



DISCOVERY SERIES

WHEN TRUST IS LOST

Healing for Victims of Sexual Abuse



When Trust Is Lost

by Dan B. Allender

Sexual abuse is one of the few crimes that brings more shame to the victim than to the offender. It takes away a person's innocence and self-respect, and usually silences the victim so that help is difficult to find. The wounds and struggles that follow are often as difficult to deal with as the original abuse. Many victims feel alone, confused, depressed, and sometimes as if they are going crazy.

If you have been sexually abused, or if you know someone struggling with this problem, the following pages describe a process of recovery that is filled with hope and help. Some of what follows will be difficult to accept. But the pain of understanding and healing is far less than the pain of denial and despair.

The Problem Of Sexual Abuse

It is important to understand the nature of sexual abuse. For healing to take place, there needs to be understanding not only of the original offense, but of the ongoing damage that such abuse does to both offenders and victims.

The Definition Of The Problem. Sexual abuse involves any *contact* or *interaction* whereby a vulnerable person (usually a child or adolescent) is used for the sexual stimulation of an older, stronger, or more influential person.

Sexual abuse is much broader than forced, unforced, or simulated intercourse. It includes any touching, rubbing, or patting that is meant to arouse sexual pleasure in the offender. It may also

involve visual, verbal, or psychological interaction where there is no physical contact.

Visual sexual abuse may involve exposing a victim to pornography or to any other sexually provocative scene (including exposure to showering, intercourse, or various states of undress).

Verbal sexual abuse involves an attempt to seduce or shame a child by the use of sexual or suggestive words.

Psychological sexual abuse includes interactions where a child is regularly used to play the role of an adult spouse, confidant, or counselor. For example, a mother who tells her 12-year-old son her sexual frustrations with his father, and shares her deep thoughts and feelings with him in a way that invites him to a level of adult intimacy, has violated the young man's sexual identity.

The Extent Of The Problem. Sexual abuse is a national plague. Research suggests that by the age of 18, 1 out of every 3 women will be victims of sexually abusive *contact*. If the definition of abuse is broadened to include abusive *involvement*, the statistics increase. For instance, just including victims of exhibitionism (which causes women to secretly wonder, *Why did he choose me to do that to?*) increases the ratio to 1 out of 2.

The figures for men are only beginning to surface. Men are even more reluctant than women to admit abuse. Like women, however, male victims are haunted by unjustified but disturbing questions about their own sexuality. At one time it was suggested that only 2 percent of men were sexual-abuse victims. More recent studies indicate that

the figure may be as high as 33 percent.

The Reasons For The Present Problem.

Histories now surfacing reveal a legacy of shame that is not new. In many cases, abusers were themselves victimized by parents or grandparents. Abuse has been silently passing from one generation to another as long as it could be kept a “family secret,” and as long as social and religious pressures were strong enough to inhibit disclosure.

These patterns have been reinforced by the breakdown of the family, the spread of pornography, alcoholism, drug addiction, and the general decline of moral and spiritual courage. The current fascination with occultic and satanic activity has also been identified as a contributing factor.

The Bible's Exposure Of The Problem. The biblical record of the rape of Tamar shows God's intention to make sexual abuse a subject for public discussion (2 Sam. 13:1-20). When King David's son raped his half-sister, the act and its resulting turmoil became a part of Israel's public and religious record.

There is much to be seen in this incident. There is a lustful brother, a vulnerable sister, a passive parent, and the seduction of innocence. There is the consuming shame of the victim, the contempt of the offender, and the resulting violence of a family divided against itself.

Some would say that the turmoil wouldn't have occurred if Tamar had just kept quiet. That is not true! Tamar grieved openly because her brother had

wronged her and because he would not accept responsibility for his sin. To have kept it a secret would have allowed Amnon's wickedness to go unchecked. It would have enabled him to do to others what he did to Tamar.

Because Amnon would not admit his wrong and seek forgiveness and restitution, family bitterness grew. Two years later, another of Tamar's brothers sought revenge. Absalom killed Amnon, throwing David's kingdom into chaos. One life-shaking quake of sexual abuse sent tidal waves into the soul of Tamar and into countless other lives.

The fact that God has included this event in the record of His Word helps us to see how important it is for us to open our eyes to the terrible damage of sexual abuse.

The Damage Of Sexual Abuse

Victims of sexual abuse often wonder how past events can still be so damaging today. The damage of the past is not erased by time. A broken arm that is not properly treated will mend, but it will not heal in the way God intended. Time may diminish the pain of the memories, but it will not heal the wound.

In the same way, the damage does not usually vanish when a person

becomes a Christian. Following Christ is like restoring a wonderful but rundown estate. Its previous owner destroyed its beauty, but the new owner intends on renewing the estate's former glory. Every room must be redone. The fact that our lives are finally given back to God does not mean that every room is immediately restored and beautiful. In fact, it is possible either to refuse to allow God to work on certain rooms, or to be unaware that a secret room might exist on the top floor that needs His attention.



Such resistance to complete restoration is typical of sexual-abuse victims. There is either a conscious refusal to admit that past abuse has any impact on today's living, or there is an absence of memory of the past damage. In either case, more is required to deal with the room than merely deeding the property back to God. Specific attention to the damage is required before the restoration is begun.

What is the damage to those who have been sexually abused? Sexual abuse (irrespective of how many times it occurred, the identity of the perpetrator, and the severity and nature of the abuse) causes the victim to feel powerless, betrayed, confused, and rejected by God.

The Feeling Of Powerlessness. Sexual-abuse victims are often physically smaller than the

abuser. They feel unable to stop the abuse. Many are threatened with physical or emotional harm. The victim feels captured. There doesn't seem to be any way out.

Victims also feel powerless to stop their own anguish. All the efforts to leave one's body during the abuse and all the energy to stifle the tears may have worked for a time, but the hurt did not end. The pain seems to be as much of an enemy as the abuser. Often there is a great deal of time spent denying the fact of the abuse or at least the physical and emotional pain that was suffered. Because such efforts don't work, victims feel powerless to remove their own inner wounds.

These feelings of vulnerability often result in exhausting attempts to take control of one's own life. Abuse victims often feel that their existence depends

on being on top of things. For instance, a woman I know who struggles with past sexual abuse snapped at her son for playing in the mud. Like most 6-year-old boys, he was not concerned about wearing dirt. After she sent him into the house, she apologized to me. She was full of remorse for yelling at him. She admitted she often lost her temper with him. I asked her why she felt the need to apologize to me since her remarks were neither against me nor particularly severe. She said, "I guess I always feel apologetic for almost everything I do. I hate myself when anything is out of kilter." She expressed the inner battle of someone who can't relax. There is often a constant pressure to be perfect, to not fail, to avoid disappointing others. Failure to live up to such expectations, in turn, leads to exhaustion and self-

hatred. Efforts to be in control eventually lead to being even more out of control.

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This inability often results in hopelessness. The terrible experience of being powerless often leads to the "why bother" attitude of depression. Many abuse victims assume that they were to blame, and they suffer with periodic bouts of depression and chronic self-contempt. The question "Why could I not stop the abuse?" lingers like a festering sore. One woman said, "If I had only been smarter, stronger, or braver, maybe it would not have

occurred.” Nothing could be further from the truth! But being told that it is not your fault, though 100 percent true, does not usually help for long. The feelings of powerlessness are usually taken inside the heart, and the self-hatred deepens to a point of despair. As sad as it is, powerlessness is not the only wound. Hopelessness and depression follow closely behind.

The Feeling Of Betrayal. Sexual abuse is a tragic betrayal of trust. Trust is crucial for growth. God gives us parents to act as His stand-in until we can learn to shift our dependence to God. He tells parents to raise their children in His behalf and urges them not to provoke their children to anger (Eph. 6:4). Few actions do more to provoke anger and to violate the parent-child trust than the betrayal that results from sexual abuse.

A parent is to provide a reasonably safe environment where a child can experience and learn about life without heart-breaking damage. Safety is the glue that allows the child to connect the different pieces of reality without fear or condemnation. When trust is tragically violated, it eventually causes a child to withdraw from learning and growing and causes suspicion of all caregivers, including God.

In most cases (89%), the offender is either a relative or a person known to the victim. The typical abuser will usually “set up” the child for a period of time prior to the actual abuse. He may give the child special favors to form a bond of intimacy. This is deepened by physical touch and playful involvement that enriches the bond. By the time the physical touch

moves across the line between appropriate and nonsexual to inappropriate and sexual, it often seems like a natural and acceptable transition—a transition supposedly desired by the victim.

The betrayal of being set up and used by a loved one is profound. The offender used the natural and God-given desire for intimacy as the bait for soul-destroying involvement. The victim was unable to see or stop the setup. In most cases, the seduction process is so effective that the victim will feel responsible to some degree for the abuse.

Another form of betrayal is committed by “nonoffending” parent(s). In many cases, a parent who knows or should know about the abuse, chooses, for whatever reason, to deny or ignore the evidence. One mother walked through the bedroom where an older

cousin (16) and her daughter (10) were together in bed under the sheets. She said nothing. Several weeks later she harshly said to her daughter, “Nothing better have happened in bed with your cousin. Don’t you do that again.” Her mother’s failure to protect, comfort, and nourish was as severe a betrayal as the original abuse.

Many parents may not know about the abuse, but they see a sudden change in character, moodiness, depression, rebellious behavior, hypersexual interest, and/or repetitive masturbation. The failure to care enough to pursue the signs of a problem is a significant failure to protect.

Such betrayal affects victims in at least two ways. They develop a hatred for their own God-given desire for intimacy, and they become suspicious of anyone who offers them love.

One man who was abused by his pastor as a child said, "If I had not had such a hunger for love, I never would have been so vulnerable." He didn't blame the perpetrator as much as he did his own neediness and hunger for love. This is common. Abuse victims see their longing for involvement as being either selfish or weak. As a result, they tend to repress their legitimate desire for tenderness and compassion and seek instead more mechanical and emotionally detached relationships. Many abuse victims actually feel more comfortable in relationships where their God-given longings are ignored or shamed.

A second effect of betrayal is that sexual-abuse victims find it difficult to trust other people. The abused will often view others with some

degree of suspicion. It may not make sense at first, but the victim is most likely to be more suspicious of those who are kind, gentle, and loving than those who are detached, exploitative, and selfish. The tragedy for many abused women is that the fear of intimacy intensifies in the presence of a trustworthy person and decreases with a person who is unwilling to offer true love.

One woman gravitated to men who were aloof and seductive. She had a date with a man who was kind and attentive and found him boring. What she called boring was, in fact, faithfulness, and what she viewed as exciting was a disregard for love. A person you know you can't trust will never disappoint your heart like someone who draws forth true desire. A true friend will feel more dangerous than the abuser,

and will therefore be viewed with more suspicion. Obviously, the abused person struggles daily with issues of trust and doubt.

The Feeling Of Confusion. The damage from powerlessness and betrayal feels awful. It causes doubts about one's strength to deal with the world and contempt toward the desire for love. It creates confusion about trust. If that were the only damage, it would be enough. But there is more. Sexual abuse goes even further in wounding the heart. It causes a violent torrent of confusion and shame about one's sexuality.

The reason for this damage is complex. It is rooted in the fact that sexual contact or interaction draws from the body and the soul both arousal and pleasure, even when it occurs in a context that is exploitative and perverse.

This is an important point. The abusive sexual events may have brought feelings of sexual pleasure to the victim. In time, this creates violent confusion of feelings. On one side, the arousal felt good and it was the only intimacy available. On the other, it was painful and demeaning to be used.

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The incredible torrent of conflicting emotions is more

than any child or adolescent can bear. They cannot understand such emotions in the same way an adult can. They cannot separate their natural longing for intimacy from the sexual pleasure exploited by their abuser. No child wants to be sexually used. Children want to be loved. So if the only involvement that is offered is abusive, it will be taken as the only available water to satisfy their thirst. God made us with a hunger and thirst for intimacy. He intended our longings to be satisfied in loving, legitimate relationships. Yet the enemy of our souls has targeted our thirst for intimacy as a major battleground for good and evil.

God meant for sexual feelings, thoughts, and activity to be pleasurable and intimacy-building in the committed relationship of marriage. Satan

understands the potential of what God has designed, and sexual abuse is one of his chief means of destroying it.

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Sexual abuse creates in the victim's mind a tragic and perverse linkage between sex, intimacy, and shame. For many abused men and women, sexual pleasure equals love. It is not unusual for children to learn that pain or stress can be relieved by the same manual stimulation of their genitals that was started by the abuser. Abuse victims may then live out their hatred of their sexuality in a promiscuous lifestyle or learn to despise sex as a means of keeping the past

pleasure, betrayal, and powerlessness at bay. In either case, sexual-abuse victims struggle with their sexual identity.

The effects of feeling ambivalent (overwhelming mixed feelings) are terrible shame and a sense of danger. Some of the shame arises from the question, “What would people think about me if they knew I experienced any, even the smallest degree, of pleasure while being abused?” Most fear that if it were known, they would be further blamed for the abuse. In fact, many offenders have said those very words to their victims: “You can’t blame me entirely. You didn’t complain or stop me and you seemed to enjoy what I did to you.”

The result of such words is that many victims cannot tell the difference between right and wrong feelings of intimacy. For example, a

woman who served as the organizer of a food bank at church was publicly commended for her ministry by the pastor. After the service he came over and warmly told her how much he appreciated her. She was stiff and civil in her response to him, but afterward she felt dirty and afraid. She was flooded with sexual images and feelings. She tried to stop the thoughts but felt overwhelmed. The only way she could quit was by masturbating. She was then consumed by feelings of self-contempt, guilt, and confusion. Her “cure” for the inner storm was to numb herself with an hour of Bible reading and a rampage of cleaning up the house. She viewed herself as dangerous when she was in the presence of a kind man. Her solution was never to get too close to anyone. And when she had sexual

feelings, she ran as far and as fast as she could and hid behind her stiff civility. The result was safety, but she was left with a dead, empty protection that decreased her passion for God and for others.

The Feeling Of Being Rejected By God. One of the most tragic results of abuse is that many victims feel that no one can understand their inner struggles. Even worse, abuse victims may feel that the past will keep them from being able to love or be loved. That is particularly true in their relationship with God. The inner hurt, anger, and confusion about sexual feelings cause many victims to feel that their heavenly Father is either disgusted and hateful or completely uninvolved. As a result, many victims either work to make themselves acceptable through legalistic performance or turn their

backs on God, assuming He has already turned His back on them.

In other words, sexual abuse makes it very difficult for a man or a woman to believe that God has uniquely built and equipped them to love and be loved by others and by God. The picture looks hopeless, but God has a cure for the damage.

The Healing Process

We said earlier that following Christ, after accepting Him as Savior, involves a process similar to the renovation of a grand old estate that has been run down, trashed, and vandalized. The new Owner must be allowed to clean out, repair, redecorate, and live in every room—even those we would rather keep Him out of.

Since it is God's desire to do this work in us, it is a comfort to know that we don't have to figure out how to fix all the damage. God will, in time, finish the good work He has begun in us (Phil. 1:6). In the meantime, the work He does in us will be life-changing. But it will be only a taste of what is ahead. Learning to trust our Savior through the havoc created by sexual abuse is a process that will not end until we get to heaven.

What we need to realize, however, is that because it is God's purpose to have a relationship of trust and love with us, He asks us to be involved with Him in our own restoration. As we will see in the following pages, He asks us to let Him bring about healing in us by facing truth, embracing sorrow, choosing surrender, and pursuing love.

Finding Hope By Facing Truth. When God

counsels His hurting children, He gently leads them out of their denial. As a teacher who was deeply concerned about helping people, Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:31-32).

Since a disciple is a learner and a follower, Jesus is describing a path to freedom that is much more than merely trusting Him in a moment of salvation. He is describing a process of truth that can rescue us from the bondage of our powerlessness, betrayal, confusion, and rejection.

Abuse victims have an especially difficult time coming to terms with the truth. Many have learned to live with their past by consciously or unconsciously pushing the abuse and pain from their memory. Denial was likely one of the chief

means for surviving their abuse. Many victims find a crack in the wall to concentrate on during the abuse or learn to “leave their body” and soar away to a more pleasant place. Some develop multiple personalities in which to hide.

Those patterns of dissociation often carry on today. Many make excuses for the perpetrator or the nonoffending parent(s). “It wasn’t his fault. I’m sure I did something to lead him on.” Or, “I know my mother would have protected me, if she only knew.”

Facing the truth about past abuse begins when a person says, “Yes, I was abused, and the one who hurt me took something away I can never get back.”



Sometimes the memory of the event is vague because it was repressed. Yet, if there is evidence of present trauma and significant periods of “blocked-out memory,” the person could say, “I cannot remember the specifics, but I have good reason to believe that my emotional problems are at least in part the result of sexual abuse.” When we are willing to face the truth, I believe God will, in time, begin to bring back to memory all that we need to recall.

It is often a great help

to write out what one has remembered in a journal. As new pieces of data return, it is important to receive them as we would welcome an

invited friend and guest into

our home. The past, no matter how painful and overwhelming, may seem like an enemy. But in the process of recovery, such memories are being used by God to transform us, not destroy us.

A second part of facing the truth involves admitting that damage has occurred. Minimizing our losses may seem courageous and charitable, but it helps no one. We don't help ourselves by living in the darkness of denial. Neither do we help those who have offended us by acting as if they have not hurt us deeply. Giving living offenders a chance to face the damage they have done is far more merciful and loving than letting them go on in unrepentance until confronted by God Himself.

Admit honestly the devastating effects of the abuse. You've already begun by reading this booklet. It is crucial for you to share

what you are experiencing with a trained pastor or counselor who can help you further explore the effects of the abuse. It is very important to get more facts and understanding about what abuse does to the heart. Read books and attend seminars and seek counseling. You can also find enormous help in sharing your burden with a trusted friend or spouse. Let them pray for you and encourage you as you consider the wounds of the past.

A third element in facing the truth of sexual abuse requires victims to be honest about the ways they have tried to protect themselves from further harm. To manage their pain, most victims discover ways to protect themselves from the horror of their powerlessness, betrayal, confusion, and rejection.

There are countless ways by which abuse

victims attempt to protect themselves. One abused woman would never let her children out of her sight. She hoped her power of protection would be enough to keep her kids from ever being hurt. Another abused man never made any decision that might be unpopular with his family. His goal was to live without conflict or failure. As understandable as these self-protective efforts are, they usually reflect a decision to rely on our own strength and abilities rather than struggling to understand God's purposes and provisions for our life. Each style of relating to others is really a desire to be God and live without struggle.

It is natural to want to protect ourselves. It is natural to try to make sure that we will never again be hurt so badly by someone who has betrayed our trust.

The problem is that self-directed efforts always end up making things worse.

✿Our self-protective efforts usually reflect a decision to rely on our own strength and abilities rather than struggling to understand God's purposes and provisions for our life.✿

The prophet Isaiah saw where self-protection leads. He said that if, instead of relying on God for our protection, we attempt to protect ourselves in the darkness by lighting and surrounding ourselves with small fires, we will end up in torment (50:10-11).

The most natural thing to do when we are lost and afraid in the dark is to light a fire. The most natural thing to do when we are hurt, afraid, ashamed, and angry is to think of safety in terms of what has worked for us in the past. It is natural to deaden our hearts to the pain, to become compliant, to use intimidation, or to work harder to please those who scare us. These fire-lighting efforts to find our own life apart from dependency on God, however, are merely futile means of self-protection that will fail us in the end. They should remind us of the proverb that says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Self-protection makes a great deal of sense at the moment, but it is the opposite of faith in God. It leads to torment and death.

It is imperative for abuse victims to face the truth of what is going on inside their hearts. They need to see that by killing their own feelings, playing tough, or running from the Lord, they have turned their fear and anger against themselves, others, and God.

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The only way for sexual-abuse victims to move out of the anger, distance, and self-protection is for them to be willing to look honestly at the abuse that has been done to them. It means prayerfully admitting to God and before others their own inability to protect themselves from further harm. It means

admitting to themselves that they are not who they deeply long to be. These are painful admissions. But waking the painful desires of truth brings hope and will be far less painful than the eventual torments of denial.

Finding Comfort By Embracing Sorrow.

Sexual-abuse victims often run from comfort the way a cruelly treated dog responds to anyone who tries to befriend it.

Fearful of more abuse, the dog gnashes angrily or runs from anyone who gets too close. It is not really running from people as much as it is running from its pain and its past.

In a similar way, confused and fearful victims

often are more inclined to impulsively “run or bite” than to face their pain long enough to see where it is coming from. By running from the pain of further betrayal, they run from comfort as well.

Jesus described a better way to deal with pain when He said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt. 5:4). He wasn’t talking about just any kind of mourning. He



meant that once we have admitted our need of God—“Blessed are the poor in spirit” (v.3)—we must learn to put the pain of sin to work for us. We

must grieve sin and its results until our heart is one with the heart of God.

Facing pain and embracing sorrow with the

expectation of finding comfort feels wrong. But it is the right way to deal with our problems. Learning how and what to grieve is necessary to the healing process. Victims need to grieve what has been taken away from them. They need to let themselves feel their lost innocence. They need to mourn their lost childhood and their loss of trust. Just as important, victims need to mourn the self-protective sinful actions by which they have tried to protect themselves from further harm.

It is difficult for victims to stay with sorrow long enough to be changed by it. Most would rather be enraged at themselves or furious at the abuser or God. They would rather kill their own emotions than grieve the irretrievable loss of their childhood and innocence. They would rather run from God, or

even go to war with Him, than give up a sinful, self-protective style of relating.

What many abuse victims do not realize, however, is that sorrow over the past is not like crying over spilt milk. It is embracing the sadness of losses that have grieved and angered the heart of God. Victims often fail to realize that God's own sorrow for what has happened is deep and profound. The fact that He didn't stop the abuse doesn't reflect a lack of His interest or love. When He restrains His wrath and final judgment, He is actually hurting, as in the anguish of childbirth, waiting in pain for the right moment to carry out judgment and justice (Isa. 42:14).

The victim of sexual abuse needs to realize that if God quickly judged all perpetrators of abuse, His wrath would fall on all of

us. No one would escape, because in many different ways, through all of our lives, all of us have sinned against ourselves, others, and God.

In an attempt to protect themselves from further pain, many abuse victims have made others as helpless as they were once powerless. Many have set up friends and spouses to experience the bitter taste of betrayal that they have experienced. Many have either chosen to withhold their sexuality from a spouse and/or handled their ambivalence by promiscuous and unfaithful sexual activity. In any case, most abuse victims have kept their hearts hidden and aloof from deep, loving involvement with others. By refusing to be richly involved with others, victims commit a form of robbery that denies to others the heart that God

has built within them.

The result is that in order to be comforted by God, victims need to embrace sorrow not only for the sins committed against them but for the sins they have committed against others. They need to admit that they have been damaged and then take responsibility for how they responded to that damage in their relationship with others and with God.

Most abuse victims have kept their hearts hidden and aloof from deep, loving involvement with others.

The tragedy is that many victims become confused in trying to seek forgiveness. Abuse victims should never repent for what was done to

them. They should not accept responsibility for the actions of their abuser. Neither should they feel a need to ask God's forgiveness for the damage or the emotions that might have been felt during or after the abuse. As they face the sorrow of the damage done to them and what they have done to others, they can find comfort from God.

Finding Peace By Choosing Surrender.

The right kind of sorrow teaches us that real danger does not lie in letting others into our heart. Danger is found in being like the abused dog that impulsively bites or runs from anyone who gets too close. The same is true of our relationship with God. It's dangerous to fearfully resist Him. But safety is found by drawing near to Him.

Immediately after saying, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be

comforted," Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5). In other words, they are to be envied who do not resist and rebel against God. To be congratulated are those who surrender themselves to His care and protection.

This is the meek spirit of the prodigal who having "seen the light" in the mess of his own choices and broken relationships chooses to turn his heart toward the Father's house (Lk. 15:11-32). It is the rebellious child who returns with no greater request than to be a servant in His Father's house. This is the submissive attitude that gives a loving Father reason to celebrate!

Even though victims of sexual abuse may have accepted Christ as Savior many years ago, they must continually surrender to Him in the circumstances and damage of their

emotional turmoil.

If you find such surrender difficult, think again of the One who is asking for your trust. He understands your pain, because He too was a victim. He suffered unimaginable crimes against nature. He knew what it meant to bear the shame of others. He knew what it meant to be alone, naked, bleeding in the darkness as He pathetically cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mk. 15:34). No one better understands what it means to suffer under the weight of someone else's sin. No one better understands what it means to bear someone else's shame. No one better understands what it meant to suffer in the darkness while God and all of the angels of heaven remained silent.

It is just as true that no one better understands God's ability to help us.

Three days later, this victim of our sin rose from the dead to live His life through all who in surrender would trust Him.

Infinite good came out of that terrible abuse and darkness. Christ used His suffering to bring millions of people into an eternal relationship with His Father. He used His suffering to show that as the Father comforted Him so the Father can comfort us. He can comfort all who will choose to give up their struggle of self-protection and join their Savior in saying, "Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Lk. 22:42).

Victims who submissively surrender themselves to Christ, not only for their salvation but for daily cares, protection, and change, will find themselves on a path of peace with God. They will see the darkness of victimization change to the

first dawning light
of freedom and hope.

It must be remembered that biblical change through the right kind of sorrow and surrender will seem very dangerous to someone who has already felt so much pain. But the risk is an illusion. The process actually awakens in victims a passion for life. By bringing an end to wasted struggles, it increases their energy level. By bringing them to a place of strength and personal safety, it frees them to become concerned about others. Those who allow their hearts to be broken by their own pain will find themselves sensitized to the pain of others. It will stir up a desire to see wrongs righted and even evoke a healthy sense of anger (2 Cor. 7:9-13). Those who have mourned to a point of being comforted by God will find that comfort received

turns into comfort given.

Through sorrow and surrender, God will bring about changes that will begin to bring peace to the heart and restore the identity, purpose, and passion lost in the feelings of powerlessness, betrayal, confusion, and rejection.

Finding Joy By Pursuing Love. When victims are changed through a process of honesty, repentance, surrender, and a restored trust in God, they will, over time, experience a desire to love others as God has loved them.

After blessing the meek (those submissive before God), Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Mt. 5:6).

To desire righteousness means to long for right relationships with God and others. It is another way of saying, “To be envied are those who hunger and

thirst to love God. To be congratulated are those who hunger and thirst, not for revenge and solitude but to love others as God has loved them. These are the ones who will be filled with the love and joy and satisfaction of God.”

There is no other path to satisfaction than to long to be able to love as God loves. It means seeing each day not as a challenge to protect ourselves but as an opportunity to see what God can do through us in the lives of others.

This willingness to risk involvement with others, however, cannot occur until we accept the principles of truth that Jesus teaches us. Freedom and satisfaction come to us only as we see the truth of our own spiritual need and the fact of our own self-protective responses to abuse. Joy comes only as we surrender in meekness to the One who

suffered for us. Wholeness occurs only when we take the risks that are necessary to become involved in the kind of loving relationships that God calls us to.

It is this kind of “hungering for what is right” that also forces us to take another look at our enemies. After talking about longing for righteousness, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt. 5:7). This new freedom to love is possible only when we realize the extent to which we have been forgiven by God. It is possible only when we realize that *our* sins against God have been far worse than any sin committed against us. (This is not to minimize those terrible sins against us, but to put them in perspective.)

Jesus taught that those who have a great sense of how much they have been forgiven are those who love

much. Those who think they have been forgiven of little have little love (Lk. 7:47). He also warned about how wicked it is if a person who has been forgiven of an enormous debt goes out and refuses to show mercy to someone who owes him far less than he once owed (Mt. 18:21-35).

Embracing sorrow over past loss and present self-protection leads to the deepening awe and wonder of being forgiven. If I am forgiven and know a small taste of what it means to return to God the Father, then I will desire for others to enjoy the same fine meal. The problem is that many Christians mistakenly assume that forgiving someone who has hurt them means no longer feeling pain, anger, or a desire for revenge.

Forgiveness is a necessary part of the change process, but

many misunderstand what it means to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean that painful memories of the past are wiped away; nor does it mean that a desire for justice is ignored. Neither does forgiveness mean that the victim will not first feel a deep sense of anger and hurt for what has happened. In most if not all cases, real forgiveness cannot even be considered until those who have been abused have come out of the darkness of denial and have begun to feel the weight of wrongs committed against them.

Forgiveness means a willingness and desire to cancel the debt that is owed to you because of the far greater kindness God has shown. Forgiveness means realizing that the abuser, the nonoffending parent(s), and likely many others owe you a debt that could never be repaid in a thousand

lifetimes. Yet, in spite of the fact that the debt owed to us is real and enormous, our debt to God is infinite. The price God paid, the life of His own Son to redeem

us from our sin, is a gift that can change our perspective toward those who owe us an enormous, but lesser, debt. It is this freedom to love that God desires to share with us.

Miracles still happen. God can enable us to desire mercy for the abuser. The ultimate good is that offenders themselves come to terms with their sin of sexual abuse and experience the power of the cross of Christ to forgive them.

If the person who hurt us is still alive, we can begin to show the love of

God by doing good to him (Rom. 12:17-21). This could mean baking a cake or sending a birthday card. It may include a confrontation of the abuser (Mt. 18:15-17;



Rom. 13:1-3). Doing good through confrontation is similar to what happens when a surgeon operates on his patient—literally

cutting him with a knife for the purpose of saving his patient's life. This will temporarily hurt the abuser. It may disrupt his life and cause him to be afraid and angry. But doing good where sexual abuse is concerned is not pretending everything is pleasant and nice. It is a bold, loving gift of life, which might be accepted or rejected (2 Cor. 2:15-16). The gift of doing good to an

abuser is a postponement of the legitimate desire for revenge and justice for the sake of seeing the abuser restored to God and eventually to the one he abused. Forgiveness is letting go of hatred and bitterness so that the passion of the gospel and the boldness of love can fill our hearts.

Hope For You

If you struggle with the damage of sexual abuse, you might wonder at this point if there really is hope for you. You might wonder if you could ever go through the process of facing truth, embracing sorrow, choosing surrender, and pursuing love to the point of forgiving your abuser.

Along with many others, you might ask, “Why should I go through all that pain when I am relatively happy

today?” The answer is clear. If you are willing to go through the healing process on God’s terms, God Himself will surprise you with the joy of what He can do in you and through you in the life of others.

In this booklet we’ve applied several of Christ’s most basic teachings to the problem of sexual abuse. But there’s more. For those who hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God, there is an opportunity to hear the Teacher also say, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Mt. 5:7-9). The last one might offer the most hope of all. Just think! Those who become instruments of peace will end up bearing the family likeness of God Himself!

Additional Steps For Change

1. Take time to pray and reflect on God's Word. The concepts discussed in this booklet may be new and confusing. It is not a simple matter of ignoring the past and pretending there is no anger at God or the abuser. Simple answers that avoid the complexity of the problem only make the heartache of the past worse. So take time to reread and pray over these concepts. Ask a friend to read the booklet with you and talk about what makes sense and what does not seem clear. Give yourself permission to take a significant period of time to struggle with these issues. Change will come, but it will not be quick or easy. Stick with it and pursue wisdom, which is found in God's Word. Meditate on

truth and take in the Scriptures like a life-giving, healing nourishment. The Word of God will help you examine yourself and your world and God Himself with more honesty and hope, and with more healing for your wounds.

2. Pursue other information on the issues of abuse, recovery, and healing.

You may be an abuse victim, married to someone who was abused, or even an abuser. In any case, you need more information to think through what it means to deal with your past and present struggles. It is not enough to hope things will get better on their own. The path to wholeness is a journey that requires as much knowledge and understanding as possible. Change is not only possible, but it is assured if you pursue it as the prodigal who returned to his father's table.

3. Begin a journal that records memories, feelings, and events related to the past abuse and your current struggles to deal with the abuse.

The damage from the past abuse will never be deeply changed unless it is first admitted. It helps a great deal to see the facts and feelings about the past put in black and white on a piece of paper. Your journal will serve as a letter written to God that puts words to your hurt, anger, confusion, and growing hope.

4. Talk to someone who is experienced in working with abuse victims. Change does not occur in isolation from involvement with God's people. We are part of a family, if we are children of God. Do not forsake the community of God's people. Don't try to address these issues on your own. Talk to

your pastor, a close friend, a Bible-study group, if you feel safe to share with them. Share whatever you feel willing to talk about. And ask for their prayers and help. Many times, change begins when we admit we are unable to deal with a problem alone.

In most cases, it is important to find someone who is trained to talk with you about the struggles of abuse. The road to overcoming shame and self-hatred is best walked with a wise and trusted guide. Though much of the battle will be fought alone and with God, the process is always best when other people are involved.

The author, Dan Allender, currently serves as president and professor of counseling at Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle, Washington. He is also a therapist in private practice and a frequent speaker and conference leader.

SUGGESTED PRINT RESOURCES

The Wounded Heart by Dan Allender (NavPress, 1990).

Bold Love by Dan Allender (NavPress, 1993).

Door Of Hope by Jan Frank (Thomas Nelson, 1995).

Child Sexual Abuse: A Hope For Healing by Maxine Hancock and Karen Burton Mains (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1997).

OTHER RBC COUNSELING BOOKLETS

When Help Is Needed (CB931).

When Forgiveness Seems Impossible (CB941).

When Hope Is Lost (CB973).

ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Celebrate Recovery (celebraterecovery.com):
A Christ-centered recovery

program using *8 Recovery Principles* that are based on the Beatitudes.

New Life (newlife.com):
A Christian program that offers a full range of care, including both outpatient services and inpatient hospitalization for individuals experiencing emotional suffering, substance abuse, and abuse issues.

For a listing of Dan Allender's books and conference schedule go to thepathlesschosen.com.

All the RBC counseling booklets are available at discoveryseries.org.

Managing Editor: David Sper

Inside Illustrations: Stan D. Myers

Cover Photo: Michael Forrest

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