been crushed. Fear has made you inarticulate. Perhaps the denial or deafness of others has silenced you. You may be silenced by the threat of rejection, which you are certain will come if you tell the truth. You have known voices that lie, distort, and deceive. In an attempt to survive, you, too, have learned to lie, distort, and deceive. You pretend you are all right when you are dying inside. You say it was no big deal when your insides were ripped apart. You distort the facts to make it seem not so bad. You say, “At least I wasn’t killed,” when, in fact, you feel dead.

Let me encourage you to speak, to give voice to the truth of your life. It is indeed a very difficult thing to do. You will, however, find freedom there. Our God is a God of truth and light. Lies are exposed when truth is spoken. Darkness is banished when light is allowed to shine. Telling your story is not an exercise in futility. It is a means to an end. In and of itself, simply telling your story will not bring healing. However, giving voice to the truth of your life so that the light of God can shine in all its spaces *will* bring healing.

You are a man or woman created in the image of God. He is the God who speaks. He has given you voice. The Israelites, in speaking of their bondage to the Egyptians said, “We cried out to the Lord . . . and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out” (Deuteronomy 26:7-8, NIV). David said, “The Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer” (Psalm 6:8-9, NIV).

Let your God-given voice join the voices of those who know the experience of oppression, violence, and abuse. It is a frightening step, I know, but as you take it, God will meet you there. He *is* the Redeemer, and he *will* bring you out.



If you are a survivor of sexual abuse—or if someone you love is a survivor—*On the Threshold of Hope* will open the door to deep healing.

<https://www.tyndale.com//p/on-the-threshold-of-hope/9780842343626>

RUINED

ONE BRISK NOVEMBER EVENING during Ruth's senior year at a small Midwestern Christian college, two armed intruders broke into the house she shared with her roommates, held all five girls hostage, and took turns raping them at gunpoint. Reeling with fear, insecurity, and guilt, Ruth believed she was ruined, both physically and in the eyes of God.

In the days and weeks that followed, Ruth struggled to come to grips with not only what happened that night, but why. The questions raced through her mind in an unrelenting loop—questions that would continue to haunt her for years to come: *Why me? Where was God? Why did God allow this to happen? What am I being punished for?*



RUTH EVERHART is a writer and a Presbyterian pastor who has been serving churches for more than two decades. The author of *Chasing the Divine in the Holy Land*, Ruth is also an avid blogger and speaker on topics related to spirituality, such as pilgrimage and healing from sexual violence. She currently lives in the Washington, DC, area with her family. You can learn more about Ruth at www.rutheverhart.com.

I resolved to tell Doug about my past on our second date. I hadn't told other guys this soon, but Doug was different. Emotionally, I was already in deep. If he was going to walk away, the sooner the better. My head said that my history shouldn't matter. But in my heart I feared that he would see me as damaged goods. Not just because I'd been raped but because of what I'd done in the aftermath.

We were in his apartment, sitting rather formally on a too-narrow couch—a hand-me-down from his parents. I was terribly nervous, afraid that this magical thing between us would vanish as soon as I said what I needed to say. I faced him as I spoke, the words sticking in my throat. Everything hinged on his reaction. Finally I let the words out in a rush.

“I have something important to say, so please listen. When I was in my last year of college, living with my friends, some men broke into our house with guns and raped us all and they caught the guys and there was a trial and they were convicted.”

Doug's face went pale.

“Men always ask about the guns and all that, and I can't bear it if you do that.”

After a moment, I barreled on. “And after that I felt rotten about myself, and I had an affair with a married man. He was older, a seminarian, and I fell in love with him. I shouldn't have done it, but I did.”

“How much older?” Doug asked.

“Ten years.”

“Then it's his fault,” Doug said.

“I'm really sorry I did it.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said.

I didn’t agree, but I wished I could.

As I’d requested, we didn’t speak of it again—not for a long time. Much too long.

• • •

We’d been dating about two months when Doug came to church with me at Prince of Glory. We drove in his rattletrap Plymouth Volare, another hand-me-down from his parents. The car was two toned, the roof darker than the body. Doug said it was two tones of brown, but I teased that it was two tones of mustard, as if the colors were competing over a fifty-cent hot dog. The ramshackle car looked right at home in Prince of Glory’s decrepit parking lot.

It felt natural to sit side by side with Doug in a pew, to share a hymnal, to go forward to receive Communion together. Driving home, we discussed why I attended this particular church. I was able to tell Doug that worshiping beside black people was important to me, that it was healing after having been raped by a black man. I said I believed in God but was still figuring out what that meant and I needed church to help me do that. I said I trusted the Spirit to do something important in this hour every week, even if I didn’t know exactly what that was.

Doug had grown up attending church with his family. It was something they did together, like weeknight suppers or Saturday housecleaning. It was never discussed, simply done, and from there they moved on to other things. I explained that it was different in my family—that attending a church in our denomination wasn’t just *one* thing we did; it was the *main* thing we did. Church was the center, the hub from which every other thing emanated: our social life, our schooling, my parents’ employment.

That fall, Prince of Glory experienced internal conflict. As a mission church, it was always on the edge of existence, and when the minister announced he was leaving, there was much talk about the future and

money and leadership. There was even talk of closing. I wasn't ready to deal with church drama. Surely there was a multiracial congregation that was a better, more stable fit.

Doug and I began to visit other urban churches on Sunday mornings. Someone suggested a church in St. Paul called Dayton Avenue Presbyterian. I couldn't imagine driving all that way just to go to church, but I took note of the name. Meanwhile, my parents kept asking if I was going to "come home" to the Christian Reformed Church. Their words echoed in my thoughts, and I felt a twinge of guilt each time we drove into the parking lot of yet another unfamiliar church.

• • •

In December, my law firm had an elegant holiday party at an exclusive club in downtown Minneapolis. In the six months Doug and I had been together since our first stormy kiss, we'd never been anywhere this sophisticated. We nibbled from seafood hors d'oeuvres arranged around an enormous ice sculpture of a sea monster. The ice was lit from below, as iridescent as a fantasy.

There were luminaries in attendance, including former Vice President Walter Mondale, who was preparing for his 1984 run for the presidency. We shook hands with him and made awkward small talk. Someone took our picture, but only after Mr. Mondale set down his glass. It was only ice water, but as he told us, that wouldn't show in the picture.

We sat down to a sumptuous dinner of steak and lobster tail and unending glasses of wine. After dinner a band played, and everyone danced. After a few songs, Doug suggested we rest for a moment in the elegant pink and gold drawing room. No one else was in the gorgeous room, which was softly lit with lamps all around. We sat together on a Victorian settee surrounded by portraits and brocade, like people in a fairy tale. Doug seemed nervous.

He finally got the words out: "Would you marry me?"

I tried to let two heartbeats pass before I said yes. But really, I wondered what had taken him so long. We went back on the dance floor, glowing. A friend of mine, a legal secretary, was dancing with her husband, who was a judge. I blurted our news, and the judge offered to tie the knot, then and there. Wouldn't that have made a story?



My parents thought I would want to be married in New Jersey, but I said no. Minnesota was my home now. We set the wedding date for early August, eight months away. Finding the right church acquired a new urgency. Still, Doug and I agreed that we wouldn't be swayed by color schemes or center aisles or possible reception venues. We were looking for more than a pretty backdrop for the ceremony; we wanted a church home, a community that would be an important part of our marriage. I liked that we talked about our marriage this way, as if it were an entity separate from us, something we could cultivate.

We began to search more efficiently. We attended two worship services each Sunday, one in the morning and another in the evening. Afterward we discussed every detail: the type of music, the friendliness of the people, the theology of the sermon, the version of the Bible in the pews, even the quality of the after-church coffee.

We quickly learned each other's hot buttons. Doug was especially irritated by churches where people seemed fake or perfectly dressed. I hated it when the minister began every prayer with "Father God." Doug studied the crowd while I studied the bulletin, analyzing the names in the list of elders so I could calculate the percentage of lay leaders who were female. After the service we stood to the side and sampled the coffee, which was invariably mediocre, invariably served in Styrofoam cups.

I still believed that someday I would walk into a sanctuary and everything would click. I would have that childhood experience I still craved. Call it comfort. Call it grace. Call it home.

The Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church was a magnificent old structure, built of enormous chunks of rose-colored brownstone. A sign pointed toward a side entrance where an elderly man, spare and slightly bent, greeted us. He escorted us inside, explaining that worship was held in the fellowship hall during the winter months to save on fuel bills.

“The board decided we have more important things to do with our money than heat that gargantuan sanctuary,” he said. “It takes twenty-four hours to heat it for an hour’s use. That’s just not good stewardship.”

The fellowship hall was set with rows of metal folding chairs. We took a seat and someone handed us a hymnal. I watched as the hall filled up, noting a number of interracial couples and families. The choir filed in wearing matching orange robes. That was the only thing about the church that matched. The members were every age, size, and skin tone.

A woman walked in wearing a black pulpit robe. It was the first time I’d ever seen those vestments on a woman. She didn’t look much older than I was. She was introduced to the congregation as the Reverend Julie Neraas, their candidate for the position of interim pastor. After the service, there would be a vote about whether to hire her. I was incredulous. This church was going to hire a woman pastor? Today?

A silent prayer of thanks rose inside me. I was grateful God had led us to this particular place on this particular day.

Ever since the night of the crime, I had resisted seeing God’s hand in the details of circumstance. After all, if God orchestrated one event, that would mean He orchestrated all events, good and bad. I didn’t want to believe that. So could I believe that God had put me in this folding chair? I resisted the thought.

Yet I felt a welling sense of gratitude. It was right and good that I was here at this moment.

I glimpsed a new possibility. Could there be some way that the

working out of God's will encompasses human free will? After all, hadn't Doug and I been diligently searching for a church home?

Maybe this matter of will was not all one way or all the other. Maybe events occurred from a sort of partnership between God and people.

• • •

The text was Mark 5, about one of Jesus' healing miracles. A woman had been bleeding for twelve years. She'd spent every last dime on doctors, to no avail. When she heard about the miracle worker Jesus, she decided to get as close to Him as she could, thinking, *If I can just touch the hem of His garment, I will be healed.*

She crept forward in the crowd and touched His robe. It worked! She could feel healing flood through her body.

But Jesus was aware that power had gone out from Him. "Who touched Me?" He asked the crowd.

"What a question, Jesus!" the disciples said. "The crowd is pressing in on You!"

Then the woman came forward and admitted what she had done.

Jesus told her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

I was familiar with the story. I grew up calling her "the woman with an issue of blood." As a child, I liked to imagine her, arm bravely outstretched to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. I figured the poor woman had a bloody wound that would not heal—maybe a gash on the knee or elbow.

The sermon I heard at Dayton Avenue that morning changed everything I understood about that story. The minister said that the likely cause of the woman's "issue of blood" was a menstrual irregularity. She spoke about this frankly, in the context of the purity laws of the day, which had enormous implications. A woman who was menstruating was not allowed to do normal activities. She couldn't cook or serve food or even touch a man. Can you imagine being in this state for years? If

she ever had been married, her husband was long gone. A woman who can't bear children or provide meals or even go to the market—what good is she?

I was overwhelmed with compassion for this nameless woman. How did she even support herself? No wonder she was desperate.

But she was also brave. She dared to have hope. She heard of Jesus and followed the crowd. Even though she was unclean, she pushed her way to Jesus and touched His garment—a punishable offense. Imagine her fear at being found out.

Jesus knew all this, of course. When He called her out, He was asking her to risk her life in admitting what she had done. And when she admitted that she had transgressed in this way, Jesus called her “daughter.”

Tears flowed from my eyes as I recognized my own experience. This unnamed woman had been an outcast, through no fault of her own. She was “less than,” ostracized because of her female parts. Yet she had faith. She persisted. She took risks.

I saw my own wounded, scarred self and heard Jesus say, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

I can still recapture the floating feeling that came over me, the sense of being wafted to the rafters even as I sat anchored to a gray, metal folding chair in an unfamiliar fellowship hall.

Daughter. What a word! For the first time in a very long time, I felt at home.



Told with candor and unflinching honesty, *Ruined* is an extraordinary emotional and spiritual journey that begins with an unspeakable act of violence but ends with tremendous healing and profound spiritual insights about faith, forgiveness, and the will of God.

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