

NOT

FORSAKEN

A Shepherd's Guide  
for handling abuse wisely.

2021 Edition

by Jennifer Michelle Greenberg

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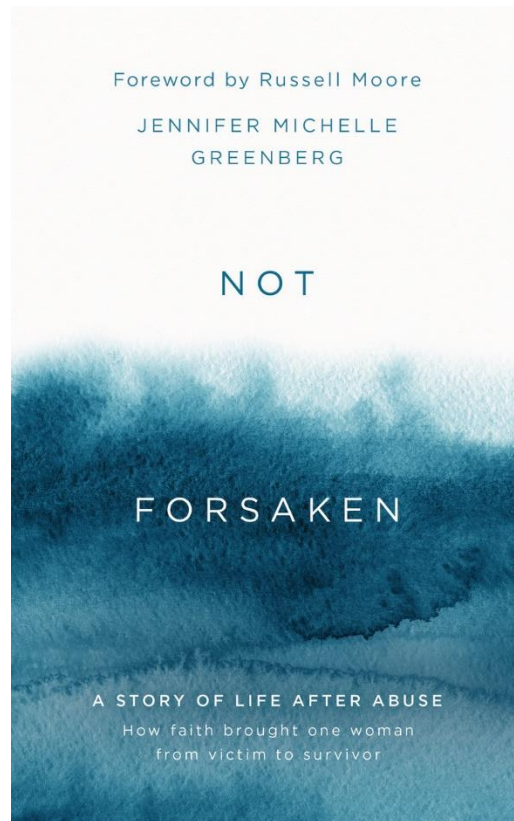
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## TRIGGER WARNING

There are stories and topics scattered throughout this material which some may find triggering. However, chapters 6, 13, 14, and 15 may be particularly distressing to sensitive readers. Please use discretion, take breaks, and take good care of yourself.

# NOT FORSAKEN

This study is designed to accompany:



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# COMMENDATIONS

I benefited tremendously as a pastor reading over this study. The Lord has made you incredibly wise. You have a gift for equipping church leaders in a much-needed and brutally hard area of ministry. Thank you for offering such a constructive way forward for equipping ministry leaders out of something heinous, evil, and that never should have happened to you or any other victim or survivor.

BRYAN PICKERING

Counselor and Pastor for Care & Counseling, Bethlehem Baptist Church  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

When I started in pastoral ministry in the late 90s, there was only a growing awareness by ministry leaders and trainers that there were sexual abuse problems in the church. The result is that we did not scratch the surface of learning how to properly address the needs of survivors and families. This guide helps fill that knowledge and skill gap for pastors and church leaders who want to do better but do not know how.

DOUG HIBBARD

Pastor of East End Baptist Church  
Little Rock, Arkansas

Those of us who have experienced abuse within the church know how needed this curriculum is for pastors. Jenn Greenberg writes with the unique perspective of an abuse survivor who has been deeply failed by the church. Yet her own suffering has not led her to grow bitter and disillusioned, but rather to lovingly speak hope and practical help to build up the church and equip pastors to do better. My prayer is that God uses this excellent resource to bring healing and hope to his beloved Bride.

CARRIE DAUKAS

Church Abuse Survivor & Advocate

A study and practical how-to guide especially for church leaders, leading us to carefully and credibly minister to abuse victims. Praise God for this sister in Christ and her work, through which the Savior's love shines so powerfully and brightly, especially for those whose lives feel lost within indescribable, dehumanizing darkness.

RUT ETHERIDGE

Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Geneva College  
Author of *God Breathed*  
Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania

One of the most tragic realities of living in this fallen world is abuse — especially the abuse of children. It requires some of the most painstaking shepherding to protect and care for the most vulnerable in Christ's flock. Unfortunately, many leaders are not only unprepared to deal with this issue but have catastrophically failed. We must do better.

Jennifer writes as one who has brought her own experience with abuse to be understood in the light of the Bible. As a good steward of her suffering she serves as a guide to help leaders wade into the muck and mess of this wicked sin and its devastating consequences. This study will encourage church leaders to compassionately love the lambs of Jesus, and to fiercely rage against those who would do them harm.

KYLE BORG

Pastor of Winchester Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCNA)  
Author at Gentle Reformation, Host at 3GT Podcast  
Winchester, Kansas

Jennifer has personally worked with me through a difficult pastoral situation. I highly recommend you check out her material. It will be well worth your time.

JASON GUDIM

Pastor of Faith Free Lutheran (ALFC)  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

## DISCLAIMER

This material recounts events in the life of the author according to the author's recollection and from the author's perspective. Letters from pastors, counselors, victims, survivors, law enforcement officers, and abusers are based on real correspondence, but have been substantially altered to protect the victims, their families, and the churches who care for them. Any similarities between other accounts is coincidental.

This material is intended to inform and equip church leaders, counselors, and other advocates in ministry. It is not intended as a substitute for professional legal, medical, or other specialized advice. Before acting on any legal matter or medical concern, readers should seek counsel from professional advisers. If you suspect that a crime has taken place, notify law enforcement immediately so they can press charges if necessary.

Not Forsaken: A Shepherd's Guide  
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## SPECIAL THANKS

I'd like to thank my husband, **Jason Greenberg**, for his encouragement and support, and for helping me think through tough issues, no matter how unpleasant. Your patience, understanding, and concern for the things I care about continually builds me up.

I'd also like to thank my publisher, **The Good Book**, who were not involved in the production of this material, but who gave me the support and courage to write it.

Thank you, **Rachael Denhollander**, for answering a few legal questions, and the mysterious **Khendarian** for helping me collect stats and talking dysfunctional psychology with me.

Most of all, I'd like to thank my beta readers and advisors, who invested their time, wisdom, and compassion into proof reading, editing, and giving me feedback:

**Rutledge Etheridge III**, Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Geneva College, in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania; **Kyle Borg**, Pastor of Reformed Presbyterian Church, Winchester, Kansas; **Angela & Victor Chininin Buele**, Advocates; **Bryan Pickering**, Pastor for Care & Counseling, Bethlehem Baptist Church, in Minneapolis, Minnesota; **Jason Tuinstra**, Pastor of Bethel United Reformed Church, in Jenison, Michigan; **Doug Hibbard**, Pastor at East End Baptist Church, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and his wife **Ann Hibbard**; **Bill Shishko**, Pastor of The Haven Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in Deer Park, New York; **Vickie Nee**, Advocate; **Malinda Just**, Author & Advocate; **Jay & Julie Camp**, Advocates; **Barry York**, President, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; **Paul Ladd**, Senior Correspondent at World Christian Broadcasting, in Nashville, Tennessee; **Carrie Daukas**, Advocate; **David Townsend**, Pastor and Ministry Team Member at Harvest House Atlantic, Lockeport, Nova Scotia; **Theron St. John**, Assistant to the President at Indianapolis Theological Seminary and Associate Pastor at Blue Ridge Christian Union Church in Manilla, Indiana; **Daniel Darling**, Senior VP of Communications National Religious Broadcasters, Nashville, Tennessee; **Rhyne Putman**, Associate VOP of Academic Affairs, Williams Baptist University, Associate Professor of Theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana; **Vince Otten**, Deacon at Anglican Network in Canada; **Jeanette Veld**, Child Abuse and Church Trauma Survivor; **Leah Moody Good**, Advocate; **Rachel Vann**, Survivor & Advocate; **Lukas Stout**, LGBT Survivor and Trans Survivor; **Beatrice De Vries Ludt**, Advocate; **Psalm 22:1**, Male Survivor; **Psalm 46:5**, Domestic Violence Survivor; **Genesis 50:20**, Child Abuse Survivor; **Psalm 23**, Abuse Survivor; **Revelation 21:4**, Male Survivor; **Psalm 34:18**, Rape Survivor; and **Isaiah 61:1**, Abuse Survivor.

These generous souls donated their time, energy, skills, and wisdom to review this material in whole or in part, and provide support and encouragement. I sincerely appreciate their ministry and friendship to me.

# WHY DO I NEED THIS STUDY?

Over the years, I've reported multiple child abusers, including my own dad, to Child Protective Services (CPS). Upon taking my report, a local agency sent out an investigator, asked a frightened kid some awkward questions, saw nothing, heard nothing, and did nothing. Law enforcement agencies cannot intervene unless a crime has been committed, and even then, only if they see red flags. If evidence is scarce or covered up, the investigation usually falls through the cracks. As church leaders – really, as Christians – it is our duty to Jesus to be watchful and wary. When his lambs are endangered, we should see and intervene even if the law cannot.

Sexual abuse in the church is the trending crisis of our decade. However, it's far from the only form of abuse, nor is it the most common in the church. Nevertheless, most church abuse prevention programs and abuse recovery ministries focus solely on sexual abuse. So, in this Shepherd's Guide, I will attempt to equip you to identify and respond to multiple forms of abuse – including domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and spiritual abuse – so that you can prevent more evil, help more victims, and stop more wolves.

The following statistics will hopefully help us understand the scope of the problem. Keep in mind, most abuse victims don't report, and male abuse victims almost never report. Particularly in cases of child abuse, these statistics only reflect the most severe cases, and most were reported by a police officer, physician, school teacher, or pastor. In other words, things had escalated to a point where doctors were seeing suspicious injuries, teachers were noticing depression, and neighbors were hearing screams and calling 911. This is the tip of an iceberg:

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence<sup>1</sup> (NCADV), in the US:

- On average, nearly 20 people per minute are abused by an intimate partner, such as a spouse or boyfriend. This equates to over 10 million men and women every year.
- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have suffered physical violence by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 7 women and 1 in 25 men have been injured by an intimate partner.
- 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have been victims of severe physical violence (such as beating, burning, or strangulation) by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
- On a typical day, over 20,000 calls are placed to domestic violence hotlines nationwide.
- Intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncadv.org/statistics>



## SEXUAL ASSAULT / RAPE

According to RAINN<sup>2</sup> (the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network), in the US:

- 1 in 6 women have been the victim of rape.
- 1 in 33 men have been the victim of rape. However, male victims rarely report or seek help, and statistically, child sexual abuse occurs almost evenly between sexes.
- 34% of child rape victims are under age 12.

## CHILD ABUSE + NEGLECT

According to The US Department of Health & Human Services, Children's Bureau<sup>3</sup>, in 2017:

CPS agencies received an estimated 4.1 million referrals involving approximately 7.5 million children in 2017. The national referral rate was 55.7 referrals per 1,000 children in the US. Of these referrals, approximately 2.4 million reports, concerning approximately 3.5 million children, received either an investigation or alternative response. The national rate for children receiving either a CPS response was roughly 50 per 1,000 children in the US.

Of the cases they responded to:

- **75% OF VICTIMS SUFFERED NEGLECT**  
Neglect is defined as the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being is put at risk.
- **18% SUFFERED PHYSICAL ABUSE**  
Physical abuse is generally defined as "any nonaccidental physical injury to the child," and can include shaking, pushing, hair-pulling, striking, kicking, burning, biting, and throwing things at the child, especially when injury results.
- **9% SUFFERED SEXUAL ABUSE**  
All states include sexual abuse in their definitions of child abuse, however, some states define it in general terms, while others specify various acts as sexual abuse. Any activity, such as "sexting" minors, inappropriate touching, or suspected abuse (whether or not it's substantiated) must be reported to law enforcement.
- **6% SUFFERED PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT**  
This statistic is far too low. Every child who has suffered neglect or physical abuse has also experienced emotional trauma. The psychological toll of feeling unloved, unwanted, endangered, or preyed upon, is devastating, but often not documented, prosecuted, or prevented by law enforcement. This is where the church has an opportunity to intervene where the law cannot. We can correct and discipline behaviors such as lying, verbal abuse, berating, insulting, and other sins that are destructive, yet not quite criminal. While they rarely document it, typical language used by states to define psychological abuse is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/canstats/>

"injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition," or injury as evidenced by "anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior."

Psychological abuse (which is sometimes called emotional abuse and includes the subcategory of spiritual abuse) may be inflicted verbally, or through behaviors such as violence, neglect, withholding affection, substance abuse, or other forms of dysfunctionality. In your ministry, you will likely find that 100% of child abuse survivors were psychologically abused, whether they realize it or not.

- **2% SUFFERED MEDICAL NEGLECT**

Ten states specifically define medical neglect as failing to provide medical treatment or mental health care needed by the child. Five define medical neglect as the withholding of medical treatment or nutrition from disabled children with life-threatening conditions.

- **7% EXPERIENCED "OTHER" MALTREATMENT**

This may include verbal threats or parental substance abuse.

Other forms of child abuse which you may come across if you read police reports, include driving recklessly or drunk while a child is in the vehicle, leaving a loaded gun or drugs within reach of a child, or leaving a child with a known predator in violation of their parole.

If we truly want to prevent abuse, we can't zoom in on one specific type, a too-narrow victim profile, or an offender stereotype. Rather, we must recognize that all people are sinful, and never underestimate the human heart's capacity for evil. As soon as we start thinking, "Most victims are female," or "Most abusers are male," or "Sexual abuse is the most common form of maltreatment," or "None of my congregants would ever hurt their kids," we fall into a dangerous trap that enables evil and turns a blind eye to depravity.

In 2017, of the 674,000 children law enforcement were able to establish as abuse victims, 51% were girls, and 49% were boys. These percentages have only varied a percentage or two over the past few decades. What this means for us – as church leaders, counselors, and ministers – is that roughly half of the child abuse victims and survivors we come in contact with will be male. This is a dangerously unreported statistic.

Do not imagine the boys in your congregation to be safer than the girls. Don't assume that the men in your congregation don't need abuse recovery ministry too. While I pray this Guide is useful to many women's studies and programs, this is not exclusively "women's ministry stuff."

I wish I could tell you that all abuse victims are going to look a certain way. I wish I could tell you that most abusers fit a specific demographic. While Satan is a big fan of misogyny and bigotry, he's a progressive demon who corrupts and oppresses impartially.

In 2017, 54% of documented child abusers were women, and 45.0% were men. The majority of perpetrators (77.6%) were the victim's own parents. These are not popular statistics. These aren't facts you'll see trending in the news or covered in most church abuse prevention programs. But if you don't know these stats – if you go into ministry thinking abusers look a certain way, or victims act a certain way – abuse will occur right under your nose, and you'll never see it, because you were looking for a too-specific thing.

# INTRODUCTION

Dear Shepherd,

Thank you for downloading *Not Forsaken: A Shepherd's Guide*. I am humbled and grateful for your interest in this topic and excited to support you as you serve Christ's church. This study compliments my book, *Not Forsaken*, and is intended for seminaries, pastors, ministry teams, counselors, and anyone interested in shepherding survivors through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. May Jesus work through you to lead them to still waters and restore their souls (Ps. 23).

If you haven't yet, please check out my publisher's website at [www.TheGoodBook.com](http://www.TheGoodBook.com) for bulk discounts on books for your class, leadership team, small group, or congregation. And, if you read *Not Forsaken* a while ago, no worries! While these lessons are meant to be read in conjunction with my book chapters, they can also be read as a follow-up book.

This study is not intended as a substitute for legal counsel or medical advice. Rather, it is experiential wisdom purchased in (often literal) blood, sweat, and tears. As a survivor of over 20 years of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse, God has equipped and called me to use what I've been through to build up his church. Hopefully, this study will be the first of many more works. I covet your prayers to that end.

Don't forget to check the last few pages of this study to learn about other studies I'm developing for individuals, small groups, church ministries, and married couples. It is my hope and prayer that by working together we can heal and protect God's children.

My father never faced criminal charges, in part because numerous pastors, lawyers, and therapists discouraged me from reporting and broke Texas law by not reporting his crimes themselves. Because of their negligence, my sisters and I endured an extra 5 to 12 years of abuse each, and the statute of limitations ran out before I was recovered enough to stand up for myself. But God is faithful. He sees all. He forgets nothing. There is no statute of limitations in his courtroom. And he works all things – even my dad's sin – together for good. My prayer is that he'll work through my story to empower your ministry.

Please feel free to contact me should you have questions or suggestions on how I can develop this study further ... or develop more!

Sincerely,

Jenn

# 1. LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken**, pages 13-38, Chapter 1: My Story.*

In 1948, Winston Churchill said, “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” As Prime Minister of England, Churchill led Britain’s war against Nazi Germany. As a pastor, you will hopefully never encounter a Nazi, but you will certainly engage in spiritual warfare, and will likely encounter incredibly evil people. You will need to protect your sheep against wolves. You will need to defend them against – not just physical abuse – but spiritual and psychological harm.

Often, when I share stories of churches badly handling abuse cases, or even perpetuating abuse, I am met with groans of remorse and even despair. However, for the purpose of equipping you and bolstering you against failure, I want us to view the blunders and even the sins of other pastors and church leaders – not as something we need to be ashamed of – but as opportunities for us to learn, prepare, and do better. Their failures need never be repeated, but in order to avoid repeating them, we must analyze and understand what went wrong and why. This will require a lot of humility, insight, and introspection, as well as a passionate desire to honor God.

*“Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.” Proverbs 3:7*

## FIRST THINGS SAID TO ME

Throughout my childhood and into my adult years, I tried to talk to pastors, therapists, lawyers, doctors, and other adults about what was being done to me. Unfortunately, I was either not understood, ignored, or given poor advice. What I’d like to do today is leverage those mistakes and errors to equip you to protect kids and adult survivors better. So, here are some of the things real pastors, doctors, and lawyers have said to me, and an analysis of what went wrong.

### *Be quiet!*

When I was about four years old, I was riding in the car with a friend. Her dad was driving. I didn’t have the vocabulary to use terms like “abuse” or “domestic violence,” but I felt a need to tell him something was wrong. I said, “Isn’t it weird that people make babies the same way dogs do?” I expected him to ask me how I knew that, who told me, or what I’d seen. Instead, he got angry and said, “Be quiet! Don’t talk about that! We are done having this conversation.” He was a Christian counselor and clinical psychologist.

### *I’m sure you’re mistaken.*

I started playing piano at church when I was about 13. The man who taught me was our church pianist. One time, he and I were sitting on the piano bench very close together and I got a strange vibe from him. I told my mom later how he’d put his arm around my waist. She responded along the lines of, “I’m sure you’re mistaken. He’s really friendly.

He's just socially awkward." A few years later, we received an email from our pastor informing us that this church pianist had repeatedly sexually abused a girl.

*You should pray for him.*

When I was about 16, I arranged a meeting with our pastor. We had lunch, and I told him, "My dad threw an iron at my head. I ducked just in time, but it dented the wall behind me." I expected him to be upset. I expected him to call the police and take me somewhere where I'd be safe. Instead, he got really quiet and said, "We need to pray for your dad's anger issues." I can't tell you how disappointing it was when he dropped me off back at home that day. As far as I'm aware, he never talked to my parents or law enforcement. He certainly never followed up with me.

*Have you forgiven him?*

Eventually, stories of my dad's violence and sexual deviance began to come out, and a pastor asked me, "Have you forgiven him? You're going to need to." At the time, this was very confusing advice. I was still trying to figure out what my dad had even done, differentiate between sin and crime, and decide how I felt about it all. Adding forgiveness to my to-do list, like it was a chore I needed to check off, burdened me under works-righteousness. Forgiveness became a task which I needed to do to prove I was saved.

*We don't talk about those things here.*

I remember the first time I visited an OBGYN. I was nervous, fearing the exam would trigger flashbacks or panic attacks. I told my doctor that I had been molested as a child. She replied calmly, "We don't talk about those things here." The nurse also, who was in the room, smiled and nodded, and everyone pretended everything was fine.

*Unless your dad hit you with a closed fist, it was legal.*

*The SOL is up. There's no point in reporting.*

After the truth about my father became public, my parents split up, and stories of my molestation and abuse were included in my mom's divorce papers. I was excited, thinking perhaps the judge or other law enforcement would press charges. When nothing happened, I decided to talk to a lawyer and ask him whether I should press charges. He told me that unless my dad had beat me with a closed fist, it was legal. Looking back, I realize this makes no sense. Obviously, whether you punch, slap, kick, club, throw, or otherwise assault a victim, it's abuse. He also told me that the Statute of Limitations (SOL) was up when it was not. However, even had the SOL been up, I could have still reported and made a paper trail to help other victims.

*You should be careful. Slander and libel are crimes.*

It is true that slander and libel are crimes. However, both involve lying. By warning a victim or survivor in this way, you're implying you think they're a liar. When I pointed this out to the pastor who said this, he explained, "I just don't want to give the abuser any

opening to sue you.” In my mind, this confirmed that he did indeed think I might be lying. In addition, it made me question whether he truly understood an abuser’s gall and propensity to lie. No matter what a survivor does, whether they stay silent or blast their grievances on CNN, the abuser may invent a reason to sue or otherwise harass and slander them. Here is the conundrum: if you don’t speak out, the abuse may go on, and if you do speak out, the abuse may go on. So, there is no point in letting an abuser frighten us into silence. They may threaten lawsuits. They may blackball us or even report us to law enforcement. All we can do is brace ourselves for an abuser to act like an abuser.

## WHAT THEY SHOULD HAVE SAID

*I believe you. I trust you.*

I was taught from a very young age that the adults in my life wouldn’t believe me. Looking back, I did talk to all the right people; doctors, pastors, lawyers, and therapists. These were mandatory reporters, yet they chose to disbelieve, minimize, and cover up my experiences. By the time a child abuse victim or abuse survivor comes to you, the likelihood is very high that they’ve already been disbelieved by other people. Make it very clear right off the bat that you are different, and you take their story seriously. (If you have qualms about telling a reporter you believe them, hang in there! More soon).

*You’re doing the right thing by telling me.*

Often, a victim will fear that reporting may in some way harm their abuser. The abuser is likely someone who has built a relationship with them. They may worry about damaging his reputation, getting him fired, getting him in trouble, etcetera. So, we want to be very clear that the victim is doing the right thing by reporting; that their bravery and honesty is admirable. We want to reassure them, “You’re not hurting his reputation, you’re making it more accurate,” and “You’re not damaging his career, you’re protecting all the people who wrongly trust him.”

*His sin is not your fault. It is 100% his choice and his responsibility.*

Due to their love for the abuser, and lies the abuser has likely told them, many victims inadvertently blame-shift. For example, they may fear, “If I hadn’t worn that dress, he wouldn’t have lusted,” or, “If I hadn’t annoyed him, he wouldn’t have gotten angry,” or, “If he hadn’t been drunk ... if he hadn’t had a stressful day at work ... if he weren’t so lonely ...” etcetera. Reinforce the Biblical concept that sin comes from the heart. It is not caused by exterior things or other people. The abuser’s sin is the abuser’s choice, and the consequences for those choices are the abuser’s responsibility.

*“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” Ezekiel 18:20*

*Can we visit with you **today** and pray with you?*



Too often, when I hear from a sexual assault victim or a wife who's been beaten up, they'll say, "My pastor and I are getting together in a few weeks." Now, let's imagine for a moment that a friend just lost their spouse to cancer, or was in a terrible auto accident, or suffered a miscarriage. What will you do? Where will you be? You'll go be with them, ASAP. You'll visit the bedside, hospital, or home that very day. The same needs to be true following a report of abuse. This person's relationship has died. Their trust has died. Their innocence and peace of mind has died. They've been traumatized. They're ready to talk now – not next week or next month. We need to respond with urgency.

### *Has this been reported to the authorities?*

Ensure that your survivor has reported. If they haven't, or if you're concerned not everything may have been reported, it's worth reporting again. Also, note that most survivors are overwhelmed and may not understand the proper way to report, or who to report to. I've encountered survivors who told their therapist, or their lawyer, or their BFF's husband who is a police officer, and they assume these mandatory reporters will follow through. Unfortunately, that's not a safe assumption to make. So, be sure to ask when, how, and to whom a report was made. Additionally, make sure everything was reported. For example, if domestic violence has been reported but sexual abuse was too embarrassing and painful to talk about, you'll want to file an additional report.

### *Can we sit down together and report right now?*

Reporting is an overwhelming and often traumatic task for survivors, even decades later, especially if the person being reported was loved, trusted, or has some level of influence in the community. Having a pastor or church leader sit down with you while you report provides validation, reassurance, and comfort. Plus, like it or not, having a male pastor or church leader present may motivate law enforcement to take the story of a traumatized child or crying woman more seriously.

Sometimes, you'll go to a police station to report. More commonly though, you'll call a non-emergency number and a team of officers will arrive at your location to take the report. Sometimes, if the victim is female, she may feel more comfortable if a woman is present. Other times, the presence of a man may make them feel safer. Much of this depends on your survivor's personality, state of mind, and the type of abuse they experienced. A woman who was victimized by a woman, may not want a woman present. A rape survivor may not want anyone present. Ask them what they'd prefer.

### *Does your abuser currently have access to you?*

This question isn't just about physical access (although that's extremely important to know!). We also want to know whether the abuser still has psychological influence over the victim. Are they texting? Is the abuser friends with their friends? This goes for enablers too. Are there people in this person's life who previously covered up, perpetuated, minimized, or otherwise badly handled their abusive situations or reports? This could include other pastors, relatives, family friends, and counselors. If so, you'll

need to evaluate and decide how to handle those influencers. They will likely not make helping your survivor any easier. In fact, anyone who has previously demonstrated a pattern of disbelieving or mismanaging your survivor's situation should not be trusted.

*How can we help you? Let us know if you need anything.*

Be ready for any response to this. I've encountered survivors who seemed fine on the surface, but later asked for someone to come visit with them while they were suicidal. Other survivors, who are clearly traumatized and needy, may claim they're fine and refuse all help. Sometimes, a survivor won't have an answer on the spot, but may think of something later. This question gives them an open door to ask for help.

*Would anything make you feel safer?*

Again, be ready for any kind of response to this. They may not have any needs. They may want someone to pray with them on a regular basis. They may want help filing a report with law enforcement or moving to a new neighborhood where their abuser doesn't know their address. If they're like me, they may want a home alarm system. So, there can be a wide range of requests from spiritual to practical.

*This is beyond my expertise. Can I help you find someone to help you?*

Any time you're dealing with trauma, crime, or the possibility of legal action, it's imperative to involve others. "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers" (Proverbs 11:14). By outsourcing and equipping the survivor with a group of advisers, you can prevent a lot of unnecessary confusion and even avoid lawsuits and criminal charges. I can't tell you how many churches I've seen get sued or make the evening news all because they failed to involve law enforcement, counselors, abuse attorneys, or other specialists, in a timely manner.

## MISTAKES: INITIAL REPORTS + REACTIONS

After our church leadership found out about my dad's abuse, he was put under church discipline and left our denomination. While putting an abuser under church discipline is absolutely right and necessary, some mistakes were made that I think we should learn from:

- My abuse was announced to the church without my knowledge or any heads up.
- The congregation was given no direction regarding how to treat me.
  - People emailed me asking embarrassing questions or expressing rage that I had no idea how to process or respond to.
  - People confronted me at church to ask the extent of my sexual abuse – or even to share their assumptions about what happened – which was humiliating.
  - An elder asked questions in front of other congregants, and seemed to insinuate that he didn't believe me or thought I was mentally damaged.
  - The same elder let me stay overnight at his house so I'd be safe from my dad. While there, I found pornography in his living room entertainment center.

- No report was ever filed. No one asked or encouraged me to report. In fact, I was given the impression that there was no point in reporting, and it was better to “forgive.”
- Though he was put under church discipline, my dad was later reinstated as a member in good standing. As a result, his new denomination was not informed by my denomination of how dangerous he was.
- I informed his new church but was met with disbelief. As a result, my little sisters continued to be abused for several years, and no one from their church intervened.
- There was little to no pastoral involvement, either through counseling or oversight of me. After I had a panic attack at church, the pastor realized he was in over his head and recommended I see a therapist. That was great advice! However, no one helped me find a therapist, made sure I was seeing someone trustworthy, or checked in to see how things were going. They were oblivious when I eventually stopped therapy because my elderly therapist was falling asleep during our sessions.

## BETTER SOLUTIONS

- Report to the authorities.
- Be prepared to alert your congregation, particularly in the case of a potential child predator. In many cases, child abusers will have built friendships with various families and children. They often meet their victims at church or camp, but the abuse itself may happen elsewhere. So, even if the abuser isn't attending church anymore, they may still have access to kid's homes, routines, etcetera. You must alert parents and guardians.
- Give the victim a heads up before making any announcements. Offer to field communications. Be understanding if the victim wants to stay home from church for a few weeks, or visit a different church. Returning when everyone knows is tough.
- Give the congregation direction on who to contact with questions. These questions may range from, “The offender babysat my kids! What should I do?” to “Can I bring the victim dinner?” It may be wise, depending on the urgency of the situation, to think up a list of probable questions and work up answers before blasting that email out.
- Ask your congregation to respect the victim's privacy.
- Ask the victim if there are a few friends in the congregation they'd like to hear from. Let these members know, and give them direction on how to help.
- Stay in touch with the victim. Check in on them. Meet them for coffee. Do your best to make them feel heard, cared for, and remembered, as you would for someone grieving a death. Remember, they're dealing with the death of a relationship, the death of their trust, the death of their peace of mind. Respect the gravity of their pain.

## A PATTERN OF IGNORANCE & COVER UPS

After I'd cut every abuser out of my life, I continued to warn pastors about the evil I'd experienced and the vulnerabilities and problems I saw within the church. I was told I was “valued and loved,” but nothing was ever done with the information I was sharing. As a result, I felt disbelieved, condescended to, and unloved.

Once, while preparing for a presentation for regional pastors, a church leader took me aside and warned, "If you start telling these men about psychological abuse and the theology behind spiritual abuse, I'm afraid they'll shut down on you. You and I both know these things are real, but these are good ole boys. They need brass tacks. Focus on getting them to call law enforcement. If we can just get them to report abuse in their churches, we'll have made a huge difference. If you get too much into gaslighting and PTSD, they'll write you off as hysterical."

There are also quite a few church leaders who simply don't want to disturb the status quo. I was recently speaking to an elder whose daughter was raped at church youth camp, and he said, "There are too many pastors who think that if they just get all their theology right – adhere to the confessions and Book of Church Order – somehow abuse won't happen in their congregation. They preach about sin, but they don't truly believe it exists in their church, at least, not at the levels you and I have seen. They would never say this, but they think we're aberrations."

Eventually, after several decades of warning local pastors and seeing nothing done to correct problems, I decided to publicly name several convicted child rapists, as well as an abusive pastor known to have over 30 victims. While most Christians throughout my denomination expressed their support, sympathy, and offered their prayers, my own pastor and elders threatened me with lawsuits and church discipline unless I retracted my statements and made the public claim that abuse was being handled well in our presbytery. When I refused, they blackballed me. They sent a cease and desist letter to every pastor in our presbytery warning them not to talk to me and not to discuss my experiences on social media.

## LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Dear Jennifer,

I'm having a bit of a dilemma. I'm familiar with the movement to "believe all women," or to respond to abuse reports with, "I believe you." As a survivor myself, I know how important it is for victims to feel believed. But what if you don't believe them? Are there instances where belief should be suspended?

Yesterday, a man who I know to be mentally or emotionally troubled, and to have a reputation for lying, told me that 50 years ago his dad molested him. His dad is now 79 and very frail, and I know him to be kind and honorable. So, I responded to his son with, "I'm so sorry. I take this very seriously and I will take action." Is that alright? How do you recommend handling these situations?

Thanks,

Robert  
Pastor, Calvary Community Church

Hi Robert,

That's a very difficult situation. Recently, I had an email from another pastor who was counseling a schizophrenic woman. She had recurring hallucinations about being raped by celebrities and people she'd never met. There are even abusers who will falsely accuse to harass their victims and ruin their relationships and career. So, weird situations do happen. Of course, in the case of a mental illness severe enough to cause delusion, it should be obvious that the person is unwell. The same goes for drug abuse, alcoholism, and addiction. For delusion to take place, the mind-alteration would be very advanced. They'll already be exhibiting other behaviors and you'll know for certain something is wrong. However, it's not uncommon for abuse survivors to cope with trauma using drugs and alcohol, and for abusers to target the mentally ill hoping their reports won't be believed. So, mental illness and addiction don't preclude abuse. That's why we report all of these accounts to law enforcement and let them sort fact from fiction.

To your question: I think we need to examine what, "I believe you," actually means. Are we saying, "Yes, everything you've said is 100% fact?" Are we saying, "Let's skip reporting, skip police investigation, skip a trial, and go straight to the local paper?" No. Particularly in the case that we're uncertain, "I believe you" could mean (privately, in our heads!), "I believe you genuinely feel this way," or, "I believe you're telling me the truth to the best of your ability," or, "Based on the facts I currently have, I believe you." Obviously, don't phrase it like that out loud, but my point is, we can say, "I believe you," without lying or condemning the innocent, even if we have some internal reservations. I think your statement of, "I'm so sorry. I take this seriously, and will act," is honest, and honesty is extremely important in these situations.

For example, if you were to say, "I believe you," but he picked up on your uncertainty, he might think you're lying to him, and then your opportunity to minister would evaporate. So, if you really can't honestly say, "I believe you," don't. Be frank, with something like, "I'm shocked. I'm not sure what to say. I am so sorry. Let me get in touch with law enforcement and some other pastors and see how we can address this situation immediately." What you do NOT want to say is, "Hmmm. Something, something, Matthew 18. Let me call your abuser and ask him what happened." At such a response, a genuine abuse victim may see their life flash before their eyes. Your goal, at the point of initial report, is to establish trust, express urgency, and ensure some level of confidentiality and protection of the victim: You're going to do something. You're going to help them. You're going to involve law enforcement, therapists, physicians, etcetera. You're not going to circle the wagons while spouting platitudes like too many others have.

The other thing to consider is, we tend to attach way too much weight to our own beliefs. Just because I believe something, or you believe something, doesn't make it fact. This is a silly example, but up until a few months ago, I honestly believed narwhals were mythical creatures. Thankfully, narwhals didn't cease to exist just because I was wrong. When we say, "I believe you," we aren't assuming the role of omnipotent God. Rather, we're assuming the role of human advocate. Based on what we're being told, we can honestly say, "I believe you," and later – if by some unlikely turn of events – we realize we were mistaken, we were mistaken, and that's all.

So, the goal at the point of initial report is not so much to verify facts (that's what law enforcement is for!), but rather to assure, comfort, sympathize, and calm the suffering party whether they be injured or sick. Regardless of whether this man who reported to you is a real survivor, or if he lied or hallucinated, I believe your words likely achieved that goal.

And of course, if you're concerned this man is mentally ill or abusing drugs, you'll want to refer him to a therapist or psychiatrist. I would recommend seeking out someone specialized in both PTSD from abuse, as well as addiction and mental illness. They should be able to sort through things, diagnose, and prescribe treatment accordingly. I'd recommend pitching the doctor to the guy as a specialist in abuse recovery, so he doesn't feel like you think he's crazy or an addict. Help him get through that doctor's door, and let them deal with confronting problems.

Through all of this, we also need to consider the wellbeing of the elderly dad being accused. Whether he's innocent or guilty, this will be a severe shock. If you can, coordinate with law enforcement to be present when he's confronted with the news. You mentioned him being frail. I'm sure law enforcement will be conscientious, but I'd give them a heads-up, particularly if he's ever had heart problems or other medical issues that could be exacerbated by shock.

I'm so sorry about all of this. I'll certainly be praying for your wisdom and confidence.

Jenn

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Get to know the survivor and build mutual trust by learning more about them:

- How were they saved?
- How do they see God working in them spiritually these days?
- How old are their kids? What are their names?
- What are their hobbies? Favorite books? Movies? Music?
- What does their prayer life look like?
- Are they reading the Bible regularly?
- Do they find church, reading the Bible, or praying difficult? Why?

PASTORAL TIP: If they find reading the Bible difficult, try to think of workarounds. For example, if their anxiety makes focusing difficult, Proverbs offers bite-sized devotionals. They can read one or two verses and meditate on them throughout their day. An audio-Bible might also be a nice gift. If they feel betrayed by God or grow angry or depressed when reading the Bible, don't demand that they read it anyway. This could actually exacerbate their pain and sense of being lost. Instead, suggest reading hymn lyrics, listening to worship songs, or reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Journaling their feelings may also help. Emphasize to them that God is faithful. Even if they're struggling now, God will not abandon them. They'll get through this.

*“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:9*



## 2. 7 STAGES OF RECOVERY

*This lesson is meant to be a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 2: Was I Abused?***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Why might a child abuse victim might not realize they're being abused?

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2. Why might an adult victim not realize – or want to admit – they're being abused?

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3. What are some pre-conceived ideas you had that this chapter perhaps altered?

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4. What's an area of vulnerability in your own character or life which, if you work to resolve it, may make you a better pastor or more effective shepherd?

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5. Why might it be difficult for two survivors to be friends?

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**PASTORAL TIP:** When it comes to recovering from trauma, the only hard and fast rule is that recovery is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. For most, it's a slow series of many small miracles. Be ready to be flexible and patient. After many years in ministry, you may start to see patterns in abusers that are so striking it's uncanny. They all share a darkness and are bent on destruction. By contrast, how survivors heal is far more variable. I like to say, "The dirt we grew out of may look pretty much the same, but the flowers we bear are diverse in their beauty."

During your ministry, you will likely encounter victims who are currently being abused, as well as survivors in various stages of recovery. Being able to meet them where they're at, and help them through whatever healing phase they're currently processing through, will maximize the effectiveness of your ministry to them.

Rick was molested by his grandmother when he was 5-years-old. When he told his parents, they called him a liar, and the abuse continued until she died six years later. He's 45 now. A father of four. He's never told anyone, but now he's confiding to you over coffee at Starbucks.

Melissa was raped yesterday, and you're standing beside her hospital bed where she's waking up following surgery for a broken jaw. You've never seen anyone this beat up, but seeing you cry makes her feel loved, understood, and begin her grieving process knowing she's not alone.

Both of these people were sexually abused, yet how you pastor them is going to be radically different. Richard is going to need help figuring out how to tell his wife and explain why he didn't tell her sooner. They'll likely need marriage counseling, because she's suspected him of keeping secrets from her for the past 15 years. He's going to need to be taught how to open up, express himself, and overcome the fear that kept his heart stuck on mute for so long.

Melissa is going to be diagnosed with C-PTSD. She will need both medical and mental health care. Her self-confidence will be shattered, and she's going to question her individual value, intelligence, life purpose, and faith in God. This is all on top of dealing with her physical injuries, possible STDs, a police investigation, and a lengthy criminal trial.

There is no copy-and-paste platitude that will comfort these people. No silver bullet to make everything OK. You're embarking on a journey to shepherd them through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It will take many years, and probably several shepherds, to complete.

The following are aspects of recovery which I've separated into stages to help us identify, understand, and respond to them better. Keep in mind, every survivor has a unique personality, and every abusive situation is different. How people process through these phases will also be different. Some may experience phases in a different order. Some will ping back and forth between one stage and another. Some may experience multiple stages at once, or one particular stage to a greater, more painful degree. All of this is sadly normal.

## 1. DENIAL

It's going to be rare that you hear from a victim in this first phase. If you do, it's likely because you happened to notice a red flag, or they inadvertently let some information slip. This person may not yet realize they're being abused. They're acclimated to dysfunctional treatment. Abuse is what they're used to and it's their normal. So, they likely don't understand they have anything to report. They may tell you a story they think is strange, or even funny, not realizing how disturbing it is. They may feel something is wrong, but they shove that feeling down to avoid asking painful and disturbing questions about a person who they love, trust, and want to help. In fact, keep in mind that many victims long to fix, save, or help their abusive loved one.

## A VICTIM IN THE DENIAL PHASE MAY SAY THINGS LIKE:

*“They didn’t mean it. This is my fault. If I were a better spouse or child or sibling or Christian, they wouldn’t get angry or lust or cheat or lie. Lots of people have it worse than me. I’ve seen those horror stories on the news. I’ve watched Law & Order SVU. My situation is nothing like that. What my loved one did isn’t that bad. I shouldn’t complain. I need to forgive them, be patient, and pull myself together. Maybe if I love them, they’ll change.”*

A few things you can say to encourage and help them, include:

- *What you’re going through is real.*
- *What they did is wrong, and it’s not your fault.*
- *Only God can change their heart. Sometimes telling the truth, making a person get help, and holding them accountable for their sin, is the best way to witness to them.*
- *Those stories on the news are the worst of the worst; the most shocking cases. Just because your situation doesn’t look like that, doesn’t make it OK.*
- *As an outside, objective observer, I can tell you this isn’t right, but can we talk to a counselor or law enforcement and see what they think?*
- *You are loved by God, and deserve to be treated with honor.*
- *Does your abuser build up your faith? Do they remind you of Jesus? Because Jesus would not treat you like this.*

## 2. SHOCK + CONFUSION

This is the phase when everything hits the fan. Maybe they found out their abuser was cheating on them. Maybe they caught their abuser with their child or sibling. Maybe the police were called. Whatever the trigger, realization is shattering their lives in violent waves. They’re sinking deeper and deeper into the horror of their situation.

In order to wrap their heads around their situation, they may anonymously post questions and experiences on websites like Reddit or Twitter. They may be studying stories in books or on the news to compare what they went through. They’ve probably Googled legal terms like “aggravated rape of a child,” or medical descriptions of STDs or mental illness. They’re trying to figure out what was normal, what was abuse, and how bad the abuse was.

## A VICTIM IN THE SHOCK + CONFUSION PHASE MAY SAY THINGS LIKE:

*“I can’t believe this is real. What do I do? How am I supposed to feel? Who do I talk to? How do I get help? Is what happened a crime? Is this really abuse? Is this all in my head? How is this possible? How could they do this? Why did this happen? Why didn’t I get help a long time ago? Am I stupid? Am I crazy? Can I trust my own reason and instincts? How do I know who I can trust? I’ve been fooled before. Can I even trust my own judgement?”*

A few things you can say to encourage and help them, include:

- *I believe you.*<sup>4</sup>
- *Your confusion and overwhelm are understandable. I'm an outside observer and I'm finding this hard to wrap my head around.*
- *Your feelings make sense and are justifiable. What's happened is horrible.*
- *If I was in this situation, I'm sure I'd feel the same way.*
- *I don't know the answer to these questions. Can we talk to law enforcement together? Let's figure this out.*
- *You may need a lawyer. Can I help you find someone trustworthy?*
- *You are not alone. Let me help you find a good counselor.*
- *It's normal to feel insecure and second-guess yourself. Anytime you feel nervous or distrustful of someone, feel free to bounce it by me.*

PASTORAL TIP: This is the phase when PTSD symptoms are most likely to manifest. These may include things like nightmares, panic attacks, insomnia, nausea, overeating, undereating, depression, lethargy, reclusive behavior, suicidal thoughts, reckless behavior, alcohol or drug abuse, self-destructive behavior, etcetera. Counseling or therapy is beneficial in any phase, but it can be life-saving in this phase.

### 3. ANGER

As the full severity of the betrayal begins to crash home, the survivor will feel waves of hatred and rage. It's important for you to understand that these emotions are rooted in love.<sup>5</sup> That may sound counterintuitive, but had the victim not loved their abuser, had they not cared about the offender, they would not feel so devastatingly betrayed. Had the abuser been someone of little influence or consequence in their life, they wouldn't be so deeply hurt. So, it's not safe to assume this anger is motivated by sins, such as jealousy, pride, or malice. Rather, operate under the assumption that it's righteous anger, or at least a justifiable and rational response to an unjust and irrational evil. Respond with calm understanding, sympathy, and sorrow over their pain.

Of course, because we are all sinners, we sometimes express our emotions in sinful ways, so be ready to forgive and be very patient. Try not to act shocked if the victim cusses, yells, or starts drinking, because if you express surprise or offense at this, you'll lose a great deal of credibility. For one thing, if you can't handle the victim's pain, there's no way you're equipped to handle the abuser's evil. If you can't tend sheep, you can't wrangle wolves. If the victim senses that you

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<sup>4</sup> If you don't feel comfortable with this statement, keep reading! We'll address it further along in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Be aware that some abusers will claim they abused their victim because they love them. For example, "She was trying to leave the room, but I love her and wanted to talk to her, so that's why I grabbed her and held her down." Be careful not to confuse a controlling person with a loving person, or an abuser with a victim.

disapprove of them, they may fear you'll align yourself with the abuser, or be conned by the abuser into undermining and disbelieving the victim. So, put away your shocked face, and be ready to get into the emotional trenches with your congregant.

If the victim's anger isn't processed in a healthy way, it can build up, leading to a lot of pain and self-destruction. It is absolutely vital to help the victim process this anger, as opposed to repressing it. This is another reason why we need to be slow to judge, condemn, or accuse. If the victim represses their anger out of shame, embarrassment, or fear, they may never fully recover. Suppressing anger is like suppressing a river. You may be able to bury a river or dam it in, but it's still there, it's just taken on a different form, and it will still affect the landscape around it. So, this anger must be expressed, acknowledged, validated, and understood, or it will build up and grow stagnant.

Anger is also an expression of pain. This level of injury is like having a concussion in our soul. Our relationship, trust, faith in God, and sense of right and wrong, have all been violated. I remember feeling like a trapped animal, desperate to escape my situation, yet without the capacity to see a way out. The survivor is likely reevaluating everything they knew or felt about their abuser and probably God too. It's an extremely scary, frustrating, and disorienting time.

A VICTIM IN THE ANGER PHASE MAY SAY THINGS LIKE:

*"How dare he betray me? I did nothing wrong! I should have been able to trust him. Why didn't anyone intervene? Why did no one see the red flags? Why didn't anyone listen or believe me? How could everyone treat me like this? They didn't really love me. No one loved me enough to save me. God, why didn't You stop him from hurting me? You are sovereign! You could have changed his heart, or caused him to get caught. You could have struck him dead before he became so evil. You could have spared me! God, why have You abandoned me?"*

A few things you can say to encourage and help them, include:

- You are right to be angry. God is angry with the wicked every day.
- If this had happened to me, I would be angry too.
- Anger is the logical and healthy response to evil. I know it's agonizing, and I am so sorry.
- As someone who cares about you, I am angry. Every time you tell me a new part of your story, the injustice appalls me.
- I know you're angry at God, but even so, you can go to Him in prayer. Tell Him how you feel. He is faithful. He will not abandon you.
- We cannot know why God lets such terrible evil happen in this life, or why he lets such evil people live. What we do know is that He is good, and He will judge the wicked.
- Our worldly court system is limited and flawed. We want him to face justice, but even if your abuser never faces consequences in this life, he will in the next.
- God is holy and just. He doesn't forget the sins of the wicked. He doesn't need evidence. He was there. He knows everything. There's no Statute of Limitations in His court.
- Jesus was betrayed and abused too. He understands how you feel.

PASTORAL TIP: Identify healthy ways the survivor can vent. I've personally found kickboxing, running, and heavy metal music cathartic. I've known survivors who would print out and burn hurtful emails from their abuser, or shred birthday cards from someone they've asked not to contact them. Look for ways they can vent safely, so they can avoid unhealthy patterns such as alcoholism or temper tantrums.

## 4. DEPRESSION

This is a particularly dangerous phase in the recovery process, because it's common for the survivor to dip into self-destructive or suicidal levels of sorrow. It's important to encourage and validate them during this time, particularly because some foolish people will claim that their depression is a sin. Your survivor likely already has or will encounter these people, so, be proactive in contradicting these lies.

When a survivor becomes weighted down under guilt and works righteousness, on top of their already crushing pain, they can spiral even lower. Just as their anger was a product of love betrayed, so is their depression. They're grieving a death. In fact, if they were didn't feel sad following such a horrendous trauma, we'd consider that very unusual and potentially concerning. So, we must acknowledge their sorrow as natural and actually healthy.

While it would be wonderful to overcome depression entirely, many of us will always feel pangs of sorrow this side of Heaven. Depression should ease over time, but it may never go away completely, and it can recur in waves. For this reason, we not only want to shepherd survivors through depression, but we want to equip them to cope with it long term. In this area, a counsellor or therapist can be very helpful.

Depending on the nature and severity of the depression, medicine and therapy can help moderate pain and reduce suicidal episodes. In other cases, getting out of the house, healthy eating, exercise, and counseling are adequate to moderate grief. Whether the survivor chooses to use medication or not, will be a personal decision, not a moral one. If they seem uncertain, it may be worth noting that they can try medication and if they don't like it, or it's not working out, then they talk to their doctor and discontinue or try something else.

Common triggers for depression include isolation, alcohol, unhealthy eating habits (junk food, overeating, undereating, fad diets), lack of sleep, certain medications including birth control and even some antibiotics, and reminders of the past.

A SURVIVOR IN THE DEPRESSION STAGE MAY SAY THINGS LIKE:

*"I am not worth loving. My abuser was right; I'm unlovable, damaged goods, stupid, and worthless. There's no way I can ever recover. I'm too damaged to ever be happy again. All my relationships are doomed to fail. Who would want to be around me? Every conversation I have somehow winds its way over to my abuse. It's like I can't get away from it. My marriage will end in divorce. I can't possibly be a good parent. I'm defective. I'm broken. I'm unstable."*



A few things you can say to encourage and help them, include:

- When Lazarus died, Jesus wept. It's OK to be sad.
- Your relationship has died. Your trust in this person has died. This is a profound loss. The betrayal was real and it was terrible.
- How your abuser treated you has nothing to do with your value as a child of God.
- They abused you because they were evil, not because you did anything to cause it.
- Your past does not dictate your future.
- You aren't broken and nothing is wrong with you. You are a rational person processing irrational wickedness committed against you.
- Anyone in your situation would feel sad and need to talk about things. Talking is actually really healthy and important for your recovery.
- Let me help you find a counselor or therapist so you have a safe person to talk to.
- You have so much value as a parent, spouse, and friend. Let me tell you how I see you.

PASTORAL TIP: Help the survivor create a Grieving Calendar. Mark on it when traumatic events occurred, such as abusive incidents, deaths, the day they cut off an abuser, the day the police were called, that time they had a big fight with a loved one who didn't believe them, etcetera. This can help them anticipate some waves of depression. They may be able to mentally brace themselves, plan a fun or fulfilling activity during that time, or clear their calendar of stressful tasks so they aren't overwhelmed during a grieving episode.

## 5. FEAR + ANXIETY

Have you ever seen *The Truman Show*? Jim Carrey plays Truman Burbank, who was brought up from infancy on a city-sized TV set. Unbeknownst to him, his world is full of hidden cameras, and he's the main character in a reality TV show. I've often wondered, when Truman finally escapes, if he is shocked by the real world? Going from a pristine manicured suburban utopia into the very real but dark, dangerous, and depressing outside world, seems like it would be pretty unsettling. Did he live the rest of his life paranoid about cameras, fake friends, and liars?

Surviving abuse is kind of like that, except instead of being trapped in a staged utopia, we were trapped in a dystopian freak show that we thought was normal. When we finally escape that life, we may find our new reality – even though it's happier and safer than what we're used to – to be unsettling and suspicious. It feels too good to be true. We're shocked by how kind people are. We question their authenticity. We're paranoid about manipulation, fake friends, and gossips. We're waiting for everything to go wrong, because that's what always happened before.

The fear and anxiety that often follows abuse is particularly hard to overcome, because it's rooted in reality. Unlike irrational phobias, we've got logical data backing up our fears. Any child may fear a monster hiding in her closet. An abuse survivor may have actually had a monster hide in her closet. We may fear violence because we were beaten. We may fear deception because we were manipulated and conned. We fear betrayal because we were betrayed over and over again.

Eventually, once we become used to a loving marriage, faithful friends, a safe church, and godly relationships, we'll grow more accustomed to love and peace and start expecting it. Some may never feel completely at ease. While our ultimate goal is to overcome our anxieties, until then, we must learn to cope with them.

Just as with depression, medication and therapy can help moderate or ease anxiety. Thankfully, the same healthy lifestyle habits – such as eating healthy, getting enough sleep, exercising, etcetera – can also help manage anxiety.

A SURVIVOR IN THE FEAR & ANXIETY STAGE MAY SAY THINGS LIKE:

*“This happiness can't possibly last. Is it even real? How do I know who I can trust? How do I know my non-abusive spouse is really trustworthy? Will their love last? What if my abuser is stalking me? What if they show up at our house? What if they try to pick up my kids from school? What if they show up at church? What if they lie to my pastor and my pastor believes them? They successfully conned me into trusting them. What if they con my friends, employer, or loved ones and turn them against me?”*

- If I ever say or do anything that makes you feel anxious or upset, please tell me.
- Your anxiety is a natural and reasonable response to stressful and traumatic events.
- Anyone who experienced what you have would feel these worries and fears.
- You lived with abuse for a long time. It's going to take time for you to get used to feeling safe, happy, and loved. And that's OK. Take your time.
- Jesus was so distressed in the Garden of Gethsemane, He sweated blood. He understands what you're going through.
- Fear and anxiety are natural responses to danger and stress. Don't ever let anyone make you feel ashamed.

## 6. REACCLIMATION

Have you ever lounged in a hot tub and gotten used to the warm water, but then you get out, or go jump into a swimming pool and it feels ridiculously cold? Your body is acclimated to that hot temperature. After a while, your body will acclimate to the cold water, but then if you go back to that hot tub, it will feel unbearably hot. A similar thing happens to abuse survivors. They're acclimated to being treated a certain way – to a certain dysfunctional environment. It can take time, patience, and consistent strategic effort to acclimate to a healthy environment. Slowly, cautiously, and in integers, the survivor will become more comfortable in certain areas, environments, and around certain people. It is often compartmentalized, for example, they may start feeling at ease at school but not yet at church, or may befriend people who remind them of those who've helped them but not people who remind them of their abuser.

A SURVIVOR IN THIS STAGE IS GETTING USED TO A HEALTHY LIFE:

*“My spouse and I have been through a lot together. Maybe they're not going to abandon me after all! My kids are happy and healthy. Maybe I'm not too broken to be a good parent. My*

*friends seem to like me, and genuinely want to be around me. I'm appreciated and loved, and I'm starting to get used to that. Kindness doesn't feel like manipulation or deception anymore. I'm learning to trust again, and to expect goodness from good people."*

A few encouraging things you can say might be:

- You've really blossomed in the past year. I'm so happy for you!
- When I see how much you've recovered, it's miraculous. God certainly loves you dearly.
- Watching you heal has strengthened my faith.

PASTORAL TIP: When the survivor is ready, purging their home of gifts from their abuser can be freeing. Not only does it remove subliminal reminders of abuse, but it can help lay the relationship to rest. At the beginning of my Reacclimation phase, I had an angry outburst. I suddenly realized to a new degree that my abuser would never change and did not love me. I thought I'd already accepted this, but somehow it sunk in deeper. I gathered all the gifts and knickknacks my abuser had ever given me in our garage, smashed them with a hammer, and threw them in the trash. As extreme as that may sound, it was a huge milestone in my recovery, because I had let them go. I was done. Some survivors may purge their home during the very early stages, as I did with some things. However, I tend to be sentimental, and by keeping small things like coffee mugs, photos, and Christmas ornaments, I was clinging subconsciously to the hope that my abuser would change.

## 7. PEACE

This final phase is one we may never reach in this life, but someday we will be able to say with complete confidence: "God is good and He is faithful. Whatever his plan is for my abuser - whether to save them or not - I am at peace with it because He is merciful and just. His plan for me is eternal peace in Heaven. I rest in the salvation of Jesus Christ. He is my Strength and my Redeemer. He is my Healing and my Recovery."

Particularly during the early stages of recovery, there's a heightened level of stress, insecurity, disorientation, and mood swings. Make sure the survivor has people available 24/7 to receive texts, phone calls, and answer questions. Ensure that he or she receives quick responses. At least one person needs to be available to drop what they're doing and go be with the survivor should they become suicidal or experience a traumatic event, such as backlash from an abuser.

In fact, anytime a victim reports, particularly for the first time, you should expect their abuser to retaliate. Often, especially in the case of narcissistic abusers, the abuser will start gossiping, spreading lies, and trying to discredit the victim and turn their family and friends against them. By refusing to fall for this trick, you establish yourself as a safe person who the victim can trust, and thereby lower the likelihood that they'll feel isolated and return to their abuser.

## SHEPHERDING TIPS

- Inform the victim right away if their abuser contacts you, and be very clear to convey that you know the abuser is not trustworthy. Transparency builds trust.
- Do not tolerate gossip. Inform anyone who gossips to you that if they have a problem with the victim, they should speak to them directly. Inform the victim you will do this. This is incredibly important, because if you listen to gossip, or tolerate it – not only are you sinning – but you run the risk of appearing like, or taking the side of, the abuser.
- Realize that if the abuser is gossiping or slandering the victim, they will likely interact with individuals who they think most likely to spread their lies and pick on the victim. These people are sometimes called “flying monkeys,” in reference to the Wicked Witch of the West sending her flying monkeys to torment Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. So, be wary and watchful for flying monkeys! Shut down the rumor mill.
- If the abuser forwards you private texts, emails, or other documents owned by the victim, do not read them. Inform the victim, and warn them not to confide personal information to the abuser, and not to leave the abuser alone with electronics or files.

## WHEN FORGIVENESS IS DANGEROUS

Shortly after I got married, I was trying to reconcile with my dad. I let him come stay overnight at our house. Late that night, after my husband and I had gone to bed, my dad got up, logged onto my computer, and emailed my pastor personal files which he apparently thought would discredit me in some way. Thankfully, my pastor was wise. He told my dad he refused to read my files, and that if my dad had a problem with me, my dad should talk to me directly. My dad never did. My pastor also advised me not to let my dad into our home again.

Later, after I reported my abuse to police, another family member who I dearly loved began slandering me. She contacted my husband, my pastor, my publisher, and even *The Houston Chronicle*, trying to convince them that I was mentally ill, delusional, and a liar. Once again, no one believed her, and she later claimed it had all been a big misunderstanding.

This type of backlash against survivors is very common. It can come from abusers, from enablers, or even from fellow victims who are still in denial. It's a humiliating, distressing, and heartbreaking experience for the victim. As their pastor, you need to be prepared for it.

## 3. THE HEART OF A SHEPHERD

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken**, pages 53-64, Chapter 3: Jesus Wept*

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. What are some of the ways that Jesus was mistreated which we could nowadays describe as “abuse,” whether criminal or not?

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2. Why might it be comforting for an abuse victim or survivor to realize that Jesus was abused too, and in ways similar to how they were mistreated?

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3. Gaslighting is when an abuser tries to convince a victim that they’re crazy or irrational. What are some instances when Jesus was gaslighted?

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4. The Bible calls Jesus a Wonderful Counselor and Great Physician. What do you think that tells us about his character, skillset, or personality?

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5. While Jesus was never sexually abused in the sense we might usually think of, he was hung naked from a cross for all to see. Why might such humiliation be comforting for a survivor of sexual abuse or assault?

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### 6 PASTORS WHO BUNGLE ABUSE

In order to be fooled into thinking an abuser is a godly person, you simply need to be human. Sure, there are red flags you should watch for and precautions you should take, but in the end, abusers are con artists, and some of them are extremely skilled. No matter how many abuse

prevention programs your team goes through, or what protocols your church follows, if you make the mistake of thinking you're too clever to be conned, too prepared to be caught off guard, or too theologically astute to fall prey to wolves, you're a sitting duck.

Does this mean that abuse prevention programs, like MinistrySafe, GRACE, or Caring Well aren't important? Of course not! I cannot overstate how vital they are. However, if we rely so much upon programs, protocol, and our own intellect, that we allow ourselves to grow overly confident, we become like a night watchman patrolling a fortress wall while checking Twitter on his phone. Yes, he's on duty, and yes, he's armed, but he's grown distracted and complacent. His bullet proof vest and gun will do him no good if he doesn't recognize the enemy – likely disguised as a fellow watchman – passing him on the wall.

If you want to protect the sheep, you must stay alert and humble. As soon as you start thinking, "I've got this," or "Nothing is going to happen," you're exposed. You're vulnerable.

Pride is our greatest weakness. Imagining that you have a fool-proof system will cause you to overlook red-flags you might otherwise have spotted. Trusting that your leadership team and volunteers are "good people," when every single one is a sinner, is a very Christian mistake to make, and it has destroyed many a life. Only God sees the heart. We cannot flatter ourselves to have the spiritual insight of Jesus, or his authority to absolve the guilty.

But before we can reduce or avoid these mistakes, we must understand them and be able to identify the motivations behind them. By God's grace, if we can identify the motivations, we can shore our hearts up against weakness and sin. To that end, let's analyze six types of pastors who commonly bungle abuse cases and survivor pastoral care.

*"For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird." Proverbs 1:17*

As a teenager, I tried several times to tell pastors that my dad was abusive. One pastor failed to notify law enforcement, even though he was a mandatory reporter. Another actually propositioned me for sex, and 15 years later, I learned that he'd abused his own daughters.

Even without these men's sins and mistakes, reporting would have been hard. It was incredibly painful to tell people what my dad really was. For one thing, he was my dad. I loved him, and I kept hoping he'd change. For another, I didn't want to ruin my sibling's childhoods. As far as I knew at the time, he wasn't abusing them. I remember wondering, "What if I report him, and the police take their dad away? What if we're separated, and I'm not there to take care of them?"

As a child victim, I quickly learned that I spoke a different language than the rest of the world. What I called, "anger issues," other people called assault and battery. What they called "a temper," looked more like mild bouts of grumpiness to me.

When most people think of a parent losing their temper, they imagine a mom or dad screaming at their kid to go to their room. They don't envision a teenage girl being thrown downstairs, or a little boy being beaten black and blue.

Sometimes, I wonder if the people I thought I'd confided in didn't understand what I meant at all. Maybe I said, "My dad has anger problems," and they thought I meant he yelled at the TV when his football team lost. No one ever asked, "What do you mean by 'anger issues'?"

But sometimes I really did clearly state that I was being abused, and the pastors, lawyer, therapists, and physician I told did nothing. Worse, some intentionally swept things under the rug, pressured me to stay quiet, and recommended I stay with a dangerous abuser.

Even after my parent's marriage imploded and the truth was known and verified, no one involved law enforcement. My dad was placed under church discipline, but later reinstated as a member in good standing. My parents got divorced and he got custody. He went on to abuse my little sisters for another 10 to 15 years.

I tried to warn the pastors at his new church. I called CPS and even sent a tip to the FBI. Unfortunately, once the statute of limitations ran up on his crimes against me, there was nothing I could do but pray, pray, and hope.

I remember a phone conversation with my mother one day. "Our best bet," she said, "is that he commits a crime we can report, but not one too traumatic or harmful to the girls."

Meanwhile, at church, I was told things like, "Forgive and forget," and, "You should repent of your depression," and, "If you had stronger faith, God wouldn't have let this happen to you."

Once, I told the President of a Christian apologetics ministry that I could relate with Jesus when he cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" and, "Take this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

In response, he pointed out James 1:2, quoting, "Count it all joy, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Child abuse, he said, is how God strengthened your faith, so you should have been joyful in it, and grateful for it.

I replied that, while I do rejoice in God's grace, and I'm thankful he preserved my faith through abuse, God does not take joy in evil or expect us to either. In other words, while we count it all joy that our faith is being strengthened, we can still grieve loss and decry evil.

He replied, "Your words reflect a remaining bitterness that goes deep. Unfortunately, you use your history as baggage in your understanding of biblical teaching. Romans 8:28. Acts 5:41."

Why does this happen? How can pastors who have graduated seminary, studied the Bible, and counseled countless others, react in such shaming ways and give such terrible advice? Why do they bungle or cover up the way they do? The answer to these questions is a first step in breaking the #ChurchToo cycle.

Firstly, if we know where the temptations lie, we can hopefully avoid them or discern them if they're present. Secondly, it can help us understand what's going on in the minds of our colleagues and friends when they fail. Understanding where someone is coming from and why they reacted wrongly to a situation can help bring clarity and closure. Thirdly, this will help equip us to respond wisely, confront others with their sin, and call on them to repent and grow.

So, here are six pastor types and why they bungle abusive situations:

## 1. THE NAÏVE PASTOR

**The Problem:** This fellow has a good heart, but he's ignorant and immature. He's bumbling when he needs to be decisive, and waffles when courage is needed. He's not experienced in dysfunctional relationships, let alone criminal or dangerous situations. Manipulative narcissists and psychological abusers run circles around him. He cannot see through their lies, even when warned by others.

Maybe he's young. Maybe he's inexperienced. Maybe he's lived his whole life in Mayberry. Who knows? Whatever the case, when he encounters abuse, his naivety shows. He may come off as disbelieving or untrustworthy to victims. He may genuinely not comprehend the seriousness of the situation. He may unwisely try to handle abuse in-house, and offer unhelpful advice like, "You should pray about this."

**The Solution:** The Naïve Pastor needs guidance and help. He needs to realize he's in over his head. He isn't a counselor, therapist, police officer, or attorney, and that's OK. He's a pastor and he can't be everything to everyone.

There's great wisdom in outsourcing problems which exceed your wheelhouse. Asking for advice from other more seasoned pastors, familiarizing yourself with local laws and mandatory reporter standards, involving law enforcement when necessary, and looping in a counselor, are just a few of the ways a Naïve Pastor can become a wise pastor. We will speak more on how to identify a wise and trustworthy counselor or therapist, in *Chapter 4: Building Your Network*.

*"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant to the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." Romans 10:2-3*

## 2. THE SUPERFICIAL PASTOR

**The Problem:** When this pastor encounters abuse, his gut reaction is to fret about appearances. He may worry what his congregation will think if they ever find out, or what the media will report if it's leaked to the press.

He'll be reluctant to seek outside help or report to law enforcement because he fears people will talk, and the scandal will damage his brand. He may fear the truth could sully the name of Christ, or rake up confrontations he's not equipped to handle. He wants to smooth things over and pretend everything is fine. He wants all this icky mess to just go away.

**The Solution:** Jesus never excused evil, sugarcoated sin, or failed to call a sinner to repentance. He offered forgiveness, yes, but with repentance as a prerequisite. By focusing on what the world will think, the Superficial Pastor has become less like Jesus, and more like the world. If he wants his church to stand out and truly honor Christ, he needs to prioritize ministry over brand.



*“Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow’s cause.” Isaiah 1:17*

### 3. THE FEARFUL PASTOR

**The Problem:** The Fearful Pastor instantly gets defensive upon learning of abuse in his church. If the abuser is on staff, he may immediately worry about being sued by the victim.

He may also fear being sued by the abuser, particularly if he fires them, reports them, or exercises church discipline. He fears his church will be financially devastated, that his name will be dragged through the press, and his career will be destroyed. He allows his fear to rule him, and hinder him from doing what is right.

Because of his cowardice, The Fearful Pastor may communicate awkwardly or come off as antagonistic or standoffish toward victims. He may lawyer up, attempt to correspond only through email, avoid phone calls and in-person meetings, and act more like a blackmailed celebrity than a loving shepherd.

**The Solution:** Like the Superficial Pastor, the Fearful Pastor has become too much like this world. His fear of man outweighs his fear of the Lord and his commitment to Jesus.

He has allowed worldly concerns to dictate his actions rather than modeling his actions after Christ’s. While it’s wise to take common-sense precautions, such as purchase liability insurance or consult with a lawyer when needed, our primary goal is to honor God, and be Good Samaritans to the oppressed and brokenhearted.

*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”  
Proverbs 9:10*

### 4. THE OVERWHELMED PASTOR

**The Problem:** This pastor has too much on his plate. Maybe he’s a poor manager who’s not good at delegating. Maybe he’s the celebrity pastor of a megachurch, and it’s logistically impossible for him to get involved in every crisis.

To victims in his congregation, he may come off as uncaring, neglectful, aloof, or even hypocritical. He’s finding it impossible to shepherd his flock on a personal or responsible level.

**The Solution:** We must never allow our churches to become so bloated with activity that God’s own children are falling through the cracks. We must never become so overwhelmed that we’re juggling a million tasks and doing none of them well.

This pastor likely has a really good heart, but he needs to be wise and ask for help. He needs to delegate, and if he’s too busy to delegate, he needs to delegate the delegating. Like the Naïve Pastor, he needs to learn that he can’t be everything to everyone. Learning to outsource and share the load will not only serve his congregation better but hopefully relieve a great deal of his stress.

## 5. THE ENABLER

**The Problem:** This pastor isn't necessarily a criminal, but he'll throw God's children under the bus to protect a criminal. Maybe he's friends with the abuser. Maybe he's known about the abuse for some time, but neglected to report it, and doesn't want anyone to find out. Maybe he's got some kind of baggage against victims or women. Whatever the case, he's willing to cover up abuse, and thus enable abuse to continue. He's got a conflict of interest and has grown corrupt.

He may casually dissuade people against filing charges. He may discourage victims from talking to other pastors or getting outside help. He may hypothesize that the victim could get sued if they tell too many people their story. He may claim that the statute of limitations is up, and nothing can be done. He may suggest that reporting will only traumatize the victim more. He may even claim the abuse wasn't criminal, when it clearly was.

At first, The Enabler may look a lot like the Fearful Pastor (he is, after all, afraid of the truth being discovered). Except, when confronted, this pastor will lash out sinfully. He'll blackball those he feels threatened by, slander victims, and spread gossip and division to protect himself or someone else. He may claim to want peace, and to be ministering to the victim, but in reality, he wants to deceive, shame, and intimidate people into silence. Silence matters more to him than justice or the safety and purity of Christ's church.

There is a fine and blurry line between The Enabler and The Wolf. While The Enabler may not commit the crimes of a violent offender or sexual predator, he may cross the line and become a spiritual and psychological abuser. Because of this, you must be wary and discerning.

**The Solution:** This man shouldn't be a pastor. Regardless of his motivations, he would rather conceal his abusive friend or his past mistakes than honor his holy God. He would rather protect his reputation and defend his ego than protect children and defend the weak. This is not the kind of man you want on your church staff. He will destroy your church from the inside out.

*"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35*

## 6. THE WOLF

**The Problem:** Some pastors really are wolves in shepherd's clothing. He may preach the gospel on Sunday, but he'll neglect to exemplify it in his treatment of others, especially in private. He loves his sin more than he loves God. He loves authority and control more than Jesus. He considers his pride and winning an argument to be more important than his sheep's emotional or spiritual wellbeing. He'll never tell you this, of course, but his actions will speak to his heart.

He may use of the trust of parents as an opportunity to sexually abuse their children. He may leverage the privacy of the counseling session to take advantage of another man's wife. Or, he may be an artfully subtle spiritual or psychological abuser, who you can't pin down with a crime, but who will utterly ravage your flock, destroying faith and scattering lambs.

It's safe to assume he's unregenerate. Consider this: if the Holy Spirit hasn't softened this man's heart and called him to repentance by now, even as he studied Scripture and preached God's

Word from the pulpit, you'll be hard pressed to convince him to genuinely repent or change. You are not the Holy Spirit, so don't even try to fill those shoes. Any and all apologies from this man should be treated with the utmost caution.

**The Solution:** This guy really, *really* shouldn't be a pastor. He shouldn't be a husband or father for that matter. He is evil. Whenever we encounter a Wolf, we must hold them accountable by involving other pastors, and sometimes law enforcement as well.

Like The Enabler, The Wolf will use backhanded compliments, false accusations, gossip, threats, and even lawsuits, to frighten, shame, and manipulate people into silence. He will often accuse others of the very sins he himself has committed. For example, if he's manipulative, he'll accuse you of manipulation. If he's a gossip and a slanderer, he'll claim you've broken the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment. This pattern is so predictable, that anything he falsely accuses others of, is likely something he's done himself. When he slanders, he tells you who he is. This is called projection.

*Remember: How he treats the weakest, most unpopular person in your congregation is how he's capable of treating you when no one is looking.*

If The Wolf has committed any kind of violent or sexual abuse, great care must be taken when confronting him. A man who can molest a child, is capable of incredible evil. A preacher who will beat or cheat on his wife, has no respect for the Bride of Christ. A pastor who had his whole church leadership team hoodwinked just a few weeks ago, isn't likely to respect your intelligence today. Nobody changes that fast. In fact, if he appears to change, his very changefulness should alarm you. He is a consummate actor, more Oscar-worthy than trustworthy.

To put things in perspective, consider this: If the abuser is married, what this means is that at some point, he convinced his wife to marry him, and stay married for years if not decades. He absolutely can convince you he's sorry when he's not. Do not underestimate his ability to deceive, nor his willingness to betray. A man who is willing to betray the trust of his own wife and family, won't find it difficult to betray a session of men who he's successfully duped before.

If you want to stop an abuser, you must first be humble. Any confidence you have in your ability to read people, any pride you take in your experience or intelligence, will be weaponized against you. Your ego is a liability. And I'll be really frank with you, if you're thinking right now that I'm being dramatic or exaggerating, then you won't stand a chance against a psychological abuser. I absolutely want you to be daunted by the task ahead of you. We need not be cowardly, like the Fearful Pastor, but if you don't feel a healthy fear of abusers, then you're not ready to handle an abuse situation.

It is my dearest hope to equip you, so you never find yourself in the place of the Naïve Pastor. To not fear the abuser is to not understand them. There's a reason the Bible compares false teachers to wolves and adders. You're supposed to fear them and respect the threat they present. As soon as you stand up to a Wolf, you take the place of his prey. You're a shepherd getting in between a predator and a lamb. A spiritual abuser may blackball you and destroy your ministry. This is why you must approach them flanked by witnesses and advocates. A violent abuser may attack you or

shoot up your church. This is why I urge you to involve law enforcement immediately upon learning about any kind of domestic violence, death threats, or child abuse.

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit ... thus, you will recognize them by their fruits.” Matthew 7:15-20*

## 7. THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Our ultimate model as pastors, teachers, parents, and believers, is always Jesus Christ. How did Jesus stand up to abusers? Well, who is the ultimate abuser and accuser? How about that snake who deceived Eve and tempted Adam? Jesus defied Satan’s mind games in the wilderness. Jesus excommunicated Satan’s minions when he cast out demons. Jesus got between Hell and his people when he hung on the cross. It was a sacrifice. It was not easy or fun. But it was good.

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”  
John 10:11-15*

The first six pastors I’ve described above all have problems. Fallen and flawed, they range from fools to psychopaths. While one would think distinguishing between folly and evil would be easy, it often takes a great deal of wisdom.

Sometimes you’ll encounter a pastor who fits more than one of these personifications. Or, you may meet someone who fits none, yet still, for whatever reason, lacks the courage, integrity, or wisdom to handle abuse responsibly.

Whatever the case, these six pastors—these dangerous counselors—are hopefully people we can avoid associating with, and avoid becoming. If we discern, repent of, and prepare against such sins, we both protect God’s people and bring glory to Christ. Then, when an abuse victim confides in us, they’ll be met with Jesus in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

**PASTORAL TIP:** A simple way to help a survivor – or anyone really – establish an emotional connection with Jesus, is to tell them how they remind you of Jesus. For the abuse survivor, they may be able to relate with the fact that Jesus was beaten up or betrayed by his loved ones. But don’t forget to remind them of the positive similarities too. Are they kind? Are they thoughtful? Are they compassionate toward small children? Do they enjoy taking care of others? Are they protective of the weak and marginalized? Highlight these strengths and use them as spiritual tethers to draw the survivor closer to Jesus.

## 4. BUILDING YOUR NETWORK

*This lesson is a companion to Not Forsaken, Chapter 4: Concussion of the Heart (65-78)*

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. PTSD is sometimes mistakenly thought to be a mental *illness*. What are some reasons you can think of why it's more like a spiritual or emotional *injury*?

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2. The Bible calls Jesus a Wonder Counselor and Great Physician. What do you think that tells us about his character, skill set, or personality?

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3. Why might a traumatized abuse victim mistake disbelief or skepticism for gaslighting?

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4. What are some reasons victims or survivors might suppress their emotions or memories?

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5. If a survivor is expressing grief in self-destructive ways, how might you encourage them to vent and express their pain in healthier, safer ways? (pg. 72)

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## KNOW YOUR LIMITS

One of the hardest things about shepherding abuse survivors, or anyone for that matter, is that you're only one person. It is physically, spiritually, and mentally impossible for you to be available to someone – anyone – 24/7, let alone on an ongoing or long-term basis. You simply don't have the resources. Complicating matters, like all human beings, you have a limited skill set and finite experience.

And let's be honest: you could live 5,000 years and spend that time constantly pastoring, preaching, counseling, and studying, and still not know everything there is to know about abuse and trauma recovery. This topic is as vast as the human race and as deep as the Hell to which the unrepentant are bound.

## KNOW YOUR MISSION FIELD

I don't watch sports, but since most of my readers are probably guys, I'll venture a really terrible football analogy. Imagine the abuser as a player for the opposing team. He's got a death grip on his sin, and he's barreling down the field to make a touchdown. Anyone who gets in his way is bound to be injured. To stop him from hurting others, and to slow his course toward Hell, you want to throw all your energy and weight into tackling him. It's going to hurt and it's going to hurt bad, but no matter how fast you run or hard you throw yourself, you may still fail. While half-hearted attempt is pointless, if you're not careful, he'll take you down with him. He'll exhaust every last ounce of your resources, leaving you spiritually banged up, lying in the dirt.

But ministering to abusers is not my mission field. I've tried many times, and each time I sacrificed my peace, time, and emotional health, to no avail. I ended up heartbroken, and the abuser ended up even more entrenched in their sin than before. My loved ones proved themselves to be in God's hands, and God's hands alone. I sometimes worry my witnessing to them only gave them opportunities to compile further condemnation against their souls. My kindness and exhortations to repent heaped burning coals on their heads (Romans 12:19-21). So, now I leave that area of ministry for others to teach, yet I will warn you of its danger and difficulty. My mission field is tending God's injured lambs and equipping his shepherds to do the same. Always know your mission field. Don't stray outside the bounds God has given you. Just as God gives us talents and opportunities, he also gives us limits. A wise person knows theirs.

## JETHRO'S LEADERSHIP ADVICE

In Exodus 18:13-27, we read that Moses was attempting to settle disputes and judge situations among all of Israel by himself. When his father-in-law, Jethro, learned what he was doing, he gave Moses some great management advice. He said, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone ... Select capable men from all the people — men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain — and appoint them as officials ... That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

Now, you're not settling cases, nor are you the leader of a theocracy, but we can take a page out of Jethro's book here. In order to avoid over-extending ourselves, overcommitting, or tackling tasks outside our wheelhouse, we need to identify wise people who we can refer out to.

An abuse survivor is going to need help and support in areas outside your skill set, time restraints, and expertise. They may need medical care, legal advice, police protection, friends, teachers, support groups, and therapists.

Survivors of the opposite sex are going to grapple with intimate issues you should not involve yourself in. In fact, I'd advise that any time a congregant brings up sexual issues, whether they be related to healthy marital intimacy or sexual trauma from abuse, refer them to a counselor or therapist who specializes in that topic. Yes, the Bible covers sexuality, and yes, you can preach about these things, but your congregants need to be able to attend church without you knowing the most intimate details of their lives. By referring out, you are granting them dignity and protecting them from vulnerability.

I cannot tell you how many survivors have left churches, or pastors have fallen from grace, because what started as pastoral counseling got way too personal, resulting in awkward feelings, shameful thoughts, or worse, an affair. That pastor you read about in the news? The one accused of sexually abusing a counselee? This is very likely how that happened. When a man counsels a woman (or visa-versa) about sexuality or sexual activity, hormones and emotions befuddle our brains, and bad things happen. You've opened the door to temptation and sin (Genesis 4:7).

So, remember your mission field and invest yourself wisely. Get to know the people God has placed around you and look for opportunities to let them use the skills God gave them.

A good manager or military general will tell you that a wise leader knows how to delegate. They know what they can reasonably accomplish. They won't take on tasks someone else could do better or has more time for. They'll assign, refer, outsource, and crowdsource. In this way, they get more done and more done well. Focus on your fortes, and outsource everything else. And if you know someone is skilled and qualified, avoid the temptation to micromanage. As U.S. President, Ronald Regan, put it, "Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out."

## WHO DO YOU NEED IN YOUR ROLODEX?

Your network of local resources and contacts should include counselors, therapists, non-profits, lawyers, and law enforcement departments. Do this as soon as you begin your ministry, so that when you do encounter a crisis situation, you're not scrambling to find trustworthy contacts. A good place to start, is by simply asking other local pastors and church leaders who they've worked with and would recommend (or recommend against!).

The basic difference between a counselor and a therapist is that a therapist has a higher degree of education, certification, and can prescribe medication. This is important if you suspect depression, anxiety, PTSD, or mental illness. A counselor can provide a confidential emotional

outlet and much practical wisdom, but they're likely not the right person to address severe trauma or emotional disorders.

Having a counselor or therapist who is relatively neutral on issues of faith, is far better than having a "Christian" who might contradict or undermine the Gospel by pushing legalistic or works oriented ideas. Not everyone who calls themselves "biblical" is actually biblical. Beware the Pharisees (Luke 20:46-47). There's a reason Jesus warns, "they devour widow's houses." They weigh vulnerable people down under shame, all while charging them money to do it. So, evaluate Christian counselors carefully, and don't feel bound to refer only to Christians.

If you're concerned about issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, or possible mental disorders, opt for a therapist over a counselor. The priority should always be to find a therapist experienced in the specific area your concerned about. For example, if your congregant is experiencing extreme mood swings, you may want to select a therapist who is able to diagnose and treat things like bipolar disorder. Once any underlying trauma or disorder is being managed well, you should find pastoring your congregant on spiritual issues much more productive.

When given the choice between a Christian therapist and a therapist with expertise in a particular medical need, choose the latter. As a pastor, you can then handle the spiritual care of the survivor while the therapist addresses any trauma and mental health issues. Remember, we're delegating tasks, not passing the buck. You're still their pastor. You're just outsourcing aspects of their care. So, regardless of whether their therapist is saved, the survivor's spiritual care will be addressed by you or another church leader.

Below is a partial list of important contacts to have in your network, as well as tips for how to evaluate candidates. This is, of course, a partial list, and you'll continue to develop it over time. Depending on the resources available in your community, as well as your congregations' size and needs, you may require additional specialists in your contacts list.

## 1. COUNSELOR

This is going to be someone you trust to listen, give practical advice, and to respect your congregant's faith. Ideally, they're a Christian. Regardless, it's important to understand that you and your church are the survivor's primary source of biblical guidance. We don't outsource spiritual care, though we may supplement it for those who need extra support.

## 2. MARRIAGE COUNSELOR

Marriage counseling isn't appropriate for abusive marriages. It may be helpful, however, for couples who are recovering together from abusive relationships in their past. Regardless, you're going to need a good marriage counselor at some point, whether counseling survivors or not, so go ahead and pick one out early.

It should be noted, in cases where a spouse is dealing with sexual sin, violent anger, addiction, or other abusive problems, they – as an individual – need to seek specialized help for those



problems. It isn't fair to send them as a couple to a marriage counselor, because the sin isn't both spouse's fault, and a marriage counselor likely isn't equipped to address their problems anyway.

A marriage counselor will be helpful for improving communication, bolstering a healthy relationship, sorting out who manages the grocery budget, and other garden variety marriage tiffs. They aren't usually equipped to handle an abuser-victim dynamic. In fact, a good rule of thumb is that the abuser and the victim need separate therapy, at least until the abuser demonstrates real and measurable repentance and change. Then, and only then, can they begin working on their relationship. Until that sin is under control and recovered from, marriage counseling won't get to the heart of their problems, and may actually exacerbate the damage. You're sitting a wolf and a sheep on a couch together.

### 3. THERAPIST

Generally speaking, if someone has endured severe or long-term abuse, or is manifesting any symptoms of PTSD, it's wise to refer them to a therapist. That way, they can diagnose and treat any possible underlying conditions, making the recovery process smoother and less confusing for everyone. Once those issues are under control or recovered from, a counselor or pastoral counseling may be a good way to manage ongoing feelings of sadness, insecurity, and loss.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK COUNSELORS AND THERAPISTS:

1. When were you saved? / What's your religious background?
2. How do you feel about patients with different religious views?
3. What's inspired you to be a counselor / therapist?
4. How long have you been practicing?
5. What licenses and certifications do you have?
6. Are you affiliated with any organizations?
7. About how many clients do you have?  
*You want someone with a healthy number of clients, demonstrating they're holding onto patients, but not someone who will need to "squeeze in" your congregant.*
8. How frequently do you see most clients?
9. What are your rates? Do you partner with churches?  
*Some counselors / therapists will partner with churches to offer reduced rates or offer group classes and events.*
10. How do you set up counseling goals?
11. What does success look like to you?
12. What kind of homework to you usually give clients?
13. What books do you recommend to patients?  
*Look up these books and make sure they are something that, generally speaking, aligns with your church teachings.*
14. What would you say your areas of specialization are?
15. How often do you counsel abuse survivors?
16. What do you do if a patient tells you they or their kids are being or have been abused?  
*The answer should be, "As a mandatory reporter, I have to inform law enforcement."*

17. When was the last time you had to report abuse to law enforcement?

*If it was a long time ago, that's likely a red flag that either they're breaking the law and aren't reporting, or they don't frequently encounter abuse survivors.*

18. In an abusive marriage, would you counsel the couple together or separately?

*The answer we want here is, "Separate." Ideally, the victim will have a counselor or therapist who is completely confidential, and in addition to that, they'll have someone working with them as a couple. This gives the victim a safe place to share the truth.*

19. What are your views on medication?

*Make sure they're not opposed to medication, but also aren't prescribing it willy-nilly. You want them to respect your congregant's needs, feelings, and beliefs, and not make them feel awkward or like a failure for needing medication.*

PASTORAL TIP: If the survivor has experienced church abuse, or their situation was poorly managed in a church setting, a secular counselor who is friendly toward Christianity may be beneficial. At the least, it may be wise to choose a counselor from a denomination other than the one the survivor was mistreated in. Our hope is that the counsel they receive will feel more objective and be easier for them to trust. It may also free the survivor to vent their anger and express their distrust of the church without fear of censure or backlash. Until they can vent and express these emotions, they cannot recover. It's like a wound that can't drain. You want the counselor or therapist's office to feel like the safest place on earth. So, make sure it's reasonably different from the environment in which they were abused or mistreated.

### 3. LAWYER

It's wise for your church to have a lawyer on retainer who can answer general questions and be available when issues arise. However, in this instance, we're talking about a lawyer experienced in representing abuse victims. Depending on the nature of their abuse, you may need a different type of lawyer, but generally speaking, a divorce lawyer experienced in domestic violence, child abuse, and child custody cases is wise to have on file.

Many abuse survivors are going to find themselves financially strapped. Retaining a lawyer for them can be a profound ministry, but make sure you do it wisely:

- The lawyer must not be a church member. Messy things will come out in court, and you want your survivor to feel comfortable – not embarrassed – attending church on Sunday.
- Draw up a very clear document that describes exactly how long the church will retain the lawyer (for example, one year, or until the divorce is finalized), and your budget. For example, if you can only afford \$3,000, spell that out. You do not want to have to explain to the survivor, half way through a custody battle, why you can no longer financially support them. Explain everything clearly up front and in writing to avoid either party forgetting or misunderstanding what was agreed upon.
- Be very clear, and put it in writing, that the lawyer works for the survivor, not the church; that the lawyer will continue working for the survivor, even if the survivor stops

attending services or transfers to another congregation. The survivor needs to feel that there are no conflicts of interest with their legal counsel, and no strings attached to your gift. You also don't want to create distrust by doing anything that appears manipulative.

- Your state or local government may provide legal counsel and representation to survivors of certain types of abuse. In this case, ask to accompany the survivor to interview this person, and make sure they're comfortable with them. If not, help them evaluate their options. There may also be non-profits and universities with law programs in your area who offer pro-bono legal services to those in need. Of course, be careful about retaining a university student or team for something as important as child custody. If both the husband and wife are gainfully employed, and need a quick straight-forward divorce, that's one thing. But you need someone experienced, tough, and credible to handle any situation where the safety and wellbeing of children is at stake.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK A LAWYER:

Depending on the nature of the survivor's case, you'll want to research online and consult others to develop a list of more specific questions to ask. You'll also need to identify the specific type of lawyer or attorney they need. Here's a generic list of questions to get you started:

- What kind of cases do you typically work with?
- What are your fees, and how will I be billed?
- Do you have any client testimonials we could read?
- How many abuse cases have you handled?
- What type of abuse do you deal with most often?
- Have you handled any cases where the abuse was similar to this one?
- How many cases like this one have you handled?
- Do you have additional training or experience that would benefit this case?
- How would you handle this situation?
- Are there alternative ways to solve this problem?

*A trustworthy lawyer should give you an honest answer, even if it doesn't put money in their pocket. They may advise settling out of court, or inform you of a less expensive way to mediate resolution. If you know of a less expensive option, and they fail to mention it, you might ask them why. If their answer isn't satisfactory, it could be a red flag that they care more about money than the survivor's interests.*

- Will the survivor's current medical, financial, or employment situation affect the case?
- In the case of child custody, how often does an abuser get full or partial custody?
- How likely do you think it is the abuser will win or get custody in this case?
- How often will you communicate with the survivor about their case?
- How will you communicate with each other?
- How do you recommend we communicate with the abuser?

*They will hopefully recommend email, text, or other forms of writing; recorded phone calls; and (depending on the type of abuse) meetings with the lawyer or a witness present who can testify later to what was said and done. You want to document everything.*

- If the abuser begins causing problems or harassing the survivor, how will you respond?

- What type of behavior from the abuser should the survivor alert you to?
- When should the survivor call the police? For example, if the abuser shows up at their home or work? Threats or harassment via email or text?  
*You want a lawyer who will be aggressive in using any type of abusive behavior to bolster the case and protect the survivor. Any police records to document abusive behavior should be viewed as important to acquire.*
- How will the survivor receive paperwork related to their case?
- Will there be any portions of the survivor's file they can't view or have a copy of?  
*The answer we're wanting is, "No. You'll have complete access."*
- If we lose the case, or are unhappy with results, do we have any recourse?

#### 4. POLICE

Get to know your local police department. Sometimes, they'll offer services, such as self-defense classes for women, extra patrols in the neighborhoods of abuse survivors, etcetera. One great way to build up any person's self-confidence, is to teach them to defend themselves.

- Do they have a list of local abuse victim resources and non-profits?  
*This should include women's shelters, crisis pregnancy centers, counseling services, etc.*
- Do they offer self-defense classes for women? Can your church host classes?  
*For example, one Houston area precinct offers, "R.A.D. Women's Self Defense: Rape / Aggression Defense. From awareness to avoidance and physical self-defense." Hosting such classes, or coordinating a group of women to attend together, is a great way to let women in your congregation know that you want them to be safe and strong.*
- Do they offer programs or safety classes for kids? Can your church host something?  
*Some Houston area precincts offer, "Stranger Danger: teaching children safe ways to interact with strangers," and "Internet & Social Media Safety Classes," for teens. Another program is, "Hero Read: a deputy will visit a classroom and read storybooks to children." These types of classes and interactions may help children feel safer talking to police officers, and increase the likelihood they'll report if – God forbid – something terrible happens.*
- What are some ways your church partners with the police department?  
*Normalize interaction and cooperation between law enforcement and your church. This will accomplish multiple goals. 1) You'll know who to contact directly with questions and concerning situations, 2) Victims and survivors will hopefully view your church as a safe haven that reports crime and upholds justice, 3) Abusers will hopefully view your church as a dangerous fold to infiltrate.*

#### 5. LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

Acquaint yourself with local and state government agencies that may help abuse victims. For

example, the Texas DPS Victim Services Program<sup>6</sup> provides services including; counseling, assistance in filing for crime victims' compensation, criminal justice support, referral to assigned detective, status of case information, arrest notification, court accompaniment, information and referrals to local social service providers, assistance with evidence return, personal advocacy, and crisis intervention.

I recently spoke to a police officer who said that his state grants up to a \$35,000 moving and housing expenditure to survivors who need to relocate, whether for safety reasons, a fresh start, or to get away from bad memories. So, know your local and state resources. Most people have no idea these even exist, and as a result, abuse survivors often struggle unnecessarily. They need people like you to come alongside them and help them.

## 6. LOCAL NON-PROFITS

You'll want to generally be aware of local charities, programs, and organizations that could help a survivor down the road. You may also want to network with a few, or see how your church can support them or get involved in some way. Here are a few areas that could be beneficial:

- Conceal Carry Classes
- Counseling / Therapy Groups
- Crisis Hotlines / Suicide Hotlines
- Crisis Pregnancy Centers
- Emergency Financial Assistance
- Employment Assistance Services
- Support Groups
- Legal Advocacy
- Public / Private After-School Child Care Programs
- Shelters for Men & Teen Boys
- Shelters for Women & Children
- Self-Defense Classes

PASTORAL TIP: Make sure your network includes both male and female counselors and therapists, because you want to be prepared to serve both male and female survivors. When I first began speaking publicly about my experiences, I expected interaction primarily from other women. To my surprise, around half the survivors who reached out to me (especially privately) were male. Over the years, this has continued to be the case as I minister in this field. Don't be surprised when you encounter male victims and survivors. On the contrary, expect it.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.dps.texas.gov/administration/staff\\_support/victimservices/pages/index.htm](https://www.dps.texas.gov/administration/staff_support/victimservices/pages/index.htm)

# 5. RESPONDING TO SELF-DESTRUCTION

*This lesson is a companion to Chapter 5: Deconstructing Self-Destruction (79-92)*

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. What are some motivations for self-destructive behavior that struck you in this chapter?

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2. “People pleasing” is easily to mistake for an eagerness to serve. How might you look out for this red flag and address it in your church?

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3. How might you address self-neglect in a sermon?

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4. “Abusers teach us to fearfully obey.” (pg. 85) How might you explain “the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 9:10) to a survivor, in a way that doesn’t evoke negative ideas?

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5. “Boundaries” are often recommended to survivors as ways to safely maintain a relationship with an abuser. What do you think might be some signs that boundaries aren’t working or are unwise, and a total breaking of the relationship is called for?

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6. If a relationship with an abuser is causing a survivor excessive depression or anxiety, what would you advise?

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## BIBLICALLY UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION + SUICIDAL IDEATION

When I was a kid, one of my favorite stories was “The Little Match Girl,” by Hans Christian Anderson. She was a poor child who sold matches in the frozen streets around Christmas time. As she wandered through icy alleys, she could smell hot food cooking in the houses. She could see warm fires and decorated trees sparkling through the windows. But then the cold overcame her—both physical and spiritual—and she began to see visions of the joy set before her, beyond this world, in heaven.

I relate strongly with that little girl. Like her, my father was cruel and unloving. Like her, the world around seemed cold and apathetic. Like her, I felt I was peeking through windowpanes at joy I could not have. I was an outsider. I was unwanted. A cold and callous world was indifferent to my plight.

At 15, I overheard my dad telling my mom what a beautiful figure he thought I was developing. I'd always known something was wrong about him, but as I matured, my understanding deepened. The hope that God would change him had long kept me from despairing, but that day, my hope died. As I heard those words, truth punched me in the gut. I realized my dad was a sexual predator, and he wasn't getting better.

That afternoon, I sat on my bed with a razor blade against my wrist. Through tears, I begged God to forgive me for what I was about to do. I asked him to give me a sign that he loved me; that he'd take care of me; that he wouldn't abandon me. I told God I couldn't live in so much pain any longer, and I begged him to take me to be with him in heaven.

But something happened then which I consider miraculous. The Word of God from Hebrews 13:5 filled my whole being as he reminded me of his promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you.” Immediately, my tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy. As Paul said in Romans 8, I was convinced that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation” could separate me from the love of my true Father through Jesus my Lord.

And so, I chose to live.

Had God not done a powerful work in my life, I'd never have grown up or met my husband. Our three beautiful daughters would never have been born. I still struggle with depression and anxiety, but I've learned to anticipate the grief that comes in waves, and those waves have grown smaller the farther I get from their point of origin.

## WHAT I'VE LEARNED

I used to think my heart was like a scale; if I put enough joy on one side, I could outweigh the pain on the other. I've come to realize that happiness doesn't cancel out pain. If you have a broken leg, all the joy in the world won't make you rise up and walk. Just so, broken hearts must be allowed to heal. If you or someone you love struggles with depression or suicidal thoughts, here are some things I've learned, both from life and from God.

### 1. SUICIDAL THOUGHTS ARE OFTEN LIES ROOTED IN REALITY

Often, we have good reason to be sad. We live in a world where people are evil, tragedy happens, and death reigns. Whether your depression is the result of a distressing experience, a chemical imbalance in your brain, or a combination of both, there is often a logical reason for it. Take comfort in this: You're not nonsensical. You're not imagining things. Your feelings are real, even if they are telling you lies. Acknowledging the reality of your grief, and identifying the cause, is the first step in learning to cope with it. Getting help, whether through counseling, seeking safety in the midst of an unhealthy or dangerous circumstance, or going to a doctor is crucial to helping you make it through your struggle.

### 2. SORROW ISN'T SIN

Too often, we're told that depression is sinful. When we're overcome with sorrow, we're expected to pray our pain away, or suck it up and rejoice in the Lord. That would be great if it worked, but this advice usually deepens our despair by giving us an impossible task which makes us feel inadequate. Now, in addition to drowning in sadness, we're weighed down by shame.

Yet, we can be comforted in knowing our Savior faced sorrow. He wept (John 11:35). And he was so distressed in the Garden of Gethsemane that he sweated blood (Luke 22:44). Jesus, the holy and sinless Son of God, knows how it feels to suffer and grieve. Your sorrow doesn't separate you from God. Rather, it enables you to relate with him in a uniquely personal and profoundly beautiful way.

### 3. SUICIDAL THOUGHTS ARE CONVINCING LIES

The most dangerous lies are blended with truth. Depression and suicidal thoughts are no exception. They take the happiest things in our lives — our loved ones, our accomplishments, our hope for the future — and constrict them in cords of pain. As those cords twist tighter, we begin to believe everyone would be better off without us. We feel we're a burden to those around us; that we're ruining our spouse's life; that we're damaging our children. Often, it's our depression itself that we fear is harming our loved ones and making their lives miserable. We come to view ourselves as a blight, and we want to remove that blight so they can be happy.

But this is a mindset that's deprived of grace. We've forgotten that we're merely human, and those around us never expected us to be perfect. We've forgotten that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and we're no more fallen than anyone else. We've forgotten that our deaths would bring sorrow and pain for years and decades to come. We've forgotten that what makes us valuable isn't our human effort or perfection, but Christ's effort on our behalf and God's perfection, in whose image we are made. When you were saved, God began a process of healing in your soul. He began a good work in you, and though at times things you may feel hopeless, he will carry his work through to completion (Phil. 1:6).

### 4. YOUR FEELINGS AREN'T WHO YOU ARE

When I was a teenager, I knew a woman named Leah. She had never met a stranger. She was bubbly, exuberant, and had the most infectious laugh. But one day, Leah confided to me that she perceived herself as shy. She felt her anxieties, insecurities, and uncertainties, and those feelings



informed her perception of herself. Regardless of how she felt on the inside, Leah was the life of every party. Her feelings didn't define her true nature, let alone her value.

It's important to understand that even when you may feel hopeless, useless, or like a burden on others, you are none of these things. Your emotions are important, but they do not define you. Your feelings are real, but they don't always reflect reality.

A helpful thing my husband once told me, was, "You aren't a burden. Sure, your depression, and your crazy relatives, and things that happened in your past are a burden. But I have burdens too. Having a burden isn't wrong, is it? Isn't the reason we got married so we could carry one another's burdens? Sure, it's hard for me to see you so sad, but that's because I love you."

Depression can be like a mirror maze. We can't always rely on our own senses to tell us what is real. We may need help from the outside to guide us out. So, as soon as you begin to feel trapped in that maze of sorrow, confide in a loved one or counselor. Tell them about the mirage of despair, the deception of hopelessness, and let them tell you what's real and what's false. Let them comfort you through the confusion, and be with you in the illusion of isolation.

## 5. GOD UNDERSTANDS YOUR DESPAIR

Did you know that God speaks about depression and suicidal thoughts in the Bible? In fact, there are three men in particular who struggled with despair:

JOB wished he had never been born. He lamented not dying at birth and regretted that his mother had kept him alive (Job 3:1-26).

ELIJAH witnessed rampant evil going unchecked. When he held the wicked leaders in Israel accountable, they threatened him with death. Afraid for his life and exhausted from fleeing, Elijah prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:1-4).

THE PREACHER in Ecclesiastes despaired at the vanity of life, saying, "I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun" (Eccl. 4:2-3).

God responds to these men in three beautiful ways, all of which should be comforting to us, and help us as we seek to encourage the heartbroken and despairing:

### 1. GOD DOESN'T MAKE ACCIDENTS.

First, he reminds us that he is sovereign. In Job 38-41, God reassures Job that he is all-powerful. He recounts how he laid the foundations of the earth "while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy." He created Job too, and he did so for a reason. No amount of sin or suffering can foil God's sovereign plan. In response, Job says, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

### 2. GOD WANTS YOU TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF.

He cares about our health. In 1 Kings 19:5-7, God's response to Elijah's despair is

strikingly practical. After Elijah takes a nap, God sends an angel. Rather than giving him a pep talk, or attitude critique, the angel tells Elijah to rest and eat. God knows we are weak. He understands that our physical needs often affect our mental state. He wants us to take good care of ourselves; to sleep well, eat right, exercise, and seek medical care, especially when we're struggling.

### 3. GOD IS HOLY.

Finally, he assures us he is just. In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher concludes, "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil." If your grief is rooted in a painful past, rest assured, God will judge the ungodly who have wronged you. There is no statute of limitations in the courtroom of heaven, and you don't have to prove anything to him. God was there when you were wronged, God is with you still, and God is holy.

## COMBATING LIES WITH THE TRUTH

Here is the conclusion of the matter: You were created for a reason. God placed you right here, right now, for a purpose. There is no pain you can feel, and no evil you can endure, that Jesus cannot empathize with. He will shepherd you through the valley of the shadow of death. We need fear no evil, for Christ is with us (Psa. 23:4).

Someday, very soon, you'll meet Jesus face to face. Whether he returns in power and glory today, or you live out your years and join him in heaven, you will overcome this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). Then, at the perfect time, in the twinkling of an eye, we will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52). He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more depression, anxiety, fear, or evil, for the exhausting old ways of sin and death will die (Rev. 21:4).

Life is a season. These waves of sorrow are a passing shadow. Like grass, we wither, and like flowers, we fall, but those who love Jesus will never perish (1 Pet. 1:24; John 3:16). Jesus laid down his life for you, and he has defeated death itself. Like David, we can choose to live our lives in the knowledge that God is faithful, saying, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord" (Psa. 27:13-14).

*This article first appeared on the ERLC. Special thanks to Lindsay Nicolet for editing.*

## CREEPING SIGNS OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

In order to develop this curriculum (and *Not Forsaken*, actually), I surveyed hundreds of abuse survivors. We emailed back and forth or talked over the phone and social media comparing our experiences, symptoms, and insights. While anyone can Google "Depression Symptoms," or "Signs of Suicidal Ideation," (and that's a smart thing to do), what you're often seeing on medical websites are scientifically observable symptoms in patients who've grown desperate enough to seek treatment.

To help us identify red flags sooner – symptoms people experienced before they realized something was wrong and resorted to calling a doctor – I've compiled this list of symptoms to watch for. When you notice these in a congregant, it's time to ask questions:

**SELF-NEGLECT:** This may include things like never buying new clothes, not washing or brushing their hair, not sleeping regularly or enough, not eating right, and generally failing to take care of themselves.

**PICKING:** I've known several survivors who report pulling their eyelashes or eyebrows out when they were children. Multiple adult survivors also report compulsively pick at their skin, faces, hair, or nails, even after injuries or damage develops.

**HOBBY DROPPING:** Inexplicably becoming disinterested in activities or things that used to make them happy.

**SCHOOL GRADES:** A sudden or unexplained drop in grades. Loss of interest in topics they used to excel at or find interesting.

**ALCOHOL ABUSE:** An increase in drinking, day-drinking, or sneaking alcohol into the school or the office.

**PROMISCUITY:** Often, we bag-and-tag this as sin and demand repentance, but sometimes an abuse survivor is reacting to their abuser's sin. They may be punishing themselves for being "trash," or reenacting their abuse to try to subconsciously make sense of it or pretend it was consensual. As illogical as it may sound, the reasoning may be along the lines of, "If I have sex with lots of people, maybe what my rapist did won't matter," or "I deserved what happened and I'm going to prove it." While we cannot condone sin, we must be very careful not to condemn the broken by compounding their self-loathing. When sin is a symptom of trauma, the underlying pain must be addressed, or the sin will continue destroying them. It's like a spiritual gunshot wound. You've got to remove the bullet or the injury can't close and it gets infected. So now, after that infection of sin sets in, applying the antibiotic of repentance isn't enough. You've got to take out the bullet and deal with the original wound.

**HYPERSENSITIVITY:** Commonly mistaken for prudishness, a provocative photo in a fashion magazine may illicit a surprisingly negative reaction, or a romantic scene on TV may result in weeping or anger. Similarly, hearing people yell or cuss may trigger anxiety or self-defensiveness. The survivor may startle easily or seem unusually reactionary.

**RISK-TAKING:** Unnecessarily dangerous behavior, from driving drunk, to hanging out in bad areas of town alone at night.

**JUST JOKING:** Talking flippantly about suicide, death, depression, or traumatic experiences, as if they were funny or "no big deal."

**LYING:** This may be to cover for an abuser, hide self-destructive behavior, or seem completely random. One theory is, that once an abuse victim becomes used to lying for or to their abuser, they start lying about other things as well. These are often little lies you might not notice, or pointless lies that have no obvious motivation. For example, they may claim they wore a blue dress to a party, instead of a red dress, or they may exaggerate or minimize their participation in an event or activity.

**RECLUSIVENESS:** Becoming withdrawn, especially suddenly or uncharacteristically. Canceling get-togethers, avoiding Bible studies, or not answering phone calls.

**ATTENTION-BACKFIRE:** They seem to want friends, want attention, and be excited about socialization, but once they get attention or a planned event approaches, they react negatively. They become reclusive, fearful, or seem hostile. They got what they wanted, but now they're overwhelmed, and don't know what to do. They want friendship, but aren't used to friendship, and don't know how to handle it, though they dearly need it.

## SIGNS OF SUICIDAL IDEATION

**SUDDENLY OK:** When a person who has been struggling with depression, abuse, or trauma, but suddenly seems calm and content. This is a serious red flag that they've decided on a way out, and probably a date and time. It is vital that you intervene; ask questions, offer encouragement, tell them you're concerned, and remind them how much they're needed and wanted. The most severely suicidal people often won't tell you what they're thinking. They'll pretend to be happy so that no one tries to stop them. So, any switch from distressed or heartbroken to peaceful and content is a massive danger signal.

**FEELING TRAPPED:** Imagining that their situation is hopeless and there's no way out. Believing things will never get better, that a relationship is irrecoverable, or that things that once defined their life – a marriage, career, their health, their family – are ruined beyond repair.

**HYPER-SHAME:** Feeling like they're a burden to their loved ones. Their friends and family would be better off without them. Their spouse would be happier with someone different. Their kids would benefit from a different parent. Their existence is damaging to others, and their death would benefit the people they care about.

**MORBID SPEECH:** A preoccupation with death or suicide. For example, asking questions, like, "Do you think people who commit suicide go to Hell?" Or expressing despondency with statements like, "Everything is pointless," "What's the point of even trying?" or "You'd all be better off without me."

**ACQUIRING MEANS:** This may include purchasing a gun, stockpiling pills, or doing research online into suicide methods and lethal doses of medication.

**RECLUSIVENESS:** Wanting to be left alone. Withdrawing from friends, family, or other social contact. Evading people so no one picks up on their mental state, as well as to avoid feeling guilty about what they're planning to do.

**MOOD SWINGS:** Being upbeat one day, discouraged the next, and suddenly becoming upbeat again. Having extreme negative reactions, such as a depressive slump, to reminders of a broken relationship or negative experience.

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE:** An increase in drinking alcohol or drug usage. This may include taking too many prescription painkillers for their calming or relaxing side effects, or mixing prescription drugs with alcohol to maximize their effects.

**EMPTY CALENDAR:** Not planning events past a certain date, not RSVPing to weddings or parties you'd have expected them to be excited about, not signing up for classes they'd previously needed or expressed interest in, or quitting their job before finding another. They aren't expecting to be alive, so they're not making plans to live.

**RISKY BEHAVIOR:** Self-destructive behavior, excessive partying, or having an, "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," type attitude.

**PREPARING FOR DEATH:** Making a will, giving away belongings (particularly items you'd expect them to need or want, like bedroom furniture, or a musical instrument they regularly play), or setting affairs in order without logical explanation. Saying goodbye to people as if they won't see them again.

**PERSONALITY CHANGES:** Becoming severely agitated, sad, apologetic, ashamed, or despairing, particularly while experiencing any of the warning signs above.

## RESPONDING TO SUICIDAL IDEATION

If a person tells you they're going to kill themselves, especially over the phone or via email or text, the following actions should immediately be taken:

- Call 911 or your local emergency number.
- Stay with the person until help arrives. Do not leave them alone.
- If they've already called their physician, stay with them at least until their appointment (which should be that same day) and afterward if necessary. Rotate friends to keep them company during the week or two following until treatment takes effect.
- Remove any guns, knives, medications, or other things that may cause harm.
- Listen, but don't criticize, argue, threaten, or yell at them. Instruct anyone else who is going to visit with them to follow the above guidelines.

There are some situations where you can avoid involving emergency services. For example, when I had depression resultant from pregnancy, I recognized my suicidal thoughts as abnormal and took the initiative to get help. I scheduled an appointment with my doctor, called my pastor, and his wife came to visit with me until it was time for my appointment. Sometimes, particularly in cases of hormonal imbalances, the sufferer may recognize that what they're feeling is not real and chemically induced. Even in these cases, great caution is called for.

**PASTORAL TIP:** Never correct a depressed or suicidal person for being depressed or suicidal, or tell them to repent of their emotions. When a person is already feeling hopeless and worthless, adding guilt or shame to the mix will likely push them deeper into despair. You're validating and reinforcing their feeling of worthlessness, rather than offering them mercy and solutions to cope and heal. We want to avoid making them feel like they are "broken" or that something is wrong with them. We want to avoid giving them the impression that this agony they're feeling is

permanent or terminal. Instead, encourage them with the Psalms, such as Psalm 22, and use what they're feeling to point them to Christ and help them relate with God. Help them get to a therapist or physician who can work with them and ease their suffering as they heal.

## LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Hi Jennifer,

Every year I help coordinate a camp for teens in our synod. This year, one of the boys had been acting very depressed, and one evening we noticed he wasn't at evening worship. So, I went to go find him. I found him in his cabin, unconscious and covered in blood. He had slit his wrists. I screamed for help, put pressure on the wounds, and another pastor called an ambulance. The boy survived, but spent three weeks in the hospital. He's now in therapy twice a week. He claims he was never abused, but he also doesn't seem mentally ill. I feel like something must have happened that he's not telling us. How do I get him to trust me?

Roger

Hi Roger,

I am so sorry to hear this! But so grateful you noticed he was missing and were able to find him. I only have two points of advice. Firstly, just be his friend. He's got a therapist to talk about dark and disturbing stuff with. Be the mentor he can feel happy and relaxed around. Take him and his friends out to movies, arcades, whatever makes him happy. Talk to him. Get to know him. Secondly, make sure he's seeing a therapist who specializes in PTSD and trauma from abuse. They should be able to unravel what, if anything, happened to him, and can hopefully encourage him to share his story eventually. It's hard though. Male survivors sometimes never tell. You might suggest to him, that if he's not ready to talk about what happened, he can write it down on paper and then shred or burn the papers. This is a therapeutic exercise I learned which helped me put words to my trauma in a safe way, and practice the experience before talking to others.

Again, I'm so sorry, yet so glad you were there to save this kid's life. You've already made a profound difference.

Jenn

PS: Don't forget to take care of yourself and talk to someone if you need to. You've been through a traumatic event yourself, and it may be affecting you more than you realize. Care for yourself so you can care for your flock.

## 6. THE PROBLEM OF GUILT

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 6: The Problem of Guilt (93-108)***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Read Job 9:20. How can Job help us understand false or borrowed guilt?

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2. Why might an abuse victim feel responsible for causing their abuser to sin?

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3. What does false or borrowed guilt tell you about how we should be teaching and preaching about sin and accountability?

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### COUNTERING BORROWED GUILT

In this chapter I deal with a lot of the guilt – both false and legitimate – which plagues victims and survivors. For this lesson, I thought I'd give you some example responses to tough questions you may be asked. You'll want to come up with your own responses based on the situation at hand, but hopefully these will get the ball rolling in the right direction. I tried to keep the answers gender neutral, but keep in mind that not all abusers are male, and not all victims are female.

1. **Why didn't I do something sooner?**

- Perhaps it was because you're a compassionate and forgiving person. You wanted to give them time to repent and change. It's not your fault they didn't take that opportunity. They should have. I'm sorry they used your kindness to hurt you again.
- You were in a very difficult situation. You're a stay at home mom with three young children. You were trying to put their wellbeing ahead of your own.
- Never feel guilty for being forgiving.

How might you respond to this question?

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**2. If I'd gotten help for them, would things be different?**

- Your abuser is their own person, and they're very smart. If they'd wanted to get help, they could have gotten help. They chose not to. Don't carry that responsibility.
- It was never your responsibility to fix them and you cannot make them change.
- In all likelihood, no, nothing would be different. Your abuser has demonstrated that they don't want to change. Even if you'd gotten help, they would not have changed.

How might you respond to this question?

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**3. Would we be happier if I'd reported sooner?**

- It's impossible to know what might have happened. Maybe you'd be happier. Maybe something bad would have happened. We can't know. The point is, God gave you the courage to report exactly when you did. Not one minute sooner or later. And here we are today. So, let's work on getting you to a place where you can be happy again.

How might you respond to this question?

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**4. Why did I cooperate?**

- Because you loved him. Don't ever feel guilty for loving someone.
- Because you were afraid, and that's a completely logical response to abuse.
- If you had not cooperated, he might have hurt you worse. You did what you had to do to survive. Don't ever feel guilty for surviving. I'm glad you're still here.

How might you respond to this question?

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**5. What if I'd done something differently?**

- What if your abuser had done something differently? This is their sin and their responsibility. They made these choices. It wasn't an accident. It wasn't your fault.
- Your action or inaction did not cause their evil.

How might you respond to this question?

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**6. Why did I enjoy that kind of attention?**

- Every daughter wants to be loved by her daddy. You had no way of knowing he was giving you an evil kind of attention.
- He was your husband. What he did was wrong, yes, but your relationship didn't start wrong. It slowly turned wrong, and that was very confusing.
- Women are designed to want to be beautiful. It's how God made you, and it's not a bad thing. At first, you were naturally flattered by his attention, but then he betrayed your trust. Don't let his evil color how you perceive yourself.

How might you respond to this question?

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**7. Why didn't I tell anyone?**

- These are incredibly difficult things to talk about. Honestly, I'm impressed you reported when you did, and I'm very proud of you.
- You did what you thought was right during a very confusing, complicated, and dangerous situation. God knows you're human. Don't be too hard on yourself.
- Hindsight is 20/20, as they say. You were in a really hard situation. I honestly don't know that I'd have done any differently.

How might you respond to this question?

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## REAL GUILT + CHURCH ABUSE

One major challenge the church is currently facing, is how and when to correctly ascribe guilt and enact church discipline. Far too often, I see cases of domestic violence and child abuse covered up – not because no one knew what to do – but because a pastor or church leader had skeletons in his own closet, and didn't want lawyers and police officers poking about.

Maybe he has a secret porn addiction and is worried about investigators scrolling through the church internet history. Maybe he screams at his wife all the time, and doesn't think it's that big of a deal if his congregant does too. Maybe he has a secret drinking problem, so when he learns that his elder gets drunk and beats his wife, he sympathizes more with the sinner than with her.

There are multiple reasons why verses like 1 Timothy 3 hold pastors and church leaders to a higher standard and level of accountability. First and foremost, pastors are to model Christ to their congregations. But also, when we harbor sins ourselves, we're less likely to see the sins of others. The sin feels normal. It doesn't feel like a big deal. It doesn't shock us into action.

*“An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” Titus 1:6-7*

The other day I spoke with a retired seminary professor who shared a telling story. Some 30 years ago, a former student of his was candidating to become a pastor. The young man came to him and confessed that he’d spanked his wife. Upon realizing his sin, and being convicted by the Spirit, he confessed, repented, and decided to seek help.

“What should I do?” he asked his professor.

“You must tell the session of the church where you’re candidating that you aren’t fit to be a pastor,” the professor responded.

The man agreed. During a meeting with the session, he confessed his sin, and told all eight elders present that he was unfit to be a pastor. In response, the elders seemed surprised. They did not think wife-spanking was abusive, and laughed it off as nothing more than a kinky fetish. They had no problem with making him their pastor, because they all did the same thing.

While this may seem like a weird example, the moral of the story is, *where sin is normalized, sin is tolerated*. Subsequently, when we see abuse being tolerated in a church, we are wise to ask, “Do the leadership relate more with the abuser than the abused? Why? Has abuse been normalized?” A primary and practical reason God places higher standards on church leaders, is because these are intended to hold sinners accountable. If they themselves are corrupt, they are far less likely to protect the people of God. In fact, they’re more likely to harm and abuse them.

“Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” 1 Timothy 2-3

In other words, not an abuser or anything resembling an abuser. If a pastor looks at porn, how can he minister to misogynists in his church, let alone the women harmed by them? If he is a drunkard, misanthrope, wife beater, miser, or agitator, how can he discern those sins in others, or correct sinners in his congregation? Whatever his sin is, that sin will be overlooked in his flock.

## BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Among abuse survivor communities, there is a prevailing expectation and belief that churches will discipline the victim while forgiving the abuser; that the oppressed receives the law, and the oppressor receives grace. Unfortunately, this belief is founded upon reality.

In a recent case out of Maryland, a pastor was accused of stalking. His wife had left him for domestic violence some years before. He had beaten her, raped her, chased her through the house, and thrown dishes at her. In one court document, the wife described how, during their

marriage, her husband used to sexually assault her, penetrating her violently with his hand until she was crying and bleeding. He believed his wife was required by God to have sex with him whenever and however he wanted. That, he said, is a woman's role in the home.

When the divorce was finalized, the pastor lost custody of his children. And that's when the stalking began. During a court hearing, the wife pleaded for a restraining order, and described how this pastor would show up unexpectedly at her home, scream at her, and bang on the door. He'd intrude upon the children's birthday parties uninvited. He'd threaten and terrify her. Even after she relocated, keeping her address secret, he tracked her down and left gifts on her porch.

The church knew all of this. While they did request that he take a sabbatical, there was no church discipline, or any attempt to strip him of his title of Teaching Elder, until a solid eight years later. Then, they had a private meeting, and about 25 men decided over coffee that he really wasn't fit to minister, at least, not in their denomination.

This kind of story is what truly damages a church's brand. Not reports of abuse. Not the existence of abuse. But abuse cover ups, moral laziness, and the toleration of evil. Too many church leaders seem to think that if word gets out that one of their pastors or elders is a pervert, it will hurt the name of Jesus. That simply is not the case. People expect evil. Unbelievers expect corruption. We are all living on planet earth after all. What truly outrages people, and what ends up making the 5 o'clock news, is when churches cover up evil in the name of a holy God. That is shocking, and praise God that it's still shocking, and still making headlines, because if it didn't, that would mean no one was surprised anymore.

I sincerely believe that if the church would hold its leaders accountable, and discipline them publicly (1 Timothy 5:20), we'd see a massive drop in church abuse cases as well as abuse cover ups. It is not enough to have a presbytery or synod meeting where a few dozen local church leaders agree over doughnuts that a man is unfit to pastor nearly a decade after his wife and kids fled in terror. Church discipline must be clear, public, timely, and decisive, no matter who the offender is or how embarrassing the truth may feel to those who trusted and ordained him.

*“Those elders who are sinning, you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning. I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.” 1 Timothy 5:20-22*

Men who are unfit to pastor, must never be pastors. Men who do not meet the qualification for elder, must never be elders. Pastors and elders who disqualify themselves should carry the consequences of their actions. And when pastors and elders fail to call out evil and discipline abusers in their church, they too disqualify themselves, and must repent. It is one thing to be deceived by an abuser, mistaking him for a godly man. It is quite another to realize a man is an abuser, yet continue acting as if he were godly.

*“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever*

*loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Matthew 16:24-26*

## ABUSING MATTHEW 18:15-17

Too often I hear of a case of abuse that was never reported or dealt with, because supposedly, there were not enough witnesses. Sometimes, a battered wife or rape victim is told to privately confront the man who assaulted her, and inform him that what he did was wrong. Some Christians seem to think that unless there are multiple witnesses to the abuse, we must assume the accused is innocent and the reporting victim is guilty of lying.

Much of this confusion (or spiritual abuse) is rooted in a misuse of Matthew 18:15-17:

*“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”*

As one wrongheaded man said, “The question is, do we trust Scripture to be our authority? The need for more than one witness isn't my standard, it's God's. The Bible doesn't give exceptions. We must follow it. Only one witness? Then don't entertain that accusation. It's false.”

Of course, by his logic, he's required to have witnesses to demonstrate his claim that the reporting victim is lying too. His argument is self-defeating and unravels pretty quickly once we take it to its logical conclusions. There's a reason most murders are committed when no one is watching. Most burglaries and kidnappings are committed when no one's around to see. Do we believe Jesus would want us to empty the prisons because the only eye-witnesses to the crimes of convicts are either dead or God? Of course not. When something in the Bible seems ludicrously illogical or enabling of evil, we do well to ascertain whether we're understanding it correctly.

It's important to note that Matthew 18:15-17 is dealing with sin in the church, but not necessarily crime in the church. Crime is usually sin, but not all sins are crimes. You can likely safely confront a brother or sister for lying, gossiping, or getting drunk. But if you suspect your brother or sister of raping their own child or beating their spouse, confronting them “just between the two of you” could be a great way to get yourself shot. They likely aren't your brother or sister in Christ anyway, so Matthew 18 might not even apply to them. Anyone capable of this level of evil is extremely dangerous. Even among trained police officers, domestic disturbance calls are considered the most dangerous to respond to. Use your discretion.

As Proverbs 20:17 says, “Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears, is one who rushes into a quarrel not their own.” Proverbs 18:15 also warns, “Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a helpless people.” What is an abuser if not a tyrant and a bully?

But going back to Matthew 18, if a victim has already pleaded with an abuser to stop harming them – to be kind and stop committing evil – they've already fulfilled the standard set forth in Matthew 18:15. They've pointed out their abuser's fault, just between the two of them, even while they were being abused, but the abuser kept harming them.

Now, the heinous act is done. The abuser would not listen. And so, the victim is doing the biblical thing by proceeding to "take one or two others along." These one or two others are not necessarily pastors or even Christians. When we're dealing with a violent or sexual offender especially, they should be police officers, "so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or more witnesses." (vs 16). Now, these officers who conduct interviews, review evidence, and compare testimonies, become witnesses. These aren't people who were present at the initial event, yet Jesus considers them to be witnesses.

If the abuser still won't repent, even after the police have warned them, explained the law to them, charged them, or arrested them, then it's time to "tell it to the church," and "treat them as you would a pagan" (vs 17). Why? Because they are unrepentant. First the victim asked them to stop harming them, but they refused to repent. Then law enforcement got involved and told the abuser they were wrong, but they refused to repent. And finally, the church intervenes and confronts the abuser with their evil, because not even God forgives people who refuse to repent. The abuser is not to be treated as our brother or sister any longer. They are to be put under church discipline, warded away from the flock, and barred from the table.

## PETER, DO YOU LOVE ME?

When Jesus reinstated Peter in John 21:15-19, he asked Peter a series of very simple questions.

*"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"* [likely meaning, "Do you love me more than you love these other disciples, apostles, elders, and pastors?"]

*"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

*Again, Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."*

*The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"*

For Peter, following Jesus meant not only teaching, preaching, and caring for God's people, but being crucified for his testimony and faith in Jesus Christ. It meant caring more about what Jesus thinks than about what other people think. It meant taking up the earthly consequences of his righteousness, however evil and unjust, and sacrificing his life for the sake the Gospel.

For repentant abusers and enablers, taking up their cross and following Jesus means taking up the consequences of their sin, and sacrificing their position of trust and authority, for the good of God's people and the purity of the church. If they truly want to save their honor, they must admit their dishonor. If they truly love Jesus, they must crucify their ego and influence. And surely, whoever lays down his career for Christ's sake will find ministry opportunities in Heaven.

When abuse has been perpetrated or covered up by church leaders, we must recognize that they've committed a type of blasphemy. These men who were supposed to represent Jesus, and who were entrusted with the care of Christ's little ones (Matthew 19:14), have ravaged The Good Shepherd's lambs, and they did it in the name of our holy God.

Because of this, it's imperative that abusers and abuse enablers, not only be called to publicly repent, but be removed from all positions of trust and authority within the church forever (Ezekiel 34:10). It would be better for them to have a millstone tied around their neck and be drowned in the sea, than face Jesus with their title of pastor intact, but an unrepentant heart and abuse in their wake (Matthew 18:6).

*“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: This is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

*Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.*

*You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.*

*So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

*Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:*

*This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.”*

*Ezekiel 34:1-10*

## 7. EMPOWERING THE VICTIM

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 7: #WhyIDidntReport (109-124)***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Many victims fear their abuser taking revenge if they report or seek help. What are some ways you could alleviate this fear, and protect victims in your congregation?

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2. What are some ways you could encourage current victims to come forward, and let them know you'll take their report seriously when they do?

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3. The consequences of being believed can also be daunting. For example, law enforcement may need to be involved, it may be unsafe to live under the same roof as an abuser who knows you reported, and your children's lives will be upended. What are some ways the church can provide encouragement, structure, and stability in such uncertain times?

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### COUNTERING SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Whether or not you suspect that there's an abuse victim in your congregation, addressing the following concerns in sermons and classes is a great way to empower the silent victim by encouraging them to get help and building them up spiritually.

#### 1. DEFINE GOSSIP

Many victims remain silent because they fear their report or attempt to get help will be viewed as gossip or sinful. I have encountered this many times, and I've personally been reprimanded by church leaders for naming an abuser who they knew to be an abuser. So, this fear victims have is logical, justified, and deeply rooted in facts and shared experience. However, we can counter it by promoting a culture within our congregations that doesn't cover up serious sins, and where truth and justice are highly esteemed. Jesus himself, when Judas was about to betray him, announced Judas's guilt before all the disciples. He did not cover up sin. He did not conceal evil

– not even evil in the heart – but confronted and condemned it head on (Matthew 26:23-25). Yet, we would never say that Jesus gossiped.

It's important to clearly define gossip and distinguish it from speaking the truth. For example, we can say that gossip is usually motivated by malice or a desire to get attention, while telling the truth to help others, protect children, or stop someone from sinning further, is honoring to God. Gossiping with the hope of tearing someone down or making ourselves feel important is sinful, but speaking truth for the sake of justice and godliness is what God desires.

*“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”* 1 Corinthians 13:6

## 2. CHRIST'S SUFFERING

I was told many times that I should submissively endure abuse because to suffer at the hands of evil people is to suffer as Christ suffered. This is a lie from the pit of Hell. Even after I escaped, I was repeatedly told to, “Consider it pure joy when you face trials,” (James 1:2) and “stop complaining” about abuse because to do so is to be ungrateful to God for the life he gave you. While a heinous twist of Scripture, it's alarmingly prevalent where abuse is tolerated.

But of course, these abuse enablers – these heretics – don't like finishing that quote in James, do they? We consider it all joy, *why?* “Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance,” (James 1:3). We do not rejoice because evil people are tormenting us. We're not happy that we're suffering. God doesn't want us to be cheerful little masochists. Rather, we rejoice that despite the wicked actions of evil people, the Spirit of God is at work within us, strengthening our hope and sustaining our faith. He overcomes evil with good.

There is also a dangerous doctrine that, in order to witness to your abuser, you must patiently endure and tolerate their abuse. In doing so, some claim, you're showing them the love of Jesus. However, Jesus himself avoided certain people who he knew meant him harm. In John 7, we read how Jesus circumvented the entire area of Judea because abusive religious leaders wanted to persecute and kill him. In Matthew 10:14, Jesus instructed the disciples that if someone refuses to listen and is antagonistic toward them, they're to, “leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.” Likewise, if someone is violent or perverse and refuses to repent and change, we have biblical precedent from Christ himself to avoid, leave, and shun that individual or group.

The Lord called Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He didn't tell them to remain in slavery in hope that somehow the Egyptians would be saved. Quite the opposite. God “hardened Pharaoh's heart,” so that, “he would not listen,” (Exodus 9:12) and God demanded his people be free.

Jesus died for sin so that we wouldn't have to. If we're truly teaching the Gospel, we'll have a redemptive understanding of suffering, but we won't require widows, orphans, and the downtrodden, to metaphorically crucify themselves.



### 3. SUBMISSION TO [GODLY] AUTHORITY

Another common tactic of abusers and enablers is to accuse victims and survivors of being unsubmitive, whether that be to an abusive parent, husband, church leader, or other authority figure. This is easily countered though by simply looking at godly men and women in the Bible who defied evil authority in order to submit to God.

The Hebrew midwives feared God, so they disobeyed the evil king (Exodus 1:17). By defying the corrupt law enforcement officers in Jericho, Rahab saved lives and was included in the lineage of Jesus Christ (Joshua 2). Abigail defied her wicked husband and made peace with David, because she was “intelligent ... but her husband was surly and mean.” In response, David did not shame Abigail for being unsubmitive. Rather, he praised her, saying, “May you be blessed for your good judgment,” (1 Samuel 25). Jesus frequently defied the authority and false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and encouraged his disciples to do likewise.

We submit to godly authority. Any time an authority is evil – or even when a Christian authority asks us to do something wrong such as cover up sin – we submit to God, not evil. One would think this would be a concept commonly taught throughout the Christian world. Sadly, it is not.

When we tell a battered wife to submit to a brutal husband, we're preaching that Satan's authority supersedes God's authority. When we tell an abused child to obey their perverse parent, we're teaching that depravity has more power over them than grace. These are fearful lies.

Just as we mirror Christ in our love and forgiveness, let us also mirror him in defying evil and false teaching, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns,” Matthew 16:23.

### 4. FLYING MONKEYS

Another common fear which victims and survivors share, is what we call “flying monkeys.” Remember in *The Wizard of Oz*, how the Witch sent flying monkeys to attack Dorothy? Well, abusers often send enablers and duped friends and family to argue, shame, and falsely accuse the victim. They defend and excuse the abuser, while working to silence or discredit the victim.

One extreme example of this is when I got the publishing deal for my book, *Not Forsaken*. While an emotional abuser contacted my publisher, pastor, husband, and even The Houston Chronicle trying to convince them that I was lying and crazy, they motivated other family members to attack me. I received numerous phone calls, emails, and texts, falsely accusing me of lying. They claimed my book contained stories and statements which it did not. They claimed I was a narcissist and only wrote my book to get attention or revenge. I was told I was taking advantage of my abuser and stealing their story to make money. I was told I had no right to tell my story until after other people, whose trauma was worse than mine, had told theirs.

Another example was when I brought attention to a child abuse cover-up in a local church. After I confronted the pastor, someone on the session leaked an unknown accusation against me to several women in the church. They began private messaging my friends on Facebook and

Twitter, warning people not to trust me. One of them apparently knew my email password, logged into my account, and publicized screen captures of my private correspondence in an apparent attempt to discredit me. Yet another texted me to say that she and her family could no longer socialize with me or my family, because I was living in sin. No one would name my sin, and no one would name my accuser, yet I was defellowshipped under the table and blackballed.

Of course, the unreasonableness of this behavior makes such attacks fairly easy to identify. Any time friends and relatives start haranguing the victim right around the same time or in the same manner, we can hopefully detect the pattern and the term “Flying Monkey” leaps to mind. However, I also want you to see how sneaky these tactics can be. An abuser may concoct ways of harassing and upsetting a victim that aren't as overtly wrong or ridiculous, yet are personal, hurtful, and vindictive. Remember, an abuser often knows their victim's buttons. They're a parent, spouse, sibling, or former pastor of the victim. They know where all the psychological bruises are, and their goal may be as simplistic as driving the victim hysterical so that law enforcement and advocates stop taking them seriously. If they can, they'll figure out just how to hurt and upset the victim without breaking any laws or committing any clear sin.

After Jason and I had our first baby, we realized that my cat, Mr. Bingley, wasn't good with kids. So, we entrusted him to a relative who I knew was emotionally abusive, but who loved cats. Two years ago, on my birthday, she posted him for adoption on Facebook. He was given away or sold without my consent to I didn't know who. Recently, the abuser informed me that Mr. Bingley had died alone in an animal shelter where he'd been all that time. Upset, I posted on Facebook.

In reply, a relative commented, “She didn't ‘put him up for sale.’ She had so many medical issues that she couldn't afford to live on her own and had to give away her animals. This was very hard for her too. I'm so sad our family had to lose such a wonderful animal.”

This is a subtle example of a “flying monkey,” but one we can detect if we pick apart the messaging. Firstly, note how she offers little to no sympathy for the person who's upset. Her goal is not to comfort, but to advance her. Instead, she corrects or attempts to set the record straight. She excuses the abuser's actions by citing financial and health problems (such excuses may seem relevant on the surface, but don't usually hold up to scrutiny). She disregards facts that don't align with her agenda, such as my cat being given away on my birthday. They attempt to depersonalize what's been done by referring to my cat as “an animal” rather than “your pet.” They express pity for the abuser, and finally, they do something which I call “grief leveling.” They try to claim that everyone – not just the hurt person – has suffered. They imply that the victim should stop complaining about sin, stop holding others accountable, and stop expressing pain, because everyone – including the abuser – has had a hard time.

Most of the time, when you encounter psychological abuse and Flying Monkeys, it's going to be petty, personally, knit-picky stuff like this. It won't always involve easily labeled crimes like theft, stalking, or blackmail. It's not always something you can report to law enforcement (however, if things are persistent and severe enough, it can't hurt to try). It's heart issues like malice, spite, and jealousy, which will likely have to wait until the Final Judgment for justice. However, this is what psychological abuse looks like. It's clandestine. It's malicious. It's often

incredibly stupid. And the people who play mind-games like this are either abusers, abuse enablers, or victims parroting what their abuser has taught them.

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL RIPTIDE

Some months ago, I was at Nashville International Airport waiting for a flight back to Houston. I happened to be seated next to a police officer who frequently handled domestic disturbance calls. We had over an hour before boarding our plane, so we got to talking.

One of the chief problems he encounters in abuse cases, he said, was battered women moving back in with violent boyfriends or husbands. The victim would call 911, he'd come out and kick the abuser out of the house, and he'd put the abuser in jail for as long as he could so the woman could pack her things, find somewhere to stay, or at least change the locks. Almost invariably though, the abuser would get out of jail and not long after he'd get another call from the victim. She'd agreed to live with her abuser again, and was now even more beat up than before.

"Why do they go back?" he asked. "That's what I cannot wrap my head around."

This tendency to go back is due to a kind of psychological riptide; an emotional current so strong, it pulls us away from safety and back into the chaos of abuse. Often, victims try to swim against this current, but the constant effort exhausts them and they eventually give up. This pull, this riptide, is usually a blend of love, hope, insecurity, loneliness, denial, guilt, nostalgia for happier times, and fear of the unknown.

While we can't make a victim stop loving their abuser, or give them the power to read hearts the way Jesus can, we can do some practical things to weaken the riptide; to make returning to the abuser less of a temptation. Depending on your church's resources, you might be able to help her out with housing, child care, finding a job, or maintaining an emotional support group.

Here are a few suggestions, but of course, depending on the individual survivor's situation, they may need more or less, or sometimes something completely different:

- **Alleviate financial burdens.** An abuser may dangle things like housing, healthcare, and groceries to lure a victim back. You can undermine the abuser by providing these things with no strings attached, and helping the survivor find lucrative employment. You do not want a young mom returning to a violent predator because she ran out of baby formula and diapers. And she may be embarrassed or fearful to tell you what she needs, so take initiative to ask, observe, and offer.
- **Provide father figures.** Often victims feel horribly guilty that their children are growing up without a dad. Make sure kids have godly men from your congregation involved in their lives; attending their sports events, dance recitals, birthday parties, taking them to the park, the zoo, helping them with their homework, grilling them burgers ... regular dad things from the fun to the mundane. These father figures should be godly, married men, who are experienced and known for their discretion, who will involve their wives in this ministry, and who will never make the mother feel awkward or indebted to them. The last thing you want is for an abuse survivor to feel like a bunch of guys from her church

are using her kids to hit on her. So, be aware of the dangers on both sides of this path. The kids need father figures, and the mom needs every dignity and consideration.

- **Provide emotional support.** Make sure friends are checking in on the survivor regularly if not daily. Any time she has a need, someone should be involved enough to notice. Any time she's having a bad day, someone should be involved enough to pick up on it, pray with her, and help out as able. If possible, once or twice a month, ask a few ladies from church to arrange a babysitter, and take her out to dinner or to get her nails done. Thoughtful little investments like this will pay off in spiritual dividends.
- **Provide practical support.** Remember, she used to have a husband. He was an awful person, sure, but he probably did at least a few good things. Find out what he usually took care of; shopping for groceries, mowing the lawn, checking the air pressure in her tires, balancing the budget, etcetera. See who can step in and fill some of these needs for her. Eventually, she'll learn to juggle all this herself, but you can lessen the shock by alleviating small burdens, at least until she adapts to her new way of life. This will be particularly important for survivors who have kids, and are suddenly finding themselves working full time. They're going to need child care, help with housekeeping, help with evening meals, and just generally transitioning to a completely new way of life.

One thing I'm currently working on is a ministry program for churches, called, RecoverTogether. It will comprise weekly lesson plans, Bible reflections, and an easy-to-follow teaching guide, so that congregations can minister to abuse victims and survivors in their communities. Implementing resources like this to help survivors maintain their hope, find support, and persevere, will contribute greatly toward helping them retain their independence and hopefully reduce any urge to go back.

## BRING ON THE BRIMSTONE

As a survivor of abuse, I find the concept of Hell comforting. That probably seems like an odd thing to say. But my abuser may never face justice in this world, and even if he does, it will be finite and unsatisfying. Putting him behind bars might protect others, but it won't turn back time. Worldly courts can't undo what's happened to me; what's happened to my family. Only God can truly judge the wicked. Only God can wipe away the tears of his heartbroken children forever.

As we discussed in our first lesson, recovery has multiple stages. Survivors experience tidal waves of grief; denial, depression, guilt, and anger. Anger in and of itself is not a sin. In fact, if you're angry at evil, you're actually being Christlike. Jesus flipped over the tables of the moneychangers. God is angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11).

For a long time, I suppressed my anger because I was scared of it. I thought I was a selfish, ungrateful, and arrogant person to be angry that I'd been abused. Once I realized I was justifiably angry, and that Jesus Christ is angry too, I was able to stop suppressing my pain and find freedom and healing. Because of this, teaching about God's holy wrath, perfect justice, and all-knowing, all-seeing nature, is comforting to those who have survived great evil.

The courts of this world often let us down. Crimes go unpunished, and even the harshest sentence can't undo the damage sin has done. Even if an abuser is convicted of a crime, like statutory rape, they cannot be held accountable for all cruel words, lies, degradation, and manipulation surrounding that single crime. And too often, our worldly courts will convict an offender of one crime, but are unable to convict on a slew of others, so that an offender may be convicted for five minutes of evil out of a lifetime of depravity.

Not so, in God's court.

*“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Hebrews 4:12-13*

While reporting crime to law enforcement is vital, and an abuser's conviction both protects the innocent and honors victims, earthly justice cannot be our only hope of comfort. We must fix our eyes on a higher court; that place where true peace becomes reality, justice is utterly perfect and complete, and death itself comes undone. We want to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, who will come again in glory to judge the world, casting the wicked into eternal damnation, and restoring his children to a state of safety, happiness, and wholeness.

But in an era of political correctness and positive-thinking, few preach about Hell or judgement anymore. We hear a lot about God's love and mercy, but very little about his wrath and all-consuming holiness. He hates evil. He damns the unrepentant. When we neglect to teach this truth about God, we not only fail to teach the whole word of God, but we leave victims without hope of true justice.

“‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord,” (Deut. 32:35) is certainly a warning to those contemplating revenge, but it's also a beautiful promise to those longing for justice. In Romans 12:19-21, Paul concurs. He says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.” Why are we to do this? Because we feel warm fuzzy feelings for them? Because anger is bad? Because we can use our good works to manipulate wicked people into being nice to us? “On the contrary ... In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Certainly, if an evildoer sees our good works and comes to know Christ in this life, praise God! But if he does not repent, and only comes to know Christ in death, God is just. Praise God.

When we're kind to people who return kindness with cruelty, they amass divine evidence against their souls. Unless they repent, God will reign Hell down upon them as he did upon Sodom and Gomorrah. We are not called to give evil a free pass. We are not called to harbor hate or do good out of malice. However, we are called to overcome – to vanquish by grace – evil with good. The Spirit works in us righteousness so we may accomplish good works with a pure heart, knowing Jesus will return as our Righteous Judge, and we will be vindicated.

And what of ministering to abusers? Can they possibly benefit from an anesthetized Gospel that only teaches love but never mentions justice? Will being told that God loves everybody, no

matter what, motivate them to repent and change? Sure, this milquetoast doctrine gets sinners into pews, but can it get sinners in Heaven?

*“They pour out arrogant words; all the evildoers are full of boasting. They crush your people, Lord; they oppress your inheritance. They slay the widow and the foreigner; they murder the fatherless. They say, ‘The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob takes no notice.’” Psalm 97:4-7*

When God’s people do not confront sin, and take no notice of evil, we’re corroborating the lie evildoers tell themselves. The concepts of sin and repentance are incremental to salvation, yet we seem to be doing a terrible job of teaching them. There's a prevalent tendency within the church to forgive the abuser so quickly, that we skip the part where we demand change and amends for sins and crimes. Such lopsided teaching is not only dangerous to the victim, but it does abusers a grave disservice. It paves them a broad and smooth descent straight into Hell.

Another heresy I am seeing more and more of, is this idea that Hell is not an eternal place, but more like an eschatological bug zapper. When God judges evildoers, he drops them into a lake of fire, where it’s thought, they’re instantly incinerated a la Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. There is no eternal judgement. There’s no afterlife for the lost. Jesus, like Thanos, snaps them into nonexistence. I find it hard to believe many churches teach such heresies. Rather, I think too few churches are teaching about Hell and God’s wrath at all. Their congregants are left to guess or Google how God judges evil.

And while I’m not a proponent of frightening people into Heaven (literally scaring the Hell out of them), “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” Proverbs 1:7. We need a kind of reverent awe, a healthy respect, and a fear of double-crossing the judge of the universe. It is a lack of the fear of the Lord which enables foolish mistakes, such as failing to report abuse. It is a lack of respect for God’s holiness that gives enablers the gall to wink at sin.

You want to counter and prevent abuse? Preach the Gospel, but preach it wholly and preach it biblically. Call out sin. Do not excuse, explain away, or minimize wickedness. Tell God’s people that because God is love, he is also just, and because he loves them, he is angry at those who harm them. If God is Love and God is good, then God cannot tolerate cruel and evil people in his presence. If we are not teaching this, we are not teaching the Bible.

By preaching the whole word of God without sugar-coating sin or white-washing God’s wrath, you’re shining the piercing light of truth into the darkness of abuse. You’re telling victims that you’re a responsible and godly person who loves justice and righteousness, and you’re telling abusers that their crimes won’t be swept under the rug.

## 8. THE IMAGE OF GOD

*This lesson is a companion to Chapter 8: Unearthing the Image of God (125-138)*

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. On page 126, I write, "It's difficult to feel confident in your value when you've been taught for years that you're inferior – when your thoughts and opinions have been treated as stupid, your feelings as irrational, your personality as a nuisance, and your body as an object to be lusted over or beaten up." How are some ways pastors or the church could counteract this erosion of a person's self-worth?

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2. On page 129, I note, "All I wanted was for her to listen. All I wanted was for someone to be with me, to act as though it mattered – as though I mattered." What does this tell you about how I felt at the time? What does it tell you about how others might feel?

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3. On page 128, I note that abusers teach us that "our worth revolves around their moods and opinions," instead of around God's love and mercy. When the abuser is irritable, we're accused of being irritating. When they're lustful, we're called "slutty." When they're angry, we somehow caused their anger. Help the survivor practice (yes, practice) correlating their worth with God's perception of them. For example, you could say, "God loves you. What does that tell you about yourself? That you're loveable and that you're worth taking care of." Or, "Jesus considers you so valuable that he was willing to endure crucifixion rather than be parted from you. What does that tell you about how he feels about you?" Think of some ways you could work to reorient the survivors worth to revolve around God's feelings and God's opinions rather than the abuser's.

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PASTORAL TIP: Create a graph for the survivor so they can sort their feelings by “Body, Heart, and Mind.” In other words, by physical symptoms, emotional feelings, and logical priorities and opinions. Help them sort through and differentiate logic from emotion. By categorizing what we’re feeling, experiencing, and needing, we can hopefully encapsulate what we’re going through so it’s not quite so overwhelming. This can also help with self-reflection, and understanding and compartmentalizing our emotions, versus our reactions, versus our beliefs and priorities. The result may look something like this:

Body	Heart	Mind
Tension	Loneliness	Cut them off
He’s handsome	He’s terrifying	Find a job
Headaches	Worry	His sin is his fault
Nausea		Enroll kids in school
Insomnia		

## EMPOWERING A SURVIVOR’S HUSBAND

*Note: Much of the following advice is also relevant for a wife wanting to support her husband who was abused. Recovering from abuse as a team can greatly strengthen a survivor’s marriage.*

Every so often I receive an email from the husband of an abuse survivor. Almost always, he asks a variation on the same question; “How can I help my wife who was abused?”

For some, their wife was abused long ago during childhood. Her abuser may be dead or distant. For others, her abuser was a previous husband, boyfriend, or sibling. Her abuser may pose an ongoing threat. Whatever the case, these husbands want to know what they can do to help their wife cope with trauma, heal, and recover.

If there’s a man in your congregation who is married to an abuse survivor, the first thing we want to do is encourage him. Remind him that he’s a blessing; that God has placed him in this marriage for a reason. It’s a big responsibility, yet God is faithful, and God will enable him by grace to be the godly husband his wife needs.

God certainly worked mightily through my husband to help me recover from over two decades of child abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse. So, here are seven ways husbands can love their wives and help them recover:

### 1. LISTEN TO HER AND LOVE HER

As the husband of a woman who was abused, this guy is on the frontlines. He’s the boots-on-the-ground. Her go-to person. Her first defense. As such, he’ll likely be the first person she tells many things. Some of them will be upsetting. Some of them will break his heart.

Remind him to take care of himself. Remind him that it’s not his job to fix this. That’s the Holy Spirit’s wheelhouse. When his wife starts telling him upsetting, disturbing, or heartbreaking



things, his job is to listen to her and love her. If something she confides makes him angry (and it will), remind him to assure her that he loves her and he's angry at those who harmed her.

It probably goes without saying that finding fault in her, such as lamenting the fact that she went to that party, drank too much, or whatever the situation may be, is unhelpful. Rather, as Romans 12:15 says, "... mourn with those who mourn." He will not always know what to say, and that's OK. In those moments, he can hug her, hold her hand, and weep with her.

## 2. PROTECT HER FROM ABUSE

There may come a time when the husband needs to cut an abuser out of his wife's life. During my early 20's, my dad used to call me on the phone and convince me to let him visit for the weekend. During one visit, late at night, he snuck out of our guestroom, logged onto my personal computer in my office, and emailed private files to our pastor and possibly others.

The files included an unsent letter I'd written to church leaders expressing how angry I was that they hadn't seen through my dad or done anything to protect me. It seemed my dad was trying to turn our church leadership against me.

After that breach of privacy, our pastor recommended we not let my dad stay in our home again. In fact, he recommended I cut all communication. However, I was too afraid of my dad, and I loved him too much, to tell him I needed him to stay out of my life.

So, my husband, Jason, did it for me. He told my dad that from that point on, he couldn't call me, email me, visit me, or send me gifts. My dad was cut off. Except for a sister's wedding, I haven't seen or spoken to him in about 13 years.

Some people do not want to be forgiven. At least, not for the right reasons. A survivor will need a wise protector to defend her from people who mean her harm.

For example, I've learned I'm vulnerable to personalities that subconsciously remind me of my dad. I'm used to certain brands of sin – apathy, misogyny, and sexual harassment – and because of this, I'm sometimes too tolerant of abusive or inappropriate comments. I neglect to stand up for myself when I'm treated badly.

The husband may need to help his wife identify and reject certain negative relationships.

## 3. MEDIATING DRAMA

Unfortunately, even after an abuser is out of our lives, mutual friends and family members often serve as conduits for abuse; gossiping, passing on messages from our abuser, or shaming us for being "unforgiving."

One relative of mine was furious with me for not letting an abuser babysit my kids. Another accused me of stealing my abuser's testimony, because I wrote a book about abuse recovery, and I should have let my abuser write a book instead.

There may come a time when a husband needs to serve as a mediator between his wife and abusive or toxic people. If he notices that she gets anxious or depressed after receiving a text from a certain person, or dreads interacting with particular family members, he might offer to communicate on her behalf.

Of course, she might turn down his offer, and that's fine. But often, abusive or dysfunctional people exacerbate trauma by reopening old wounds and setting off triggers. They may be pressuring her to reconcile with someone who is dangerous, or trying to dissuade her from reporting her abuse or getting help. Some may even inadvertently remind her of pain and cause her distress. Whatever she decides, knowing that her husband is available to be a buffer between herself and stressful people may help her feel loved and understood by him.

#### 4. ENCOURAGE SELF-CARE WITH TLC

I think one of the most difficult challenges of my recovery process has been self-care. My abuser didn't take care of me, at least, not in a healthy or consistent way. Rather, he taught me that I wasn't worth the time, patience, effort, or expense. Being neglected was my normal. Now, as an adult, neglecting myself feels normal. The husband's wife may need him to do things like schedule haircuts for her, exercise with her, or take her shopping for new clothes.

She may also benefit from him accompanying her to the doctor, therapist, or your pastor's office. This will be especially true if her abuser was a pastor, physician, or any kind of authority figure. His presence will likely be a rock in any kind of situation where she feels vulnerable, from an OBGYN appointment to a job interview.

I remember, once, Jason sat in our car in the parking lot while I met with a new client. Knowing he was nearby made me feel safe, and I didn't have to worry about navigating an unfamiliar area of town. Little things like that go a very long way.

#### 5. PROVIDE SPIRITUALLY AND EMOTIONALLY

Husbands are commonly thought of as "providers," but I'm not talking about bringing home the bacon. Providing financially is a blessing, but even more importantly, the husband is his wife's safe-space. He should be her best friend, defender, and spiritual encourager, all rolled into one. The husband's ultimate marriage goal should be to point his wife toward Jesus.

There are many ways a husband can provide for his wife both spiritually and emotionally. For example, if his wife is at home with the kids all day, he can offer to take care of them in the evenings so she can go out with friends, exercise, take a class, work on a hobby, or read her Bible. Quiet time rarely happens when you're a stay-at-home mom. Make sure he's making sure it's happening for his wife, especially as she recovers.

My husband has actually coordinated outings with my friends. He's put gas in his car, come home from work, and handed me his keys. He's a great guy. If it weren't for him, I'd be a friendless hermit scrolling mindlessly through Twitter between potty emergencies, picking up Legos, and cleaning peanut butter off the cat.

It's not that I don't want friends. It's that I don't believe in my heart that anyone would want to hang out with me, so I rarely take the initiative to make outings happen. While recovering from abuse, a survivor may need encouragement and help making friends.

## 6. BOND THROUGH YOUR SHARED INTERESTS

Encourage the husband to take note of his wife's interests and talents. Does she play the piano? Bake? Paint? Run? Whatever her talents or hobbies, he should encourage them, help her make time for those things, and if possible, try to get involved in what she's doing. This is likely a kind of love and thoughtfulness that she rarely-to-never experienced from her abuser. It may be an opportunity for him to fill a gap that's been painfully empty all her life.

Another thing he can do, is look for ways to involve his wife in his hobbies and interests. He should tell her about his projects both at home and at work. He should ask her for advice and feedback. Often, I think, we only ask for other people's advice when we need help. However, asking for someone's ideas is an effective way to show them you care, that you respect their intelligence, and are interested in their opinion.

So, even when he doesn't need help, he should consider asking anyway. This will boost her self-esteem and deepen the bond between them, as they help, build up, and invest in each other.

**PASTORAL TIP:** You too can empower a survivor by letting them use their God-given talents to serve others. Too often, it's assumed that because a survivor has had a rough time, they can't be trusted with responsibility. Sadly, this reinforces a common abuser lie that the survivor is stupid, useless, or otherwise irrelevant.

While some survivors may feel overwhelmed by too much responsibility too soon, others will find feeling useful and valuable to be a much-needed validation. Care must be taken to empower the survivor while not overburdening them. For example, instead of asking them to coordinate a baby shower, or bring snacks to youth night, see if they'd like to team up with several people to accomplish the task. That way, if they drop the ball, it's not a big embarrassing loss, but if they pull through, they feel involved and useful.

Be sensitive to the survivor's schedule, other commitments, and stress level. For example, if she's got three little kids and is coming to Sunday school anyway, bringing a box of animal crackers may be no big deal. However, if she's been caring for small children all week long, serving in the nursery may deprive her of a much needed break.

## 9. LEVERAGING THE STRANGER

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 9: The Stranger Inside (139-152)***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Why might verbal abuse or emotional abuse take longer to recover from?

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2. Why do you think it is that most (if not all) domestic violence and sexual abuse victims have also experienced verbal, emotional, or spiritual abuse too?

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3. What does Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve, and also of Jesus Christ, tell us about psychological abusers? How might it direct us to minister to victims?

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4. What most struck you about this chapter?

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5. What does this chapter tell you about the power of words? How might this inform your preaching, teaching, and pastoral counsel? (James 3:1-12)

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## UNRAVELING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

The “Stranger Inside” is an agonizing pain, but also, a powerful tool which you can use to undo the lies of an abuser. As an survivor confides in you, you’ll likely hear about the many cruel things their abuser has said to them and about them. These will likely include false accusations, insults, backhanded compliments, threats, gossip, and tactless critique.

Consider asking the survivor to help you catalog hurtful things their abuser said. With the survivor’s approval, also consider teaming up with the survivor’s spouse and select friends who you consider discerning. Working together, assess the nature of their emotional abuse, and discern how you can respond to it as a team to encourage, build up, and support recovery.

It may be helpful to create a chart of the Abuser’s Lies versus The Truth. This will not only help you identify how best to build the survivor up, but it can also help the survivor see just how their abuser lied and manipulated them. For example:

Abuser’s Lies:	The Truth:
<i>You’re so stupid.</i>	<i>You have a bachelor degree and write for the local newspaper. You’re very smart.</i>
<i>No man will ever love you.</i>	<i>You’ve been married for 10 years now, and have many male friends who respect you.</i>
<i>What is wrong with you?</i>	<i>Nothing. You’re a perfectly rational and friendly person who has been through some very bad experiences.</i>
<i>You’re pathetic. When are you ever going to learn to stand up for yourself?</i>	<i>Actually, you’re so strong that you survived and thrived despite your abuser’s attempts to break you down. I think that’s amazing.</i>

The survivor may struggle to believe these truths at first. It may take a while and require regular repeated encouragement before they’re able to take your words to heart and mentally absorb the message. Remember, their abuser likely hammered lies into their heads over the course of many years, maybe even decades. It may take that long to completely unlearn them. This will be a process, and that’s OK. The Spirit of God seems to prefer working slowly and methodically. Over time, through your patient efforts, he will slowly untangle the knots of psychological abuse, reversing the damage done by replacing sorrow with joy and insecurity with confidence.

## CREEPING GNOSTICISM IN CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

There is a movement among Christian and biblical counselors that we must be wary of. It teaches that the body and the soul are completely separate as opposed to different aspects of one interconnected whole individual. Our bodies are viewed as a husk, or fleshly vehicle for the soul. Like a shell to a hermit crab, they are disposable, carnal, break, and wear out. Our souls, on the contrary, are eternal and the only thing Jesus came to save. They may not put it so bluntly, but this underlying belief is exposed in how they treat mental illnesses, disorders, and trauma.

For example, if you were to tell such a counselor that you have a heart arrhythmia, they'd send you to a cardiologist straight away. However, if you told them you have depression, anxiety, PTSD, or suicidal ideation, they'd tell you to repent of your weak faith, your ungratefulness for the hardships God gave you, trust Jesus harder, and pray more. These sufferings, they believe, are not caused by hormonal or chemical imbalances. Sorrow, distress, fear, and anxiety – however linked they may be to clear instances of tragedy or injustice – are not rational responses to irrational evil. Rather, they are sin, and it's your job – not the Spirit's – to overcome them.

Well intended or no, this line of thinking is dangerous to abuse victims and survivors, and really any Christian who has endured suffering. It teaches us that happiness is the primary byproduct of salvation. If we don't feel happy, something must have gone wonky with our faith. But that's far from Biblical. In fact, it reminds me of Ron Weasley, when he's trying to read tea leaves, and dubiously concludes, "You're gonna suffer, but you're gonna be happy about it."

Did James say, "Faith without happiness is dead," or that "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26)? Can we not do good deeds even as we suffer? Surely, Jesus is the prime example of doing just that. The concept of grief and suffering precluding faith is recklessly extrabiblical. Can we think of one person in the Bible who had an easy, blissful life? The godliest bastions of faith were often miserable, persecuted, tormented, and driven to cling to God out of sheer desperation.

Jesus wept. Jesus sweated blood. But we covered this in Chapter 3.

This idea that – if you're truly saved – God will cure your mental, emotional, and spiritual pain, but not your physical ailments and injuries, is a form of Gnosticism. It implies that God cares about your soul, but not so much your body. As good students of Scripture we know this to be untrue. God cared about Elijah's physical wellbeing and sent ravens to feed him (1 Kings 17:2-16). Jesus made the lame to walk, the blind to see, and raised corpses back to life. God cares about us, body and soul. He made all of us, from our fingers and toes to our heart and soul.

This form of Gnosticism also implies that our mental and emotional health is a byproduct of salvation. It teaches that if you love Jesus enough and trust God really hard, things like hormone deficiencies, chemical imbalances, and other disorders of the brain or thyroid will be healed. Indeed, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). But this promise isn't said to be fulfilled upon conversion, or upon our repentance, or even upon being a really good Christian, but upon Christ's return!

This heresy claims to be biblical, but it upends the Gospel by burdening the heartbroken in legalism and shame. If we're saved, but we still feel sad, does that mean God doesn't love us? If we love Jesus, but still feel afraid, are we too broken to be redeemed? Has God rejected our repentance? Are we not good enough for Jesus to heal? Are we not measuring up?

While we linger here on earth, there will be tears. There will be death and mourning and crying and pain. Counseling shouldn't be about denying what God himself acknowledges. It should be about shepherding us through that suffering – comforting us amid this broken and dying world – as we await the return of Jesus. Then he will make all things new.

# 10. I WILL FEAR NO EVIL

*This lesson is a companion to **Chapter 10: Out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death (153-164)***

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. What struck you most about how this chapter describes depressive thinking?

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2. Spoiler alert: Depression's husband is named Anxiety. As two sides of the same coin, how and why do you think depression and anxiety might feed into each other?

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3. How might people who struggle with depression be able to relate with Jesus?

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4. How might solid and regular teaching about Heaven give hope to those who suffer?

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## RED FLAGS FOR DEPRESSION

If you notice any of the following problems in a person, it's wise to dig deeper and ask your congregant about feelings of depression:

- Struggling at work / employment problems
- Struggling at school / a drop in grades
- Strained relationships
- Seeming overwhelmed or stressed by what should be mundane life
- Being constantly late / disorganized
- Reluctance to attend Bible studies and social events
- Drug or alcohol abuse

## SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

- Sadness (explained or unexplained)
- Lethargy and tiredness
- Insomnia / excessive sleeping
- Difficulty focusing or finishing tasks
- Anger, frustration, or irritability
- Loss of interest in hobbies or activities they used to enjoy
- Low energy / lack of motivation
- Over-eating / under-eating / craving unhealthy foods
- Anxiety / worry / restlessness
- Reclusiveness and isolation
- Trouble thinking clearly or making decisions
- Constantly second-guessing
- Excessive apologizing / guilt / shame
- Neglect to prioritize needs / lack of self-care
- Always deferring to other's needs / wants / opinions
- Unexplained pain, including headaches or body aches
- Drug or alcohol abuse

Depression can be caused by many different things. Chemical and hormonal imbalances are common medical causes. A general practitioner should be able to evaluate and treat most cases, however, in the case that abuse or PTSD is a factor, a specialized therapist is ideal.

You should counsel your congregant to be careful about alcohol. While having a glass of wine or two helps some people relax, it can also intensify a depressive slump. Make sure they're aware of this so they can moderate accordingly. Similarly, if someone is struggling with anxiety, caffeine is something to be careful with.

Depression may also be situational. For example, an abuser who won't repent, the loss of a loved one, or some past trauma or tragedy. If your congregant experiences depression intermittently, see if you can work together to track the cause. Do they get depressed every time they talk to their mother-in-law? Is a manager or colleague at work causing them stress? Are they depressed on the same day every week? Do they get depressed after specific activities, such as scrolling through Twitter, hearing a song that reminds them of something sad, or drinking alcohol?

Most abuse survivors will experience some level (or a combination) of medical and/or situational depression. Be sure to rule out medical causes right off the bat, as any kind of untreated medical condition is going to make it substantially harder to address situational issues.

**PASTORAL TIP:** Certain medications can cause or exacerbate depression. Ask your congregant to check the side effects of any medication they're taking, including birth control and natural supplements, to rule out negative reactions as well as interactions. For example, if they're taking anti-anxiety medication, and decide it would be nice to relax and have a beer, they could experience an interaction between these two substances which triggers depression.



# 11. WHAT IS SPIRITUAL ABUSE?

*This lesson is a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 11: Recovering Fatherhood (165-180)***

## CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. When did Jonathan first realize Saul was abusive? Why? (pg. 166)  

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2. What does this story tell you about where abuse victims are coming from emotionally?  

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3. Why might a survivor subconsciously sabotage romantic relationships?  

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4. How might an abusive father shape how we understand what God means when he calls himself our Father?  

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5. What are some ways abusive fathers are anti-Fathers? (pg. 168)  

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## THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTI-CHRIST

Spiritual abuse is a clandestine type of heresy. It is lies – often very subtle lies – that ultimately drive a psychological wedge between the victim and Jesus. These lies usually grant the abuser control over the victim in the name of God. For example, a child may be told, “Children, obey your parents,” but “in the Lord,” is left off the end or never explained. The child is taught that God wants them to submit to their abusive parent’s whims, even when they’re told to commit, cover up, or suffer the abuser’s sin and evil.

Social media is flooded with hashtags like #ChurchToo, #SBCToo, and #CatholicToo. Newspapers and websites have chronicled horrifying accounts of abuse by pastors, elders, youth ministers, and seminary leaders. But spiritual abuse is more than abuse that takes place in a church building. It can take place in homes and at youth camp, in Christian schools and at

seminaries. It may coincide with sexual or violent abuse. It may be verbal or psychological in nature. It may be committed by an individual or a network of abusers, enablers, and fools.

What makes spiritual abuse particularly heinous is that the Holy Word and name of God is weaponized to harm people who were made in his image. When it's perpetuated by a pastor or church, the Bride of Christ has been exploited like a host by a parasite. This is why I consider spiritual abuse to be blasphemy. The abuser is falsely claiming that God endorses their evil.

The harm done to victims is multi-faceted; overwhelming the mind, breaking the heart, and suffocating the soul. This is a brand of evil that should make us just as angry as every other form of abuse, because not only is the victim terribly wronged, but God is profaned. He is treated abusively with irreverence and contempt. His Word is desecrated by a false teacher.

There are several layers we need to unpack here. There's the commission of earthly crimes, and the commission of spiritual abominations. There are things you can go to prison for, and things you can go to Hell for. Understanding what's what, and who is responsible, is key to helping us counteract this greatest betrayal.

## SPIRITUAL ABUSE ENABLES EVIL

My main abuser was my father; a well-read theologian and occasional Sunday School teacher. One minute he could be quietly studying the Bible, and the next beating his daughter black and blue. The hands he folded in prayer were the hands he used to push me, shake me, and throw me against walls. The paradox of godly words and ungodly behavior was a mind-game in itself.

But bruises heal. Tears dry. It's the hurtful lies and scathing words that stab into your mind like splinters for decades.

*"If you don't forgive me, Jesus won't forgive you."*

*"Honor your father; don't dishonor him by reporting."*

*"If you're angry or depressed, God won't hear your prayers."*

I remember being taught that if I was a good little girl, didn't complain, and didn't tell anyone what was happening in our home, my dad would see Jesus in me and change. Maybe he'd love me and become a good father. Terrible family secrets – porn addictions, violence, sexual abuse, and death threats – were covered up in the name of Christ.

So, how do we counter spiritually abusive lies. How do we minister to someone who's been psychologically abused using Scripture? How can we help them heal from this damage?

## POINTING PAST THE LENS OF ABUSE

Like all people, survivors of abuse view the world based on our personal experiences. If we have a violent father, it may seem alarming that God calls himself our Heavenly Father. If we had a cruel pastor, it may be hard to understand why Jesus calls himself a Shepherd. If we had a perverse husband, hearing Jesus referred to as a bridegroom may feel awkward or wrong. If we were betrayed by a youth leader or teacher, it seems strange to picture Christ as a Rabbi.

The people of God are supposed to represent God. Their words and actions are supposed to point us to Jesus. When those who should be examples of godliness behave in ways more aligned with the devil, it distorts our understanding and emotions regarding Christ and Christianity.

Like a discolored lens, abuse filters good people, good churches, and God himself, through shades of pain. So, how do we overcome this? How do we pull off that lens of abuse – that perspective learned from past experiences – and view God in the way he wants us to?

## 1. WICKED PEOPLE DON'T REPRESENT GOD

The first thing to emphasize is that abusive people do not represent our holy and loving God. An earthly father may be an angry tyrant, yet our Heavenly Father is patient and loving. A corrupt pastor may lead us down the wrong path, yet Jesus “leads me beside the still waters ... in paths of righteousness (Psalm 23:2-3). A husband may berate, degrade, and humiliate us, yet God is the unchangeable embodiment of love. A teacher may teach us lies, yet all God's words are trustworthy and true.

Abusers don't represent God. They're fakes. Liars. Anti-Christ. Anti-Fathers.

You may find it helpful to remind the survivor of the fruits of the Spirit; “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) These are the attributes of God. They're also character traits which his Spirit develops in the hearts of those who truly love him. Compare these attributes with the behavior of their abuser. You will likely find that the abuser is the exact opposite of almost all these things.

## 2. ABUSIVE CHURCHES AREN'T 'THE CHURCH'

There are toxic, unhealthy, dysfunctional, and abusive churches. It's good to acknowledge that honestly and openly. The survivor needs to know you are aware of hypocrites and false teachers. If they feel you lack perspective in this area, they will find you difficult to trust. It's important to clarify that the True Church, the Bride of Christ, will repent of their sins, turn from their wicked ways, and heal (2 Chronicles 7:14). Where there is no repentance, there is no salvation. Be very clear about this. Where there is deception and manipulation, there is only enough truth to make the lies sound convincing. Where there is no love, there is no Jesus.

When pastoring an abuse survivor, do not hesitate to call out churches and church leaders (including spiritual guardians like Christian parents) who bear little to no fruit of the Spirit. We must call evil what it is. As John describes in Revelation 2 and 3, there are loveless churches, idolatrous churches, and dead churches. We must encourage the survivor not to let the sins of one congregation, one denomination, or one cult – let alone one person – define the entire Bride of Christ in their mind. This will be difficult, but it's vital to attempt.

A True Church—the authentic people of God—will be a haven for the broken and oppressed. They will be a family for the widow and the orphan. A True Church does not cover up sin, but calls evil what it is. It defends Christ's sheep against wolves.

It's also important to encourage survivors by reminding them that it's not a sin to leave an abusive or spiritually-toxic church. Leaving a congregation doesn't mean you're leaving Jesus.

In fact, if Jesus isn't in a congregation, leaving it may mean following Jesus. It takes a great deal of wisdom, sacrifice, and prayer, to discern when it's time to find a new church. If the survivor has done this, acknowledge their courage, strength, and virtue for doing so.

### 3. CHANGE UP THE WORSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Often, when we leave an abusive church, or we're abused in a particular church environment, we'll feel anxious in similar environments. For example, when my dad abused me, we were in a conservative church with a spartan worship service featuring piano, traditional hymns, and academic sermons. There was nothing wrong with the theology per se, but the environment constantly reminded me of my dad. So, Jason and I began attending another church with a praise band. That small change, while superficial, enabled me to worship without feeling sad or unsafe.

If someone was abused in your congregation, and you notice them feeling uncomfortable at church, this could be an aspect of why. While we don't want to make them feel unwelcome or unwanted, it may be wise to tell them that if they need to visit another church, you'll still pastor them, and you'll still be their friend. You can help them find a good church home where they'll feel safe and not be reminded of past horrors. The goal here is to build up their relationship with God; their relationship with your church or denomination is a tiny side-note by comparison.

While things like music style, order of worship, and even sanctuary décor may seem trivial, if the survivor is perceiving worship through the lens of negative experiences, even subconsciously, it can inject fear, anxiety, and depression into our hearts, inhibiting our ability to worship God and fellowship with other believers. So, don't be afraid to change things up.

### 4. JESUS SUFFERED CHURCH ABUSE, TOO

The most important thing survivors need to know, more than anything else written above, is that Jesus suffered church abuse, too. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and rabbis were the pastors, seminary presidents, and Sunday school teachers of his day. This does not mean we need to let ourselves be crucified, but it does mean we're understood and heard by God.

The Jews who chanted, "Crucify him!" were good and pious temple-goers; the supposed people of God. The disciples who betrayed him, denied him, and fled when things got tough, were his small group, his brothers, his best friends.

The spiritual abuse Jesus endured as he was falsely accused and humiliated would have devastated anyone less than God. In Matthew 4, as Jesus wandered in the wilderness, Satan himself came to deceive, manipulate, mock, and harass him. That was spiritual abuse.

Because, what did Satan do? He quoted the Bible. He twisted the Scriptures. And Jesus called him out on this spiritual abuse three times, finally saying, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

So, spiritual abuse is not a new problem. It is, in fact, a very old problem; one that traces its roots back to Satan himself. As early as Eden he's been twisting God's words, and tricking people into doubting their Creator's goodness.

Knowing that Jesus Christ can relate with the survivor's suffering should give us great encouragement, but also great pause, because Jesus has the ability to evaluate our pastoral care from the perspective of a survivor. We must treat survivors, and all our congregants really, with the same compassion we'd give Jesus.

This is what Jesus meant when he prophesied in Matthew 25:41-46, “‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Of course, the glorious implication of all this – the truth which Satan doesn't want us to take away from this lesson – is that Christians who have suffered can relate on a personal level with the Lord of all Creation. We are not called to obey abusers. We are not called to submit to evil. We are called to love and honor our holy Father, Shepherd, Bridegroom, and Friend. We follow Jesus. Because of this, children are commended to “obey your parents,” but only, “in the Lord;” only insofar as it honors and pleases Jesus Christ.

And so, we work patiently and steadily, for as long as it takes, to peel away that lens of spiritual abuse. By God's grace, like Isaiah, someday we'll be able to say to those who have endured abuse, “Survivor, behold, your God!” (40:9)

**PASTORAL TIP:** Ask the survivor what Bible verses their abuser used to defend their behavior. Make a list of these and continue to add to it as they remember things. For each verse, carefully consider every aspect of how Scripture was twisted and the implications of it. Was the verse used to justify or excuse evil? Was it used to silence, shame, frighten, or manipulate the victim? In what ways? How must the victim have felt, and how must they now feel when they read the Bible or listen to sermons through this warped filter? After analyzing this, reframe each verse in its correct Gospel context. Recalibrate the verse to point away from the abuser, and back toward Jesus. Help the survivor see how the abuser has lied and why; how they manipulated and abused Scripture in order to manipulate and abuse them. Our goal is to help the survivor differentiate the lies of their abuser from the truths of their Savior. Do this lie by lie, false teaching by false teaching. View each misused verse as a single thread in a blindfold. As you unravel each one, by God's grace, the whole blindfold will come undone.

<i>Abused Text</i>	<i>Lie</i>	<i>Truth</i>
Matthew 18	There aren't enough witnesses. She can't talk about it and shouldn't have reported.	She's a witness, as are the police officers and doctors.
Exodus 20:12	Reporting child abuse dishonors your father and mother.	Reporting crime and standing up to evil honors God your Father.

## TEXTS FROM THE FIELD

Hi Jenn. I'm having a conversation with a fellow pastor. He thinks that if we just get all our theology right (spoiler alert - his idea of right!) we won't have any abuse in our church. I wish he were right. That would be awesome! Lol. But clearly, this is wrong. Have you ever encountered this idea? How do you respond to this?

Hey Jerry! Yeah, I've encountered that a few times. It's pretty easy to prove false though when we consider that abuse is sin. Do we believe that if we get all our theological ducks in a row, sinners will stop sinning? Of course not. I mean, sure, some heresies and bad theology may make a church a higher target for abusers, but no matter how biblical or Gospel-centered our teaching, we're still teaching and preaching to sinners. And sinners gonna sin!

Haha! Yeah, it's pretty illogical. That's a good point. Another weird teaching I've come across is that forgiveness is the "antidote" for victims of childhood sexual abuse. As if, once we forgive a person, all the spiritual and psychological damage will disappear.

Oh wow. Yeah, that's really weird. It's like saying if "John" forgives the guy who hit him with a car, his broken leg will be healed. People don't think through these ideas logically. Psychological trauma is not unlike physical trauma. It takes time to heal. The process may be lengthy and agonizing, you may need medical care, and full recovery may never happen this side of Heaven.

Amen! We cling to Jesus. We pray. We seek help as needed. We can't turn things like forgiveness into a cure-all or works-righteousness or it turns quickly into legalism.

Yes, absolutely. This reminds me. A while back I worked for a pain doctor. He told me that, when you're physically injured, painkillers actually help the body heal faster and heal correctly. If you're in a ton of pain, different joints and muscles are going to compensate for the injured tissue, resulting in further trauma, a longer recovery period, and sometimes you heal in a misaligned or incomplete way. I think the same is true of emotional injuries. If we're overwhelmed with shock and agony, we can't process things logically or compartmentalize. Medication, such as anti-anxiety or anti-depressants, can lessen our pain enabling us to think more clearly and take one thing at a time.

That's a really interesting thought. I may point that out to a widower I'm pastoring. His wife passed from cancer last month and he's overcome with grief. He's finding it impossible to get their finances in order, which in turn is causing him a lot of stress, compounding everything. Thanks for that. Very helpful.

## 12. THE TRUTH ABOUT REPENTANCE

*This lesson is meant to be a companion to **Not Forsaken, Chapter 12: The Truth About Forgiveness.***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. How is forgiveness sometimes misused to enable, excuse, or cover up abuse?

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2. Why might ongoing abuse make forgiveness impossible?

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3. Why is forgiveness often a process?

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4. Why is it important that a survivor recover – at least to a degree where they can view their abuser somewhat objectively – before considering reconciliation?

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### SORRY NOT SORRY

“I’m sorry,” I remember my dad saying. “I’m sorry, and I love you.”

He didn’t say what he was sorry for. He didn’t mention the hand-shaped bruises aching up and down my small 11-year-old body. He didn’t seem to understand how afraid and devastated I’d been. But that was the first time I’d ever heard my dad say he was sorry for anything, and the relief it brought felt like rain after a drought.

In the back of my mind, a little voice said, “*Don’t trust this. He’s only apologizing because Mom threatened to tell Pastor Jim if he didn’t.*” I shoved that voice down. I smothered my doubts. I

had prayed for so long that Dad would change. I had tried to be a good daughter who reminded him of Jesus. This apology, however vague, was hope and a sign God was working. Or was it?

### THE CRUELTY OF FALSE REPENTANCE

Around a decade would pass before I'd hear my dad apologize again. I didn't assume sincerity. But by that time, I'd already blown the whistle. I'd told our pastor everything. Dad was under church discipline. His marriage was imploding. He had nothing to gain by lying, did he?

And then something strange happened. As I began sharing my story with pastors, family, and friends, my dad would admit and apologize for things he'd done, but then weeks or even days later, claim he didn't remember any of it. He'd say he didn't recall beating me, throwing me down on the stairs, or even his recent apologies for those events. He didn't remember his sexual comments, throwing a knife at me, or threatening to shoot me. He'd apologize, then retract. He'd remember, then claim to forget. Back and forth this went for maybe a year, until I felt like I was losing my mind.

"I don't know what to think," I told him over the phone one day. Huddled on the kitchen floor, I spoke between sobs. "I have two choices. Either you're crazy and don't know what you're doing, or you're evil and you understand completely."

"Well, I'm not crazy," he replied calmly. "You're just going to have to accept that I'm evil."

That was the last time I spoke to my father.

### ANALYZING REPENTANCE

I've had a lot of experience dealing with unrepentant people: multiple abusers spanning over two decades of child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. All of this was reinforced and compounded by psychological abuse, which continued well into my 30s. Because of my background, I've accrued some practical wisdom. Because of my faith, I've turned to the Bible for guidance when distinguishing real from fake repentance.

There are stubborn sinners who refuse to apologize, liars who claim to be sorry when they're not, and hypocrites who may truly believe they're sorry yet lack remorse or any understanding of biblical repentance. So, what are the attributes of genuine repentance? Here are eight signs I've gleaned both from life and God's Word.

#### 1. A REPENTANT PERSON IS APPALLED BY SIN

Horrified by what they've done, they'll humble themselves, grieve the pain they've caused, and be cut to the heart in their conviction. As the prophet mourned in Isaiah 6:5, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

#### 2. THEY MAKE AMENDS

In Luke 19:1–10, we read the story of Zacchaeus and the generosity he demonstrated as part of his repentance. A tax collector, thief, and oppressor of God's people, Zacchaeus made amends:



“Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (v. 8). And Jesus confirmed the authenticity of Zacchaeus’s repentance: “Today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9).

### 3. THEY ACCEPT CONSEQUENCES

A genuinely repentant person will accept consequences. These may include losing the trust of others, relinquishing a position of authority, or submitting to worldly authorities such as law enforcement. When the thief on the cross repented, he said to his companion, “Do you not fear God? . . . We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve” (Luke 23:40–41). And Jesus commended his repentance by assuring him of his salvation: “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

### 4. THEY DON'T EXPECT OR DEMAND FORGIVENESS

Often, I’ve been told by my abuser, “If you don’t forgive me, God won’t forgive you.” But this threatening posture indicates insincere repentance. It’s unloving, manipulative, and implies the offender doesn’t accept or comprehend the gravity of what they’ve done. When Jacob approached Esau and repented, he didn’t expect mercy, let alone compassion. In Genesis 32, we read he felt “great fear” and “distress” (v. 7). He anticipated an attack (v. 11) and considered himself unworthy of kindness (v. 10). In fact, so certain was Jacob of retribution that he separated his wives, children, and servants from him, lest Esau’s anger fall on them too.

### 5. THEY FEEL THE DEPTH OF THE PAIN THEY’VE CAUSED

A repentant person won’t try to minimize, downplay, or excuse what they’ve done. They won’t point to all their good works as if those actions somehow outweigh or cancel out the bad. They’ll view even their “righteous acts” as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). They won’t shame the offended party for being hurt or angry. They won’t blame their victims or others for making them sin. Rather, they’ll take responsibility, acknowledge the damage they’ve done, and express remorse.

### 6. THEY CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIOR

A truly repentant person will realize they need God to sanctify their heart. They’ll proactively work to change their behavior and take steps to avoid sin and temptation. That may mean seeing a counselor, going to rehab, or asking friends, pastors, or law enforcement to give them oversight and hold them accountable. Consider the stark contrast between the church persecutor Saul before salvation and after. Acts 9 tells us that even though some Christians were understandably hesitant to trust him, his character had already altered dramatically.

### 7. THEY GRANT SPACE TO HEAL

The fruit of the Spirit includes patience, kindness, grace, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). A truly repentant person will demonstrate these consistently. They won’t feel entitled to trust or

acceptance; rather, they'll be humble, unassuming, and willing to sacrifice their own wants and needs for the benefit of the injured party. They won't pressure us to hurry up and "get over it" or "move on." Rather, they'll understand our distrust, acknowledge our grief, and honor the boundaries we've requested.

As an abuser, they loved their sin more than they loved you. As a repentant sinner, they should love you more than their sin and pride.

## 8. THEY'RE AWESTRUCK BY FORGIVENESS

If a person feels entitled to forgiveness, they don't value forgiveness. When Jacob received Esau's forgiveness, he was so astounded he wept: "To see your face is like seeing the face of God, for you have received me favorably" (Gen. 30:10). Jacob realized that forgiveness is divine miracle, a picture of the Messiah, and a sign of the Lord's mercy. Though Jacob and Esau hadn't spoken for 40 years, Jacob knew God had empowered Esau, by grace, to forgive him.

## REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS ARE FROM GOD

When these eight signs of repentance are authentically present, we are blessed. Our offender has forsaken evil, and the God of peace is glorified. But what do we do when these signs are not present? What do we do when someone lies about being sorry to avoid consequences, or uses our goodwill as an opportunity to hurt us again?

For more than three decades, I begged God to call my abusive dad to repentance. Instead, like Pharaoh, his heart only hardened. His pretenses at change turned out to be a strategy he used to enable his wickedness. My own love and trust were weaponized to betray me.

Eventually, I had to accept that my dad didn't want to get better. And no matter how much I loved him and wanted him to repent, change, be a good dad, love me, and love Jesus, salvation is God's work, and I couldn't fix my dad. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for a person is to not let them hurt us any longer.

*"The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them."* Ezekiel 18:20

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## 13. DEFINING THE ABUSER

*This lesson is meant to be a companion to Not Forsaken, Chapter 13: Defining Love (201-218)*

Understanding the Biblical concept of love, and being able to discern and measure the fruits of the Spirit working in a person's heart, can conversely help us identify a "wolf." Not only must we see evidence of these fruits, but we must also see notable, measurable spiritual growth over time. An abuser may be able to fake patience, or even love, but faking maturation over the course of months and years is far more difficult. By learning to detect hypocrites, we're not only enabled to better protect the sheep, but we can confront abusers with their sin. It's vital then to be able to identify the abuser, not just for the sake of the innocent, but for the sake of the guilty.

Too often, churches fail to confront abuse or condemn wickedness because they'd rather be "loving" or "think the best" of the offender. It is a great evil when innocent people are unprotected from wolves, but it is also a great evil when abusers are allowed to meander straight into Hell unhindered and unchallenged. It is not loving to forgive and excuse one who is unrepentant. It is not merciful to patiently stand by while someone cannibalizes their soul.

Say, for example, you have a friend who has drunk too much at a party. He wants to drive home, but he can barely walk straight. Are you going to do what's easy and let him leave, or are you going to risk offending him and take his keys? The same concept applies to an abuser. He's drunk on sin. It's impeding his judgement, his perception of right and wrong, and affecting how he treats his family and others. Are you going to do what's easy and let him continue on his destructive path, or are you going to risk losing his friendship, and do your best to stop his reckless devastation both of himself and of others?

When we balk at the choice between doing what is right, and what is easy, our inaction becomes a kind of action. Our silence sends a devastating message. Our failure to intervene becomes just as terrible and offensive as if we had aided and abetted destruction.

### SURVIVOR SPEAK

In survivor circles, you'll often hear abusers described as narcissists, sociopaths, or psychopaths. Many modern psychologists and therapists have abandoned these labels in favor of terms like Borderline Personality Disorder. Part of this is an effort to more specifically diagnose behavioral patterns, which is good. However, there is also a movement to explain sin and evil away as if it were an illness or disability as opposed to a choice. Mental illness can certainly complicate sinful behavior, but most abusers aren't sick. Rather, they're in an advanced state of sin.

A Christian counselor recently told me, "Narcissism, sociopathy, and psychopathy are illnesses. Sins like selfishness and apathy are the symptoms. Once they come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, their illness will be cured and they'll show compassion and empathy again."

While this line of logic is growing in popularity, it makes no logical sense. Does accepting Christ as our Savior cure illnesses like cancer, diabetes, asthma, or schizophrenia? Will getting baptized wash chicken pox away, or clear the mind of someone with Alzheimer's? No, because these are illnesses. God can heal them, but we aren't promised perfect health this side of Heaven.

However, accepting Christ does eventually and ultimately cure us of being desperately wicked jerks, because being a desperately wicked jerk is a cluster-sin, not an illness. If narcissism, sociopathy, or psychopathy were illnesses, accepting Christ would not cure them. Thankfully though, salvation – genuine salvation – involves repentance for sin, and should result in drastic behavioral changes, similar to what we see in the conversion of the Apostle Paul (Acts 22:1-21).

It shouldn't surprise us that the world would confuse evil with illness. Outside belief in God, there is no logical basis for morality. Subsequently, secular philosophers and physicians must come up with explanations for abuse and dysfunctional behavior outside of sin. They can't define it as rebellion against God, because they don't recognize God as being God.

If we're dealing with an abuser who suffers from an illness like depression, anxiety, or some mental condition that makes empathy difficult, that does not excuse evil. There are many dear and godly Christians who suffer from hormonal imbalances and cognitive disorders who would never harm anyone. Using illness or disorder to explain away evil is an insult to every sick or disabled person who loves others to the best of their ability. While an abuser's sin may be so intertwined with illness that it's hard for us to distinguish one from the other, God searches the heart and understands every plan and thought (1 Chronicles 28:9). He knows delusion from deceit, accident from malevolence, and sorrow from crocodile tears.

Sin is by nature chaotic. It is the violation of God's created order and law. Thus, there is a quality of insanity and futility in sin. As Ecclesiastes 9:3 observes, "the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts." Sin can present as insanity and insanity can present as sin. Great wisdom is required to distinguish the two, particularly if and when the two occur simultaneously. In that instance, we must treat the illness first. Once its symptoms are being well managed through medication and therapy, we'll have a much easier time addressing the sin.

## ACUTE SIN VERSUS CHRONIC SIN

I think it's helpful to differentiate between what I call Acute Sin and Chronic Sin. You'll sometimes hear physicians talk about Acute Pain versus Chronic Pain. While I'm deriving these terms from the medical field, the concept is biblical.

Acute Sin is a singular event which may be minor or serious, but of which the person genuinely repents and does not repeat. A Biblical example would be when Peter denied Christ (John 18:15-27). This had never happened before, and it never happened again. Most importantly, as soon as Peter realized what he'd done, he was heartbroken. He repented, reconciled with Jesus, and went on to lead a life that contrasted starkly with the sin he'd rejected.

Chronic Sin, however, is a habitual sin that's repeated without genuine repentance or lasting change. It may start as smaller sins such as bitterness, lust, and little lies, but these are indulged and developed into larger sins like revenge, adultery, and fraud. The offender may fake an apology – they may even behave themselves for a while to make it look extra convincing – but ultimately, they persist in their wickedness. Wickedness is their lifestyle, their worldview, their identity. You'll only see fake fruit of the Spirit in their lives, because God is not at work sanctifying their hearts. They love their sin more than they love Jesus, and when push comes to shove, they'll choose sin over change.

A Biblical example of Chronic Sin is King Saul, who allowed his vanity to poison his soul and drive him to jealousy, conspiracy, attempted murder, and witchcraft (1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 1). He indulged his sin until it drove him to irrational outbursts of rage and paranoia. Modern physicians might have diagnosed Saul with mental illness and prescribed pills – and perhaps they would be right – but Saul brought on his depraved state by stubbornly and tenaciously indulging the evil in his heart. Amnon, in 2 Samuel 13 is another example of this phenomenon. He indulged his lust and selfishness until it culminated in the rape of his own sister.

*“Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.’” Genesis 4:6-7*

When people refuse to rule over their sin, and instead open the door to it, practice it, and indulge it, it has a callousing effect on their conscience and soul. Like alcohol, the drinker must imbibe greater and greater quantities, and stronger and stronger varieties, to sate their thirst for evil and their lust for that degenerate high. Sin numbs them to healthy emotions such as empathy, compassion, and remorse. They may sin over and over, worse and worse, until they find it difficult or impossible to feel pity for their victims or sorrow for what they’ve done. They were not born this way. They made themselves this way. They were born sinners, yes, but they have developed their sin into their specialization, like an artform.

Now, is it impossible for an abuser – someone with Chronic Sin – to genuinely repent? Of course not. However, we must be extremely wary of trusting one who has proven untrustworthy. In 1 Kings 21:25-29, King Ahab repents of his heinous wickedness and humbles himself before God. While the Lord honors Ahab’s repentance and seems to express favor toward him, in the very next chapter, God sends a “lying spirit” to trick Ahab. Subsequently, Ahab is killed in battle, “and the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed themselves in it,” I Kings 22:38. So, we can say with fair certainty that Ahab’s repentance was not of a salvific quality.

## KNOW THEM BY THEIR FRUIT

Some will tell you that all abusers were abused at some point. In my experience, this is untrue. There’s the famous idiom, “Hurt people hurt people.” As someone who has been hurt, I personally find the phrase offensive. While some in their trauma will lash out, and those who don’t address their trauma may grow bitter and vindictive, Christ is the God of the brokenhearted. In fact, I would argue that by God’s grace, *hurt people help people*. As Christian survivors, we know what it’s like to be victimized, and so we make special efforts to protect, encourage, and defend others. To be sure, some abusive behavior is learned behavior, but not all hurt people hurt people. In fact, statistics show that the percentage of victims who become abusers is low. Since most abusers are liars, and many will claim to be survivors to garner pity and excuse their sin, it’s also hard to get accurate data.

But even more important to understand is that not all hurtful people are hurting. Making this assumption is incredibly dangerous. It can destroy your ministry and cost souls. For example, if you walk into a crisis mistakenly pitying a psychopath, they will leverage your compassion to con you. Would you pet a feral wolf or coyote, hoping that deep down inside, it really wants to

be a Labrador? Of course not. The wolf may sincerely want to live in your sheep fold, that coyote may genuinely enjoy hanging around your hen house, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a feral predator. It will eventually bite the hand that feeds it and wreak havoc in your church.

There are people who enjoy inflicting pain – whether physical or psychological – and who derive gratification from watching others suffer. My dad was a violent child abuser and sexual predator, but he was supposedly raised in a happy Christian home. By his own account, he was never abused. He chose to be evil. Some have tried to explain it away, asking, “I wonder what happened to your dad to make him so messed up?” The answer, my friends, can be found in Genesis 3. What happened to my dad is his own sin; his decision to pursue an education in evil.

At some point, we have to stop asking, “What happened to this person to make them act this way?” and ask instead, “Are they intentionally causing pain because pain is their goal? Are these random acts of wickedness, or a strategy designed to create the damage we're now seeing?” More often than not, if someone routinely creates chaos, it's what they intend to do.

To be sure, any sinful or traumatized person may act irrationally and even violently, but when a person is an abuser, you will hopefully see clues as to an underlying method in the madness, because the madness is not madness at all, but a calculated campaign.

Here are a few red flags that what you're witnessing is not accidental or Acute Sin, but rather, a pattern or ongoing strategy:

- **Chronic Sin** – repeated sin that doesn't cease after repentance, counseling, or correction.
- **Gossip** – spreading rumors, “concerns,” or “prayer requests” which seem maliciously aimed to discredit or call into question the victim's sanity, character, or intelligence.
- **False Accusation** – accusing others of gossip or slander for genuinely seeking help from others or for confronting the abuser with their sin.
- **Projection** – imagining that others harbor the same temptations they do, and falsely accusing innocent people of sins they themselves have committed.
- **Accountability Resentment** – they may play along with your session for a while, but underneath, they're resistant or unresponsive to church leadership, counseling, therapy, and medical treatment. They may use your attempt to minister to them as an opportunity to dupe and manipulate you into taking their side against the victim.
- **Blame Shifting** – they will blame their sin on their own real or imagined suffering, including past abuse, stress at work, financial hardship, or even bad traffic. Often, they will blame the victim for stressing them, provoking them, or causing them to sin.

Of course, not everyone who gossips, resents accountability, or blame-shifts is an abuser. In fact, many abuse survivors will fear authority because they've been betrayed and abused by authority figures in their past. It's important not to mistake *fear and trauma* for resentment or condescension. However, when we see these traits combined with other issues, or repeated as a pattern that perpetuates pain upon others, we do well to be wary and watchful.

Here's how *Fear of Authority* and *Accountability Resentment* differ:

- **Fear of Authority** – you should be able to trace fear back to real negative experiences in the victim's past; a pastor, parent, teacher, or role model who in some way betrayed their trust or abused them. Fear of Authority is a logical reaction to a traumatic event.
- **Accountability Resentment** – is motivated mostly if not entirely by pride. The offender mistakenly believes they can smooth over their problems and fix broken relationships by themselves; they're too smart, manly, or strong to require counsel or help; their sins aren't as serious as everyone is making them out to be and everyone really ought to stop being so dramatic. They may not admit these things out loud, but you will hopefully pick up on the arrogance. Arrogance is a common sin, but it's the calling card of an abuser.

## THE SCHOOL OF THE FOOL

Some people practice sin the way a pianist practices Bach, or a ballerina practices pirouettes. This is how abusers create themselves; they are proficient sinners and consummate actors, but they all began as students.

This is exactly what David is warning us about in Psalm 1, when he says, blessed is the man who does not listen to the counsel of the wicked, nor walk the career path of sinners, nor sit in the student's seat at scoffing university. The godly man meditates on the ways of God and delights in studying morality. The evil man meditates on perversion and delights in studying sin.

The Book of Proverbs also makes a motif of this concept. There are those who follow the teachings of Wisdom, and those who follow the instruction of Folly; those who listen to the admonition of a godly parent, and those who listen to tempters, liars, and workers of iniquity. Just as a theologian attends seminary and studies Scripture, so an abuser practices lawlessness and studies techniques to perfect and facilitate abuse.

“Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and *meditate treachery* all day long.” Psalm 38:12

“No one who *practices* deceit shall dwell in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes.” Psalm 101:7

“Good sense is a fountain of life ... but *the instruction of fools* is folly.” Proverbs 16:22

“They are all senseless and foolish; they are *taught by worthless wooden idols*.” Jeremiah 10:8. Other translations describe this teaching as, “*the instruction of idols*” (ESV) and the “*discipline of delusion*.” (NASB)

“For the fool speaks folly, and *his heart is busy* with iniquity, to *practice ungodliness*, to utter error concerning the Lord, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink.” Isaiah 32:6

“Do not enter *the path* of the wicked, and do not walk in *the way* of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are

robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble. For they *eat the bread of wickedness* and *drink the wine of violence.*” Proverbs 4:14-17

This Biblical description of sin as a discipline, a practice, an exercise routine, a chosen pursuit, a religious sacrament, and a field of study, must inform our understanding of abusers. They are not ignorant lost puppies who made an oopsie, but venomous snakes who camouflage themselves in the grass, waiting to strike any sheep or shepherd who wanders too close.

The following terms have specific definitions in the medical world, but more generic and transient meanings in abuse survivor communities. The purpose of this material is not to teach us to diagnose anyone, but rather to equip us to converse with victims, survivors, counselors, and therapists, so you know what they mean when they describe someone as a narcissistic abuser or a sociopath. Granted, depending on the survivor's experiences, they may have their own understanding of these terms, but generally speaking, this is what is meant.

## WHAT IS A NARCISSIST?

- A narcissist will take pleasure in making others feel inferior. She or he will use backhanded compliments, petty criticism, and withholding thanks or praise, to degrade and break down their victim, while making themselves look good or feel superior.
- They will use gossip and slander to sabotage other people's relationships. This may be done out of sheer spite, or as part of a campaign to maliciously establish themselves as their victim's only confidant, friend, or advocate.
- A narcissist will often hijack conversations to talk about themselves. If a parent is praising their teen for getting accepted into college, the narcissist may use this as an opportunity to boast about their own academic achievements. If a cancer patient is sharing a prayer request, the narcissist may divert attention to their own health issues, however minor or irrelevant. Everything somehow becomes about them.
- They will abruptly drop friends without explanation. They'll abandon loved ones who no longer fuel their egos and turn against those they perceive as a threat. For example, if their victim remains upbeat despite their mind-games, or a sibling gets a promotion at work, the narcissist may take it as a personal insult.
- Narcissists are often extremely jealous people. They will resent those they perceive as smarter, wealthier, more popular, or more successful than themselves. They will want to keep their victims down, and may hinder the success of their own children or spouse.
- They will disregard normal boundaries and interfere in other people's relationships and marriages. They will sow distrust, make insinuations, and intentionally set up awkward situations to generate conflict and drama. It's as if they view themselves as a television director, and their family and friends as characters in their very stressful soap opera.
- A narcissist will be entitled and demanding. They'll expect everyone to go along with what they want, whether or not they've communicated their wishes. This could mean anything from throwing a fit because their sister dared to offer to host Thanksgiving, to making their husband sleep on the couch because he bought the wrong brand of coffee.



- A narcissist will have grandiose opinions of their own accomplishments, personality, appearance, and suffering. These opinions may or may not be rooted in reality. They will imagine that others also view them as superior, loving, clever, and inspiring, and they'll be deeply offended anyone disillusions them. But that's OK, because they enjoy playing martyr too. Trying to out-victim others is often a favorite pastime.
- They will blame others for their problems. They'll refuse to take responsibility for sins and mistakes, rather than constructively seek to learn, heal, and grow. For example, if they insult someone, they may blame that person for being too sensitive and insecure. If they abuse prescription drugs, they may claim it's their doctor's fault for prescribing painkillers, while simultaneously claiming they have a medical need for them.
- A narcissist may have dramatic and sudden mood swings, or extreme reactions to mundane and minor inconveniences. They may interpret other people's mistakes as intentional and malicious slights, imagining they're being persecuted or attacked. Minor misunderstandings are blown up into major points of contention.
- They'll never genuinely ask for forgiveness, because they imagine themselves to always be right. They will rarely to never repent. They may, however, profusely apologize for things that aren't their fault – like someone else's flat tire, unemployment, or illness – because these apologies make them look sympathetic and caring.
- If they're married, they will likely degrade their spouse by telling others about medical issues, private disagreements, or other personal information. They'll use humiliation as a means to punish their spouse or make them feel like a failure. For example, a female narcissist may leak embarrassing details about her husband's sexual performance, while a male narcissist may make unkind jokes about his wife's cooking or housekeeping skills.

#### POSSIBLE NARCISSISTS IN THE BIBLE:

- King Saul – vain, selfish, entitled, jealous, moody, paranoid
- Potiphar's Wife – manipulative, seductive, deceitful; seeks to destroy her victim when she doesn't get her way (Genesis 39)
- Amnon – vain, selfish, lustful, covetous, suddenly hates his victim (1 Samuel 13)
- Absalom – vain, deceitful, conspiratorial, manipulative (1 Samuel 14-15)
- Ananias – selfish, deceitful; feigned religious fervor for self-glory (Acts 5)
- False Teachers – 1 Timothy 6:4-5 (ESV) describes false teachers as narcissists, saying, "he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain." 2 Timothy 3:1-7 doubles down, saying they "will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive ... ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, [yet] *having the appearance of godliness ...*" They "worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women ... always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth." We are warned, "Have nothing to do with such people."

Most if not all people have some narcissistic tendencies. You might think of a young teen girl posting dozens of selfies on Instagram, yet that girl will grow and mature and hopefully become a godly and charitable woman. So, while we may exhibit one or more of these personality traits, we are not necessarily abusers. The difference between an abuser and someone who is occasionally selfish or arrogant, is that the abuser will feed and nurture their sin. They will not repent, turn from their sin, and change. They will remain stagnant in their sin, or grow progressively worse and worse. You will not see the Spirit working genuine fruits of humility and compassion in their hearts. Instead, you'll see repeated patterns of deception, manipulation, gossip, and entitlement, which affect their relationships and erode their ability to empathize.

## A BIBLICAL CASE FOR SPIRITUAL DISORDER

Some personality disorders may be rooted in medical causes. Others are predominantly spiritual. Here, we are dealing with the latter. We are not talking about mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, but rather something far more nebulous and nefarious. Modern PC terms for these disorders include Antisocial Personality Disorder, Sadistic Personality Disorder, or Borderline Personality Disorder, but I tend to view these issues less as disorders and more as spiritual scarring resultant from chronic unrepented sin.

Have you ever read *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*? In it, J.K. Rowling describes the sin of murder as an abomination which splits your soul into pieces, degrading your morality and ability to feel joy and love. But Rowling didn't pull this idea out of thin air. The idea that sin can damage your mind and shred your conscience is biblical.

Genesis 6:12 tells us, "all the people had corrupted their ways." In Exodus 32:7, God tells Moses, "your people ... have corrupted themselves." Deuteronomy 32 calls the wicked "corrupt," "warped," and "perverse" people, who "drank the foaming blood of grapes," "grew fat" on sin, and "rejected their Savior." Ezekiel 28:17 reads, "Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of splendor." Proverbs 14:30 warns, "envy rots the bones." Hosea 9:9 says, "They have sunk deep into corruption," and Ephesians 4:29 (ESV) warns, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths." 2 Timothy 3:8 reads, "these teachers oppose the truth; they are men of depraved minds." And James 1:27 cautions us to keep ourselves "from being polluted by the world."

So there is a concept right here in Scripture that sin decays, corrodes, and deteriorates us on a spiritual and mental level. It infects and contaminates our thoughts and behavior. In turn, corrupting thoughts, words, and actions can cause us to become even more impure and polluted, heightening our capacity and tolerance for evil. Over time, this process of sin upon sin upon sin results in moral, emotional, and spiritual erosion. We gradually lose our ability to do good authentically. We handicap our hearts from feeling love and joy.

*"Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ... Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and ... Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts ... Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to*

*be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.” Romans 1:22-32*

While we're all born with a sin nature, and certain personalities may be more vulnerable or prone to specific types of sin, no one is born a narcissist, sociopath, or psychopath. These are spiritual and psychological conditions that develop over years and even decades. They sinned, so God gave them over to “sinful desires,” and they sinned even more, so God gave them over to “shameful lusts,” and they sinned even more, so God gave them over to “a depraved mind.” This process continued until they had “no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.”

Some theorize that lack of conscience or empathy may result from childhood trauma, such as abuse or neglect. This is not consistently true though. While Ecclesiastes 7:7 (ESV) says, “oppression drives the wise into madness,” some people with idyllic childhoods choose to become evil, while others with horrific childhoods choose to love and serve the Lord.

Others theorize that congenital defects in the brain or chemical imbalances might deprive a person of empathy or morality. While that may sometimes happen, it's not the norm, and it certainly would not make the abuser any less dangerous. Quite the opposite, this would be where the term, “criminally insane,” is relevant.

In most situations – and probably all the situations you'll encounter – the abuser has made a series of conscious choices to spiritually mutilate themselves. While there may be correlation between childhood trauma and the emotional aspects of personality disorders, trauma does not excuse evil. Many people suffer. Few turn into Dorian Gray. No matter how traumatized, mentally ill, or cognitively disabled a person is, they still need Jesus, and they must repent.

## WHAT IS A SOCIOPATH / PSYCHOPATH?

The differences between a sociopath and a psychopath are nuanced, and best left to a medical expert for diagnoses. But we're not here to learn how to make medical diagnoses. We're here to familiarize ourselves with common terminology so we can better communicate with survivors, therapists, and physicians. We also want to acquaint ourselves with red flags which may alert us if we're dealing with complex evil and a deceptive situation.

To this end, I'll give you a list of behavioral patterns to watch out for. Generally speaking, sociopaths tend to be more callous and anti-social, while psychopaths tend to be more charming and can mimic emotions like sympathy. However, sociopaths and psychopaths exist more on a spectrum than as two distinct personality types. A Hollywood characterization of a sociopath would be Han Gruber in *Die Hard*, while a psychopath would be Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. Of course, most real-life deviants won't be nearly that extreme, and many will never even commit crimes. Thus, when we see one red flag, it's wise to watch out for others:

- They lack a conscience, or have a heavily inhibited conscience. They have the social awareness to know how to behave when they need to, but view morals more as manners

and crimes more as things to avoid doing in public. They will feel no remorse for causing others pain, although a psychopath may skillfully mimic the appearance of remorse.

- They won't respect social norms or laws. For example, a pastor may drop the F-bomb during private conversation for shock value. A counselor may leak confidential information to damage a patient's reputation. A mother may act excessively affectionate to their teenager in front of friends to embarrass them. They will intentionally make others feel uncomfortable or unsafe, because this makes them feel powerful.
- They use deception and lies for personal gain. This may include calling themselves a doctor, counselor, teacher, or pastor, when in reality they lack the credentials. They are exceptional con artists who enjoy playing the part of the theologian or academic, because fooling people into thinking they're good and honorable makes them feel clever.
- In private, they may come off as aggressive or controlling. Some may consider them a bully, while others find them intimidating but can't put their finger on why. They are likely extremely competitive when it comes to winning arguments, climbing the career ladder, or establishing themselves as dominant and superior.
- They are likely highly intelligent and incredibly calculated. For example, they may only vent their rage in private, and only behave inappropriately in front of people who they know will keep their secrets. I once interviewed a man who bragged that he knew how to beat his wife in such a way that he didn't leave bruising as evidence. He thought this made him clever. He didn't understand that it made him an even greater monster.
- In some situations, these abusers will behave compulsively, showing apparent lack of forethought or understanding of consequences. They'll do reckless and dangerous things, disregarding their safety or the safety of others, and later laugh it off as a mistake or a joke. For example, a man may let his kids play with fireworks, and then act like his wife is irrational for complaining. A person may weave recklessly through heavy traffic, but later claim they were in complete control, and you were silly for being afraid.
- Their fits of rage may result in damaged furniture, broken dishes, or injured pets. They may physically harm others and show little to no remorse. They will often blame their outbursts on stress at work, bills piling up, or the house being messy.
- They take no responsibility for their actions, and think people who complain are dramatic, hysterical, or irrational. They won't take initiative to get counseling or therapy, although they may agree to it if they think their victim will leave them or report them. When this happens, they only comply in order to continue controlling others.
- They may fail to follow through on personal or professional responsibilities. For example, a pastor may preach punctually every Sunday, but neglect any kind of pastoral care or socialization with congregants during the week. They may rack up credit card debt, despite having a job and the means to pay their bills.
- They'll feel little to no guilt or remorse for their sins. They won't regret mistreating or hurting others. Because of this, they will rarely to never apologize, except in the case that they think they'll get into trouble if they don't.
- To outsiders, a sociopath may seem cold, unfriendly, or arrogant. However, they will use their intelligence, sarcasm, and status to camouflage themselves. A psychopath may seem

charming, insincere, threatening, or superficially friendly, but they use their intellect, sense of humor, and charisma to manipulate and con.

- They may be extremely educated and knowledgeable, boasting many strong and unwavering opinions, even about topics they know absolutely nothing about.
- They may have many casual friends, but oftentimes, no close friends. Besides lacking the empathy to maintain a close relationship, they likely don't want the accountability or exposure which such a relationship would bring. They'd rather live clandestine lives enjoying their sin. Sometimes though, they'll befriend other abusers or abuse enablers.
- They'll often use threats, violence, and intimidation to manipulate and control others. They may threaten suicide without actually intending to act upon it. They may threaten to kill their wife and children if they try to leave them or report their crimes.
- They may use alcohol or drugs to numb their conscience so they can commit worse and worse sins and crimes. They may intentionally develop addictions as a means of dulling their inhibitions and empowering their lust and rage.
- They may commit violent or sexual crimes, but they'll also break laws in more subtle ways. For example, they may speed down the freeway to make their victims fear for their lives, encourage their teen daughter to date adult men, or allow dangerous people to be near or alone with their children.
- Because sociopaths and psychopaths are intelligent, they usually won't commit crimes if they think they'll get caught. Instead, they'll stick to minor offenses and toeing the boundaries of the law. However, if such a person persists in their evil, and comes to believe they can get away with crime, they may end up a sadistic killer like Dennis Rader, who successfully eluded law enforcement for over 30 years (1974 to 2005).

An abuser may exhibit any or all of the warning signs above. They may be charismatic and adept at hiding their issues, or strike you as insane and terrifying. While there's a broad range of dysfunction, be prepared for subtlety, mind-games, manipulation, and artful deception. And of course, anytime anyone threatens suicide or violence of any kind, call the police. Even if you suspect an abuser is threatening suicide for attention or sympathy, the best thing you can do is call 911. They'll likely be committed to a psychiatric hospital for a week or two where they'll be forced to see mental health physicians and be evaluated. This is likely the best thing for everyone involved, and may be what it takes to confront them with their sin.

#### POSSIBLE SOCIOPATHS / PSYCHOPATHS IN THE BIBLE:

- Pharaoh – controlling, conspiratorial, homicidal, violent, ruthless (Exodus 1:8-22)
- The Unnamed Levite – seems gracious and forgiving; manipulative, apathetic, cruel, drunk, violent, dismembers the concubine he abandoned to be gang raped (Judges 19)
- Herod – power hungry, deceptive, manipulative, cruel, wrathful (Matthew 2)
- Jezebel – power hungry, cruel, seductive, sexually perverse, sadistic
- Nabal – arrogant, stubborn, anti-social, controlling, harsh, drunk (1 Samuel 25)
- Rehoboam – controlling, sadistic, violent, deceitful (2 Chronicles 10:14) sexually perverse (1 Kings 14:24)

- The Chief Priests – self-righteous, deceitful, scheming, cruel, slanderous, envious, power hungry; they sympathize more with a murderer than with Jesus (Mark 15:10-11)

## LETTER FROM A SEXUAL PREDATOR

The following is a real email I received from a sexual predator convicted for “Continuous Sexual Abuse of a Child.” He was upset because I wrote a blog about a negative experience I’d had with him when I was about 13. His original email is over four pages long with no paragraph breaks, so I’ve trimmed it down substantially. I also edited for clarity and to protect the identity of his victims. At the base of each page you can see how I, as a survivor, perceive this communication.

Jennifer,

I came across your website and blog yesterday. I am grieved that you have had to endure what you have endured and I am ashamed that I myself played a negative role in your formative years. I apologize for things I did to make you feel uncomfortable or awkward when you were 13 or so back at [REDACTED] church.

Had he stopped here this would have been a decent email. However, he continues.

I do not recall the incident you mention at the piano, but I trust your memory and accept responsibility. I did not know any interaction with me had made you feel uncomfortable being around me; please forgive me, Jennifer, for making you feel this way.

Note that he apologizes for how he made me *feel*, not for what he *did*. He also doesn’t say, “*I made you uncomfortable*,” but rather, *the interaction* did. This is classic deflection. While he seems to be taking responsibility, he’s actually not. Though not damning, these are warning signs his apology should not be trusted. Nevertheless, had he signed off here, this might have been a fairly convincing email.

I am horrified at the abuse you and your siblings have endured both at the hands of your dad and at the hands of church leaders. I am so sorry. As one who has myself been part of the problem and who contributed to your overall experience, allow me for a moment to stand in for the whole lot of the men who have abused you, and especially your dad, and say as a class: I repent; please forgive us.

No one who thinks they can repent on behalf of all abusers understands how repentance works. He cannot speak for the male “class” and he does not represent the “whole lot” of my abusers. I mean, does he think he’s Jesus? He can’t represent anyone but himself. This strange theology, and strikes me as a poorly executed attempt to feign humility.

If there’s anything I can do to be an advocate for the change you are seeking, I’m willing to help. For example, if our

denomination were to form a committee to deal with issues in a meaningful way (or maybe they already have).

It's hard to imagine he truly believes the church would want a convicted child predator involved in such an endeavor, but who knows? My guess is he's fishing for information to see whether there is such a committee and find out if I'm reported him to it.

While it's true I have been through the court system and I do have a conviction on my record, the actual reality of my and our family's situation is vastly different than what is portrayed. There is no basis to Pastor [REDACTED]'s allegation I sexually assaulted a child. What I dealt with the law regarding had nothing to do with assault or other similar things.

Remember, this guy was convicted of "Continuous Sexual Abuse of a Child," and he knows that I know this. I've seen his sex offender profile on national registries. He's also accusing a pastor who I trust of lying. This is gaslighting; when an abuser tries to make someone question their memory, perception, intelligence, and reason.

After a complete vetting of me by investigators, detectives, psychologists, DAs, etc., they determined there was no basis to deem me a threat to society nor list me in sex offender registries. Unfortunately, something did get posted for a short window but it was quickly removed when the error was discovered.

By digging up decade old content from page five of a Google search rather than relying on an official State or National database, and republishing it in a more current and more visited webpage - especially with our last name embedded in the title of the subpage, you have brought harm to my children, opening them up to a fresh wave of ostracization and denying me the ability to earn a living and provide for my family.

Note the guilt-tripping and blame shifting. He's accusing me of harming the children he sexually abused, because I warned others to be wary of him. He doesn't consider his own sin and crimes to be the source of their harm. I'm causing harm by telling the truth about what he did. It's also worth noting that a background check should have alerted any responsible employer. I just saved them the expense.

Also, since the State has deemed me not a danger to society and that the greatest good to society is served by keeping my case history private, isn't it setting yourself above the law to publicly name me? Isn't that considered vigilantism?

What you are doing actually serves to perpetuation the same broken subculture in our denomination and other church bodies that you and I are trying to dismantle.

Here he shifts blame onto me, as well as the church. He claims he's an advocate for abuse survivors, and that public information about convicted sex offenders doesn't protect anyone. Ironically, he sets himself above the law, which did in fact deem it appropriate to publicly list him in government databases as a sex offender.

I request you delete your account and all mention of my name. To leave it up protects no one, has no redeeming value, and would only carry unholy motive, which I am confident is not where your heart is at. Please understand that I am in no wise suggesting or asking you to change your story or not tell your story. It is your story, and you the right to tell it. I completely accept the unfortunate part I played in your story - especially set in the context of your history with abuse in the church. I am only asking you to delete the reference to me as it has no redeeming value and is materially false and brings harm to my family.

First, he asks me to delete my account, then he encourages me to keep sharing my story and admits his guilt, and then he asks me to delete my account again, or at least the part involving his sin. This kind of back-and-forth waffling is common among psychological abusers and liars. Either they're so accustomed to contradicting truth that they don't notice when their statements contradict, or they're trying to confuse you, or their own sense of morality and truth is so confused that they struggle with consistency.

I also request, going forward, in your blogs, podcasts, etc., to keep the references to me to the telling of your own story and not to mix misinformation, speculation, and gossip. In truth, such "vindication" unwittingly comes at the cost of disempowering your own story and message.

Don't miss the scare tactic here. He suggests that I've compromised my credibility and integrity by telling the truth. He suggests I've sinned by committing "gossip." He's likely hoping that if I second-guess myself, I'll do what he wants and delete the truth.

You were right to feel uncomfortable with me at the piano bench regardless of whether I was squeaky clean in my record and history or not. Your mom ought to have paid more attention to you and taken you more seriously when you expressed your concern, completely independent of what may or may not be discovered years later about the person.

Now it's my mom's fault.

The church needs to have the right boundaries and procedures in place regardless if the person in their midst has a record or not. We must learn to listen to our children and take their expressions of discomfort at face value.



And now it's the church's fault again.

I have not read your book yet, but I will. I am sure there is much I can learn from and grow by reading it. I invite you to reach out to my wife. She is writing her own book detailing the process of healing from sexual abuse and the redemption God has brought our family through. You will find her to be a powerful ally and voice for abused women and children.

Keep in mind, as far as I'm aware, the only reason his wife and kids have experience with sexual abuse is because he did it. It is unsettling to hear a sexual predator boast about his family's inspiring testimony of overcome the damage he caused. It is also unsettling to hear him say he's planning to read my book and find out more about what I suffered. As a survivor, I do not want an abuser imagining how I was abused.

You may also reach out to my adult children who will relate to your story. They will also benefit from learning from you in the area of how you have successfully navigated the transition to getting married and having children, as they have not crossed that bridge yet themselves.

In closing, he brings up "the area" of my sex life and the sex lives of his victims. He implies he understands how sexual trauma can inhibit one's ability to get married and have babies. He compliments me on overcoming this extremely painful and intimate aspect of abuse recovery. The fact that he even mentions this is inappropriate, particularly given the nature of his crimes. Any time an abuser hypothesizes about a victim or survivor's sex life or sexual trauma (even if they refer to it as "getting married" and "having kids"), your creep radar should ping. At the very least, it indicates that he's still thinking about his victims in sexual contexts.

## 14. WHEN ABUSERS COME TO CHURCH

*This lesson is a companion to **Chapter 14: Then I Am Strong (219-229)***

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

7. How is pain similar to darkness?

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8. How did God overcome evil with good in Joseph's life?

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9. How has God overcome evil with good in your life?

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10. How can we acknowledge and confront our suffering, yet find our identity in Christ?

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### STATISTICS OF RELEASED RAPISTS

According to a 2005 US Department of Justice, BJS study<sup>7</sup> of 401,288 released prisoners who were previously convicted of rape or sexual assault:

- Nearly 70% of male rapists were arrested again within 9 years of release.
- 84% of male rapists released before the age of 24, and 72% of those released before the age of 40, were arrested again within 9 years of being released.
- About 50% of all rapists (male and female) were arrested again within the first 3 years after being released. Over two-thirds were arrested again within 9 years.
- In the 9 years following release, 28.1% of rapists were arrested again for a violent crime (such as murder, rape, robbery, assault), 24.2% for property crime (burglary, fraud, theft, forgery), 18.5% for drugs (possession or trafficking), and 58.9% for public order (DWI, parole violations, illegally carrying a gun, obstruction of justice, disorderly conduct).

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsorsp9yfu0514.pdf>

- About 10% of sex offenders who got out of prison before the age of 24 were arrested again for rape or sexual assault within the first 3 years after being released.
- Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) female rapists had less than five arrests for any type of crime prior to their release, compared to about half (52%) of male sex offenders. (This doesn't necessarily mean they're less dangerous; it may mean they're better at avoiding arrest).
- More than half of rapists (52%) had 5 or more prior arrests before being convicted for rape. About one-third had prior drug arrests.
- Released rapists were more than three times as likely than other released prisoners to be arrested again for rape or sexual assault (7.7% versus 2.3%).
- 30.5% of released rapists had previously been arrested for a drug offense. 55.8% had previously been arrested for a property offense.
- About 1 in 3 (32%) rapists were granted an unconditional release and not placed on parole, probation, or another form of community supervision, compared to about 1 in 4 (26%) offenders overall and 1 in 4 (25%) non-sexual assault offenders.

## STATISTICS OF PEDOPHILES

According to a 2010 research publication by Harvard Medical School:<sup>8</sup>

- Pedophilia is defined as a sexual attraction to children who have not yet reached puberty (infant to about 13 years old). Many secular medical professionals consider pedophilia to be a sexual orientation, and therefore unlikely to change. As a Christian, I believe pedophilia is an advanced state of profound evil, and that the extremely low rate of improvement among pedophiles has led doctors to conclude that it's a genetic predisposition as opposed to the result of a long series of increasingly wicked inclinations and choices. However, in the coming years we're likely to see pedophilia being pitched more and more as a sexual orientation as evil people attempt to normalize evil.
- Not all sexual abusers of children are considered pedophiles. Some abuse for reasons other than sexual attraction. About half of all victims are 12 to 17 years old (postpubescent), and their assailants don't meet the strict definition of pedophilia.
- About 50% to 70% of known pedophiles are also diagnosed with another paraphilia, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, or sadism.
- Treatment for pedophilia usually aims to enable the pedophile to resist acting on their sexual urges, rather than on eliminating the urges themselves, because the latter is considered to be so unlikely.
- No intervention is likely to work on its own; outcomes may improve if the patient is motivated and their treatment combines psychotherapy and medication.
- In about 60% to 70% of child sexual abuse cases involving pedophiles, the perpetrator is a relative, neighbor, family friend, teacher, coach, clergyman, or someone else in regular contact with the child.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter\\_article/pessimism-about-pedophilia](https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/pessimism-about-pedophilia)

## STATISTICS OF CHILD MOLESTERS

According to a study by the Solicitor General of Canada<sup>9</sup>:

- Nearly 80% of unmarried child molesters who were convicted of abusing boys were later arrested and convicted for additional sexual or violent crimes. When we consider how few male victims of sexual abuse report, this number is staggering.
- Out of all the offenders in the study, 42% were convicted of another sexual or violent crime within 30 years after release. Keep in mind, only a fraction of victims report, and only a fraction of reports result in convictions. In other words, recidivism is *at least* 42%.
- Child molesters had much higher rates of sexual recidivism (35%) compared to criminals convicted of non-sexual offenses (1.5%).

As the Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence<sup>10</sup> states, “The problem with using recidivism rates to determine the rate of reoffending is readily apparent when considering the following example. If 100% of released molesters reoffended, but the rate of reporting is only 12%, and the conviction rate is half of this, the recidivism rate would be reported as only 6%.”

Many of the above statistics need to be viewed – not as real or accurate numbers – but as a minimum baseline. Most are derived from conviction rates. This means they don't include offenses against very young or disabled victims who didn't understand or don't remember being abused, victims who are too afraid or embarrassed to report, or instances that were reported yet didn't result in conviction due to lack of evidence, a plea deal, or failure by law enforcement.

As one pastor wrote to me, “Of course, we don't limit the Holy Spirit's power to redeem anyone, but we need a realistic understanding of sin remaining even in the heart of a believer. When I was serving a church that was dealing with a pedophile, it was eye opening to the elders that even though his outward behavior seemed appropriate, he burned with a deep inward lust toward the daughters of our congregation, which ultimately led to his being removed from the church.”

## WHAT ABOUT ROMEO + JULIET?

Occasionally, you may encounter a person who, for example, was convicted of having sexual relations with his 16-year-old girlfriend when he was 18. While considered statutory rape, this type of offense is clearly different from say, a 30-year-old who molested a 13-year-old, or a youth pastor who sexted teenagers entrusted to his spiritual care. Because the law rightly doesn't want to confuse twitterpated teens with perverted sexual deviants, most states have what we call Romeo & Juliet Laws. You will need to review laws in your state to determine local parameters.

According to Expert Law<sup>11</sup>, “In some contexts a Romeo and Juliet law will make the sexual conduct non-criminal but, particularly for age differences of three to four years, the law may

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/chld-mlstr/chld-mlstr-eng.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.leadershipcouncil.org/1/res/rcd.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.expertlaw.com/library/criminal-law/what-romeo-and-juliet-law>

instead reduce the penalty faced by the older teen ... [or allow older teens] to petition to be excused from the requirement of registering as sex offenders.”

Romeo & Juliet Laws may not apply if the age gap was too wide, the younger teen fell below a minimum age requirement, the offender was over 21 years of age, the offender has a previous conviction of sexual abuse, or the offender used threats, violence, drugs, or alcohol to coerce or inhibit the minor victim. So, for example, if someone tells you that they only have to register as a sex offender because when they were 17 they were convicted for having a consensual relationship with their 16-year-old girlfriend, it should raise red flags. While you should be verifying all such accounts, this unlikely scenario deserves a double double-check.

## THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD, GO I

Upon seeing criminals being led to execution, English Reformer John Bradford is said to have noted, "There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." However, Bradford was referring to God's mercy in protecting him from religious persecution for his faith, not in restraining heinous levels of sexual deviance. In 1555, Bradford was burnt at the stake. Before he died, he is said to have told a fellow victim, “We shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night.”

Bradford would likely have been horrified to learn that future Christians would rip his quote out of context and use it to make the case that – but for the grace of God – they too might be sexual predators, and therefore, predators should be trusted and welcomed to worship alongside lambs.

While God will save anyone he wishes, and Christ's blood is sufficient to atone for almost any sin, some sins leave deeper scars and broader devastation than others. Some sins disqualify us from serving in ministerial positions. Some proclivities make it irresponsible for us to risk temptation. We are to flee temptation, not surround ourselves with it.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:31-35, “Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit ... A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

In other words, if the Spirit calls a person to repent, yet they resist him and stubbornly persist in wickedness, we should question their salvation. If someone has lived in the church for years, surrounded by Christian friends, benefitting from the faithful preaching of the Gospel, yet stagnates in evil, we must ask why. If they fraudulently repent in order to gain opportunities to abuse children, we should fear God enough to fear them. If they claim to have the Spirit in their heart, yet use God's holy word to facilitate, justify, or cover up evil, has not the Spirit been blasphemed? Have they not taught their victim – a precious child – that the Spirit dwells alongside demons? (Luke 11:14-28) When we see a tree weighed down and surrounded by putrid rotting fruit, we are wise to suspect a bad tree. Christ himself has warned us to.

Perhaps the reason therapists and doctors find it nearly impossible to ease the predilections of pedophiles and child molesters is because God has given them over to evil (Romans 1:24-32).

Hypothetically, if God's grace is truly restraining someone from acting upon deviant sexual impulses, the grace of God should also compel them to flee temptation (Mark 14:38, 1 Corinthians 6:18, 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 2:22). They should resign all ministry positions and avoid interaction with minors. This would demonstrate responsibility as well as genuine repentance for lusts that disqualify them from church leadership.

Another common line of reasoning is, "Everyone sins and their sin is just different from mine." Well, yes, that's true. But a cannibal's sin is also different than yours, and that doesn't mean you should accept their invite to dinner. Again, some sins – by their dangerous and persistent nature – are worse than others. Every struggle with sin requires appropriate precautions and tactical wisdom in the battle against it.

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." In other words, be as clever as the wicked people who would harm you, yet as virtuous as the Holy Spirit who empowers you.

## HOW DO WE MINISTER TO CHILD PREDATORS?

One of the most common questions I hear from pastors is, "But Jennifer, how do we minister to *recovered* child predators? What if they're repentant? Shouldn't they be allowed to come to church again? Aren't all believers entitled to attend corporate worship?"

First, let's clarify that there's no such thing as a recovered child predator. You're not a recovered sinner. I'm not a recovered abuse survivor. That's because recovery is a lifelong process. Until we reach Heaven, our sanctification is incomplete. We are *recovering*, but we are still sinful, finite, and fallible. While our identity as Christians is bound up in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11), we are still prone to the same patterns of temptation which once defined us. For the sake of others and ourselves we must arrange our lives accordingly. We must humbly accept the earthly consequences of sins eternally forgiven (Psalm 51, 2 Samuel 12).

As to the question at the top of this section, the short answer is no. The long answer is as follows.

Say you have a godly elder in your congregation. We'll call him, Elder John. Elder John is a great guy; strong Christian, eloquent teacher, father of six, and married for 37 years. He's the salt of the earth. Everyone looks up to him and wants to learn from him.

Elder John has offered to serve as chaperone for a recovering child predator. This guy served two years in prison for sexually abusing his daughter, but according to prison officials he was a gold star convict. He ate all his vegetables, made his bed every morning, read all the right books, and didn't shank anyone. In fact, he got out early for good behavior.

His parole officer also sings his praises. He's never been caught loitering in creepy manner outside schools or near playgrounds. He's never been late to register as a sex offender. He pays his child support on time. He honors his wife's restraining order. He hasn't been caught buying a gun. He doesn't even have any traffic tickets. As far as sex offenders go, he's Prince Charming.

Elder John has been meeting this guy for coffee every week for almost three years. He's certain his repentance is genuine. This guy has read all the books of the Bible, even Leviticus. He can

quote Geerhardus Vos. He tithes. He even knows a little Greek. His favorite superhero is Batman, he prefers Coke to Pepsi, he votes Republican, and his favorite sport is baseball. What could be more wholesome and safe?

So, Elder John offers to be responsible for this guy if the session<sup>12</sup> will let him attend church services. The session wants to be careful though. They decide that, despite this man's repentance, he won't be allowed near the nursery or Sunday School rooms. He won't be invited to Sunday school fellowship over coffee and doughnuts. He'll arrive right as the service starts and leave immediately after. If he needs to use the restroom, Elder John will go with him and make sure no kids are in there. He'll even walk the guy to his car so he's not unsupervised in the parking lot.

"We've done it!" they think. "We've created the ultimate predator-proof safety plan! Our children will be safe, and this prodigal son can return to church."

But now let's look at this through the eyes of a child.

Little Abby is eight years old, which is the same age this man's daughter was when he assaulted her. Abby looks up to Elder John. He and her daddy are good friends. Sometimes, their family goes to Elder John's house for BBQs, and her parents enjoy Elder John's Wednesday night Bible study. Abby is certain that all Elder John's friends are just as godly as he is.

One Sunday, Abby notices Elder John sitting next to a man she's never seen before. The following Sunday, they're sitting together again. The Sunday after that, Elder John accompanies the man to the bathroom.

"They must be really good friends," she thinks. After all, Abby and her friends often visit the bathroom together. That's what little girls do, so this is perceived as the closest comradery.

This goes on for several weeks, and Abby gets curious. When she asks her parents who he is, they get a strange look on their faces, and tell her to stay away from him. This makes Abby even more curious. A few times, she wanders close to the man, clutching her little pink Bible, hoping to hear snippets of his conversation. They've never spoken, but he's smiled at her. Abby thinks he looks sad, and she wonders why. Everyone should be happy at church.

One day, Abby is out playing in her front yard with some neighbor kids, and she sees Elder John's friend walking a dog down her street. What are the odds? She goes to say hi. She pets his dog. She introduces herself. He says his real name isn't important, but his friends call him Ziggy. She thinks that's funny. It turns out, he loves playing ball and reading Narnia, just like her.

At this moment, Elder John is 20 miles away trimming his rose bushes. He has no idea what's happening. Abby's mom is inside with the baby, and her dad is still at work. Abby is alone and unsupervised with a sexual predator who she trusts, because she knows him from your church.

Now, some of you may be thinking, "But Jennifer! We'll tell the parents who this guy is and what he's done. We'll even warn the kids not to talk to him! We'll tell them he's dangerous!"

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<sup>12</sup> A body of elected pastors and elders governing a local church in Presbyterian polity. A church leadership board.

Really? Let's think this through. Are you prepared to explain to a class of kindergarteners that a man attending their church might hurt them? Or kidnap them? Or want to touch their privates? When new families visit your church, you're going to ask them to sit toward the front, because the child molesters sit in the back? This seems like a good solution to you?

It is not practical to tell children not to talk to someone, and assume they'll obey. It is not rational to tell kids an adult is dangerous, and expect them to understand what you mean. No child who trusts you would believe you're putting them in the same room with a sexual predator. They assume you'll protect them. They assume you won't put them at risk. They assume everyone at church loves Jesus as much as they do.

Best case scenario, if you warn your children, they'll be frightened to attend church. Why would you put kids in that position? Did not Jesus say, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these?" Matthew 19:14. Don't you think frightening kids is a hinderance to them?

You must decide: Will your church be a safe haven for the child, or the child abuser?

The goal of protecting children is to provide them with happy, healthy, innocent childhoods. They should view the house of God as a sanctuary, not a hunting ground where they're the prey. They shouldn't have to sit in pews fearing the adults around them. They shouldn't have to wonder if a predator is watching their backside as they sing hymns and pray. They shouldn't have to check twice to make sure someone isn't watching them use the restroom, because you decided ministering to a sexual predator was more important than ministering to them. I have felt that fear. Trust me, if you want to destroy a child's faith, this is how.

Yes, educate children in an age-appropriate manner, but you're going to find yourself hard pressed to explain sexual deviancy and pedophilia to toddlers and elementary schoolers. It's simply not appropriate, and even if it was, they wouldn't understand you.

I can't tell you how many times I've warned my kids – even screamed at them to stop – because they were running up to a neighbor's dog who was barking at them through an iron gate. They don't know that dog. The dog is obviously guarding his territory. But they love animals, and they assume all dogs are friendly, and safe, and would never bite them. Because they're children.

While educating children is wise, and a practical step every parent should take, it's not the solution here. The solution here is for adults to take responsibility for their evil and accept the consequences of their actions. For some, the consequences are to avoid any chance, any risk, any remote possibility of awakening that devastating temptation again. The cost is simply too high.

A genuinely recovering sexual predator should understand the gravity of his sin. He should fear and recoil at even the smallest opportunity to be tempted, let alone regress. He won't want to frighten the parents or children in your church. He won't want his presence to inhibit their ability to worship. He won't ask you to go out on a limb for him to defend his "right to worship."

If an abuser seems to feel entitled to attending corporate worship, or expects those around him to trust and accept him, he's smacking you upside the head with red flags. He's either lying to



himself, or lying to you, or both. Whatever the case, do not trust him. Anyone who feels the need to convince you to trust them – or expects you to insist that others trust him – cannot be trusted.

So, how can we safely minister to sexual predators?

#### 1. ESTABLISH A SEPARATE MINISTRY

There is no rule that all Christians must attend family worship at 11AM on Sunday. There are many homebound believers who – through no fault of their own – are unable to attend corporate worship, and so we minister to them separately. This is common practice and biblically faithful. If someone has a spiritual deformity or sinful disease, how much more so should we minister to them separately? This is not just about the safety of children, but about enabling the recovering abuser to avoid temptation. You can establish alternate worship times and locations for individuals who should not fellowship alongside children. This could be a Bible study during the week, small group, or private Sunday service off church grounds. Whatever the format or location, absolutely no children may be present, and it cannot take place in a home where children live. No child should see trusted adults with the offender, and the offender should not be allowed to familiarize himself or herself with the schedules of children, photos of children, or the layout of buildings or residences where children are cared for or taught. Any adults involved must be instructed to never tell the offender their children's names, what they look like, where they go to school, or what their routine is. The offender should have no access to church directories, Facebook groups, kid's ministry pages, or other materials which include the names, addresses, photos, or ages of children. If the offender ever does succumb to temptation and begin to lust in his or her heart, they should be incapable of acting on that lust against your children. In theory, should a child encounter the offender on their walk home from school, or while playing ball with friends, they should be total strangers. A repentant offender will understand and accept this. If they don't respect your guidance in this, they don't respect your guidance. Count your blessings and ask them to leave.

#### 2. REFER TO AN ESTABLISHED MINISTRY

Ministries and churches in your area may already have established outreaches specially designed for recovering sexual predators and abusers. Rather than reinvent the wheel or risk making a catastrophic mistake, it's best to refer whenever you're able.

### RECOVERING THE SANCTUARY

In 1996, I watched the Disney cartoon, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In it, Quasimodo saves Esmeralda from an unjust execution by rushing her to the cathedral and crying out, "Sanctuary!"

It used to be that a church's sanctuary was a literal sanctuary. The falsely accused, persecuted, and downtrodden could flee to a sanctuary and find protection from anyone seeking to harm them. This was holy ground. The "teachers of the law" of John 8 could not berate a victim there. Not so in our modern churches and worship centers. They have become a hunting ground.

But the safety of God's children shouldn't be gambled against a pastor's ability to judge a person's character. The security of God's children shouldn't hinge on a leadership team's opinion of a predator's repentance. Unless you're Jesus Christ and can read hearts and minds, the cost if you're wrong is simply too high.

And even if a predator is genuinely repentant, do we believe repentant people are never tempted again? Do we believe saved people never sin again? Of course not! We're thankful for the work of the Holy Spirit, but we know we're not in Heaven yet. We're still fallible. We still sin. Don't ever forget or underestimate the fallen state of professed Christians. Be wary of opening the door to temptation, for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Genesis 4:7, Matthew 26:40-41).

As a lawyer once told me, if you owned a dog who has mauled a child before, you'd never let that dog near children again. And if you did, and a child was hurt, you'd deserve to get prosecuted or sued. You'd deserve to go to jail. It doesn't matter how cute your dog is, or how well he obeys, or how long it's been since he mauled someone. You simply don't take the chance. The same is true of child predators. Once a person has demonstrated such a profound lack of self-restraint, and such dangerous and destructive inclinations, the only responsible thing to do is remove them from any possibility of temptation.

You wouldn't invite a recovering alcoholic to a bar. You wouldn't subject them to the very temptation they've worked so hard to overcome. Inviting a recovering child predator to church when kids are present is not only child endangerment, but it's unfair to the recovering abuser. You're placing a weak sinner in the midst of temptation. You're setting a fox in a hen house.

Pastors and church leaders, we must value the children of our congregations more than a sex offender's ego. We must love the weakest among us enough to make sure they feel safe and truly are safe. We must love survivors of abuse enough to be willing to earn their trust, even if that means sacrifice and a little extra coordination. God's children must be allowed to worship Jesus without fear; without dreading who is watching, without wondering what an offender is thinking, and without worrying whether they might be followed home. Anything less can erode their faith; associating the church and our holy Savior in their minds with hypocrisy, depravity, and danger. In this way, many well-intentioned churches have caused Christ's little ones to stumble.

*"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." Matthew 18:6-9*

## 15. LETTERS FROM THE TRENCHES

The following letters are based on real correspondence I've received from pastors and church leaders. They've been heavily edited or rewritten for confidentiality, as have my responses, to protect the identities of the victims and the churches caring for them. However, the situations and spiritual dynamics being grappled with are real. It is my hope that by providing these, you can gain insight into the challenges you may someday face, and how best to consider them.

### CONSENSUAL ABUSE?

Hi Jennifer,

Recently, a woman came to my clinic because she's struggling with an eating disorder. I don't remember how it came up, but we got to discussing her marital life, and she revealed that her husband sometimes chokes her during sex, or spanks her for mistakes, like burning dinner or forgetting to run the laundry. I told her that this was abuse, but she contradicted me, saying that it's foreplay, consensual, and normal sexual behavior. As if everyone does this. I'm not sure how to respond. What are your thoughts?

Thanks,

Jayson Brenner  
Biblical Counseling

Hi Steve,

It's true that some people fetishize abuse and punishment. However, that doesn't make it healthy or safe, let alone good. The choking is disturbing, because she's describing the fetishization of violence and assault. The spanking is disturbing, because they're sexualizing the discipline of a child; equating their marital relationship with a parent-child relationship. How this may be affecting their behavior toward their kids, and how they view children, is of concern. That's something to discretely look into with careful questioning and observation.

This sort of behavior isn't only morally warped, but it's psychologically damaging. I suspect that if you dig deeper into their pasts, their marriage, and their lifestyle, you're going to find other manifestations of abuse. But don't just look for violent or sexual abuse; look for drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gambling addictions (financial abuse), infidelity, and pornography.

This type of fetishization is sometimes indicative of a traumatic childhood (in which case, they both may be so used to abusing and being abused, they don't know anything else) or current

abuse (such as, she's in denial that her husband is an abuser). And, of course, it can be both. In fact, I think both is the most likely scenario.

He likely has some sort of past trauma, which is manifesting as sadism. I would guess he grew up with domestic violence or an absent father. Whatever the case, he now finds violence arousing. She likely equates love with pain and control, probably also rooted in a dysfunctional childhood, which trauma is manifesting as masochism. Her eating disorder ties into how she views herself, which is probably as someone who deserves to be abused or punished.

I would respond by clearly stating what love looks like; that it is kind, it shows honor, it does not delight in evil (1 Corinthians 13), and that the fruit of the Spirit includes gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). I would then explain that marital relationships – including sex – should express such love. You can point out that, because choking someone is not gentle, kind, or honorable, it is therefore not loving, but wrong and abusive. And if you get the line, “But it’s consensual,” I would point out that a great many sins are consensual, and just because sin is consensual, doesn’t make sin OK. Back in college, I attended frat parties where people consensually got black-out drunk. Just a few years ago, teens were consensually eating Tide Pods. Consent does not dictate morality, let alone safety or wisdom.

Remember that line from the Eurhythmics? “Some of them like to be abused.” It’s a true statement. But just because someone likes being abused, or thinks abuse is normal, or finds abuse arousing, doesn’t make abuse acceptable in any way, shape, or form.

I hope this is helpful. I’ll be praying for you as you help this patient.

Jennifer

## A FALSE ACCOUNT OF RAPE

Hi Jennifer,

I need help dealing with a situation that has me extremely worried. This past week, a man in my congregation named David was named in a blog post where he’s accused of rape. The post was written by a woman he dated in college. According to him, when they were both 21, they were at a college event kissing by a campfire as several friends sat nearby. She asked him to stop kissing her, so he did. David apologized for making her uncomfortable, she forgave him, and everything seemed fine. They amicably broke up shortly thereafter, and haven’t spoken in 20 years. So, he was shocked and horrified to read this blog. He has always been under the impression that they parted on good terms, and he has no idea why she’d say these things, particularly after so many years. Also mentioned in the blog is an incident

with another man. Apparently, a few months after she and David broke up, she attended a frat party, passed out drunk, and woke up with a man having sex with her. When she protested, he refused to stop. She named him too. It doesn't sound like she's ever reported it to the police. I'm attaching a link to her post. What do we do?

Mike

Hi Mike,

I'm so sorry to hear about this. It is indeed extremely distressing. I've read through the blog post, and there are some interesting things about it. For one, she doesn't describe what David did, she only says "David raped me." It's unclear, based on her post, whether they're thinking of the same event. Regardless, she goes on to describe in graphic detail this very clear example of rape by Bill, the second man, but she doesn't call what he did rape. Instead, she seems to blame David for making her depressed which is why she drank too much at the party. It's also odd that she talks about David as if he's currently abusive to others, when they haven't spoken in 20 years. Do they have mutual friends? Could someone be gossiping or lying about him? A few thoughts:

1. David needs to seek out a lawyer. He should be able to get a free consultation for initial advice, and hopefully they can counsel him on how to resolve this peaceably, ideally outside the courts. For example, perhaps they can draft up a carefully worded letter that will express sympathy while not taking responsibility for any sins or crimes he didn't commit.
2. David's account does not fit the legal definition of rape. According to him, they were consensually kissing, she asked to stop, and he did. However, she does accuse him of rape in the post. If she reports this account to the police, they'll ask her for a detailed description of what happened. If she describes a rape, they'll contact David for his side of the story. That's something he'll need to mentally prepare himself for. However, it's also possible she'll tell police the exact same story David told you. Perhaps she's mistakenly calling it rape, when at best it sounds like an awkward situation, and at worst some kind of harassment. The police will determine what charges to file, if any. However, after 20 years, the SOL is up on harassment in your state.
3. If police investigate, they'll likely want to contact other people who were at the campfire. They'll also want to talk to David's wife, particularly regarding the allegations of current abuse. If possible, he should have a list of names, but don't contact them or do anything that could make it appear he's tried to influence them. If their stories align with David's, I don't think he'll be charged with anything, but again, he needs to talk to a lawyer who specializes in cases like this.
4. The second account involving Bill does describe sexual assault or rape. This is something the police should be informed of. While I have no reason to doubt David's account, this woman's post sounds very rational and genuine. It's possible she remembers things differently, or that due to her trauma, she may be having trouble differentiating between personal feelings and criminal offenses. She may also be blurring the two experiences together for some reason. This is

something for the police to determine. The real case though, if there is one, does seem to be against this Bill person who attacked her while she was unconscious. That's rape.

5. I looked up the laws in your state, and as a pastor, you're a mandatory reporter. When you hear an account of sexual abuse, regardless of whether or not you think it's reliable, you must report it. I would turn this blog post over to law enforcement and let them sort out who did what. When you speak to them, describe exactly what you've been told happened. Avoid labels like "harassment" or "sexual assault," which may mean one thing to you and another to the police. Stick to what you know, just as you did in your email to me. The police will figure out what crimes, if any, have been committed.

6. Since David found the blog post, he should seriously consider reporting to police as well. This would give him the opportunity to let law enforcement hear his side of the story right off the bat. Given the graphic description of rape by the second man, I think it's important to bring this blog to their attention. This may also be a way he can make amends for upsetting her.

7. I'm concerned that this woman is a real rape survivor who is severely traumatized, and doesn't know how to report or where to ascribe blame, so she's grouping someone who made her feel awkward and vulnerable in with someone who criminally violated her. My guess is she's in a lot of pain. If she's kept her rape secret for 20 years, the unaddressed trauma could result in confusion and erratic behavior. Or, she may have developed a mental illness. Either way, she needs help. Try to view her with mercy. I'm also fearful, if this Bill is in fact a rapist, and he sees her blog, he may retaliate against her. Reporting this to the police could save her life.

8. Do not contact this woman, her friends, or her family, or respond to any communication from them without guidance from a lawyer. If she has already lied about David, or somehow misunderstood something she heard from someone else, she's at best seeing the world through a very dark and distorted lens. Be careful not to do or say anything she might misunderstand or find triggering. David should make all his social media accounts private, so she can't read his posts and misconstrue them to be about her. He should also avoid communicating with people who may be mutual friends until he's consulted with a lawyer on how to respond, and spoken with the police. If he says anything unclear or defensive, or appears to be swaying witnesses, it could hamper their investigation. Keep all of this off social media as much as you can.

Again, I'm so sorry to hear about this. Please keep me posted. I will be praying for all involved.

Jenn

## THE EXHIBITIONISTIC SEXUAL PREDATOR

Hey Jennifer,

A woman in our church has come to me with a very unsettling account. She had previously revealed that her husband is abusive, but only psychologically or verbally, not physically. We've been counseling them, and to be honest it

hasn't gone well. He's extremely arrogant and I don't think he feels remorse. However, yesterday the wife told me that one of their children walked in on them while they were having sex in their bedroom. Instead of stopping and covering up, her husband kept going, refused to stop, and seemed to be excited by it. She begged him to stop and cover them up, but he wouldn't. What even is that?

Stephen  
Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church

Hi Stephen,

That's rape and sexual abuse. For one thing, when the wife wanted to stop, he should have stopped. Then of course, you've got him exposing himself and his wife in front of their child. So, you're looking at some kind of child sexual abuse as well. Depending on your state laws, this could lead to charges such as "endangering the welfare of a child" or "lewdness," in addition to "sexual assault" or "rape."

You should also be wary, because a person who apparently derives enjoyment from having sex in front of a child, even though the child accidentally walked in on them, is likely doing other sexually abusive things. You should report this to law enforcement immediately, and ask about getting a trained expert to interview the children. They'll know how to ask questions in such a way that the children's testimonies stand up in court. For example, if you were to ask a 6-year-old, "Has your dad ever abused you?" they'd likely say "No," because they don't know what abuse is. So, you need someone who specializes in establishing child testimonies.

I hope this helps. I am so sorry and I will be praying for you all.

Jenn

## THE ABUSER SEEKING VISITATION

Dear Jennifer,

I'm ministering to a convicted sex offender who is serving time in prison for assaulting his son. After a few years of being incarcerated, he became a Christian, and I am absolutely certain he is genuinely heart-broken and repentant. He wants to reconcile with his ex-wife and children, but there is an Order of Protection prohibiting him from contacting them. He feels like he's being denied his ability to repent and reconcile. I'm wrestling with how to proceed. Should I contact his family on his behalf?

Pastor Brad  
Providence Presbyterian

Dear Pastor Brad,

This situation is certainly tragic. I strongly advise against contacting his family. For one thing, you could be charged with a crime, but more importantly, you could cause additional trauma to them. The fact that they have an order of protection against him gives us a big clue as to how they feel. They do not trust him. They don't think he can or will stop harming them. They also don't feel like they can protect themselves from him. They feel unsafe and afraid. For this reason, they have asked law enforcement to intervene and maintain this boundary.

This speaks to the level of manipulation and deceit they felt from him. It's quite likely that he's been given many, many opportunities to repent and reconcile with them, but he betrayed their trust every time. Remember, the level of sin he's committed isn't something he arrived at overnight. He became a sexual predator over the course of years, and will have committed many smaller sins and crimes leading up to his conviction. So, it's not like he was suddenly and surprisingly cut off without any warning or chance to change.

His family feels incapable of trusting him. Their feelings should be respected. To disregard them would violate and damage whatever delicate and slow healing they have managed thus far. This abuser is living with the consequences of what he's done. He may be saved now, but that doesn't change what he's done. His sins will be washed away before God, but the injuries his sin caused are still open wounds to his family. They cannot test hearts like God can, and neither can we. He was a wolf and they were the sheep he spiritually, emotionally, and physically assaulted. We cannot reasonably ask them to trust him. He still resembles a wolf to them, and they are justified in reacting in terror to his advances.

If he seems to view repentance and reconciliation as a right, or if he is resentful that he isn't trusted, this is a red flag. He is not entitled to their time or trust, let alone their forgiveness. Trust is something that is earned, and he has proven himself untrustworthy. Forgiveness takes time and is a blessing from God. It is not something he deserves or can demand. In fact, it's safe to say an abuser who demands forgiveness is not truly repentant, because he either cannot or will not recognize the gravity of the pain he's inflicted. A truly repentant abuser should be understanding and sensitive to his victim's pain, and shrink from the slightest possibility of causing them further alarm. He will humbly relinquish the relationship for the sake of their recovery.

When a father and husband sexually abuses his own children, he breaks his family's hearts. It's a betrayal of more than trust. It's a kind of psychological cannibalism. Spanish artist, Francisco Goya, painted a piece called, *Saturn Devouring His Son*. As a teenager, I found this painting to be demonstrative of how I felt about my father. Sexual abuse is an abomination. There is a horror that's been ground into us; a profound disgust and righteous rage which cannot be put into words. I remember thinking, "If he had died when I was a child, it would have been easier than watching him turn into the person he became."



You must understand, the man they imagined him to be or hoped he could become has died; he killed him. He spiritually, emotionally, and relationally self-destructed in front of them and tried to take them with him. He destroyed his relationship with him, and that is a wound that doesn't easily mend, if it ever mends at all in this life.

On the bright side, in a very real sense, as he grieves the loss of his family, he is doing as the Bible commands, to "weep with those who weep," (Romans 12:15). He's mourning his evil with them, even if from a distance. He's grieving his sin and the consequences he brought down upon them all. By weeping, he's empathizing with them, and feeling a taste of the sorrow he caused.

And I think perspective is very important here. He should not grieve his family's distrust and fear, or resent them for shunning him. Rather, he should grieve his sin, and that he gave them good and logical reason to distrust, fear, and shun him. By empowering him to grieve in this way, the Spirit of God may actually be softening his heart, teaching him to love the brokenhearted. This process, though painful, is incremental to his healing and sanctification. He must mourn with his family and for his family. He must slowly learn to empathize (a skill abusers usually lack, so this is the spiritual equivalent of growing a new limb). So, while you may weep that he is weeping, we should also rejoice that he is weeping, because it's a sign of God's restoration in progress. If he were not sad, he would be damned.

Do not rush what God is mending. Perhaps someday, one of his children will recover to a place where they feel secure enough to initiate contact. Or, perhaps reconciliation can only happen in Heaven. Either way, it will come if and when God wills it, and not one moment sooner. We have to learn to be at peace with this. It's part of learning to rest in God; trusting him to work in his time and on his terms. In this way, by accepting the reality of devastation, and weeping as he weeps (albeit remotely) with his family, he is being sanctified and matured in faith.

Someday, in Heaven, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... the nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." Isaiah 11:6 & 8-9. But on this side of mortality, even tamed wolves destroy lambs, and the cobra and adder still bite and poison. Until God completely alters their natures, lambs and children should be protected from wolves and snakes, even tamed ones.

I'll be praying for your wisdom and endurance as you continue your ministry.

Jenn

## THE PEDOPHILE SEEKING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Dear Jennifer,

For the past two years, I've been corresponding with a man who was imprisoned for molesting a young child. He got out of prison six months ago, and we've been meeting for coffee on a weekly basis. He wants to start attending church, but

is very understanding that it could be awkward. I've told him that he won't be allowed near the kids, to volunteer in the nursery, and that all the parents will be made aware of his history. He seems OK with this, and I've been really impressed by his humility. Can you advise me on how best to talk to my congregation about this? Some of them are abuse survivors, and I want to be conscientious of them. And just so you know, I'm a child abuse survivor myself, so I don't take this lightly.

Thank you,

Dave

Lead Pastor, Trinity Community Church

Hi Dave,

I am so sorry to hear that you were abused. Thank you for trusting me with that. While I think it is very considerate and compassionate of you to even speak to this individual, I would advise extreme caution. Often, as child abuse survivors, we see people we love in sexual predators. We are unduly hopeful, because we want to believe there's hope for our parent, or uncle, or older sibling. We are unduly sympathetic, because all those old buttons that used to keep us calm and quiet, make us compliant, and lower our guard, start getting pressed again. Be very careful.

As for this offender, I think it would be wise to refer him to a ministry in your community designed to serve sex addicts and predators. Attending corporate worship is a blessing, but allowing a child abuser amongst children might be like inviting an alcoholic into a bar. You just don't do it. You're not doing the abuser any favors, and you're certainly not protecting your kids. Also, given your status as a survivor, you don't need that on your plate.

You and I both know that abuse doesn't usually happen at church. The child may meet the abuser at church, but the abuse itself usually takes place at camp, in a car, in someone's home, or during a field trip. No matter how many precautions you take to protect children at church, you can do nothing to protect them elsewhere. Your best bet is that the kids never lay eyes on him.

I hope this helps. Take good care of yourself. Don't let this guy get into your head. Pass him off to someone who can counsel him objectively without personal risk. You're walking wounded. This is not your mission field.

I'm praying for you.

Jenn

## THE PEW-CLEARING PREDATOR

Dear Pastor Smith,

I've had a number of emails from current and past members of your church that are troubling. They claim that you and your session decided to allow a man named [REDACTED] who is currently being investigated by the police for sexually assaulting several children, to keep attending services and church events, despite publicly confessing to sexual sins and crimes. Is this accurate? I'm trying to discern how to respond to these individuals, who are distressed.

Please let me know if I can be of assistance. I'm praying for your wisdom and peace.

Jennifer

Greetings Jennifer,

Yes, a few months ago, [REDACTED] and his wife entered my office to discuss the "crossing of boundaries" with some of his own children. The moment I realized this was not merely a sin, but a crime, I contacted the legal/civil authorities. [REDACTED] was compliant, and this was the beginning of a very difficult journey.

We had a congregational meeting, which was very difficult for many people, but was of great value. [REDACTED] attended that meeting and publicly confessed what he had done. He has since been charged with the continuous sexual abuse of children, but hasn't been sentenced yet.

This may sound odd, but in a world where people, even Christians, tend to fail to take responsibility for their actions, I felt [REDACTED] took full responsibility. He is a repentant sinner of an awful sin. There were many people who threatened to leave our church if he remained, and about 20 did. This was due to the great pain many of them suffered in a similar manner in their past.

It was eye-opening, yet very challenging. People tend to like that Jesus was a friend of sinners, until it is a sin like this one - one that reminds us of something atrocious in our past. We decided that the church had to remain a place for repentant sinners, even if others decided to leave. I hope this answers your question.

Thanks

Steven  
Covenant Reformed Church

Hi Steven,

Thank you for your quick and honest reply. However, I confess, I am appalled.

You have admitted that you prioritized a confessed child predator who is being investigated by law enforcement for multiple counts of sexual abuse, over frightened parents and abuse survivors. You consider his ability to attend worship to be more important than theirs. You also consider your personal opinion of his repentance to be more informed or valid than theirs, because you have never been sexually abused.

I would suggest quite the opposite; that people who have been bitten by an adder are far more likely than a person who has never encountered one to identify it correctly. Although, I do commend you for not breaking the law by involving law enforcement when you should have.

Has it not occurred to you, that if [REDACTED] is truly repentant, he should be sympathetic to the fear of others, and humbly abstain from corporate worship so they can worship God unhindered by him? Does it not strike you as odd that he feels entitled to attend church at the expense of others who are afraid of him or afraid for their children because of him?

Do you not understand that sexual predators are proficient liars and consummate con-artists? How do you think a pedophile or rapist convinces a woman to marry him, and stay married for years and years, even after she's watched her own children be abused by him? It's not because abusers never fake apologize. It's not because they all look like Steve Buscemi in Con Air. They're deceptive and charming! They're Oscar-worthy performers! You've gambled the safety of children on your feelings.

I would be extremely surprised if, as this investigation unfolds, we do not hear some new horror story about [REDACTED]. I anticipate that you will be made to deeply regret favoring a sexual predator over your concerned church members. Please start prioritizing the spiritual wellbeing of your innocent sheep, and the safety of your covenant children, over the ego of a pedophile.

When law enforcement or another victim contacts me, I will be legally obligated to turn over all the evidence I have, including our correspondence. I strongly advise you to backpedal hard, or this could turn out very badly for you, your church, and the children of your congregation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer

## THE FEMALE ABUSER SEEKING PASTORAL CARE

Hi Jenn,

I'm in an unusual situation. I'm counseling a woman who I believe is an abuse survivor. I feel bad saying this, but I've started to question her stories. She's told so many accounts of being abused and raped, and many seemed far-

fetches. I hope I am not offending you, but I don't know anyone else experienced in these matters to talk to. A few months ago, she accused someone I know of hitting on her. Now, I know this man, so I didn't want to let my bias blind me, but when I confronted him, he didn't even know who the woman was. So, I decided to contact the police and corroborate her stories. I was shocked when they said they know her because she's repeatedly filed false reports of rape, sometimes against total strangers and celebrities she's only seen on TV. She also has a minor criminal record that includes shoplifting. I'm not sure what to do. She wants pastoral counseling, and is clearly traumatized. I want to help her, but I'm not sure how. What should I do? I'm heartbroken for her, but also daunted by the complexity of her situation. Can trauma make someone this way?

Your servant in Christ,  
  
Brian  
Pastor, Hope Fellowship

Hi Brian,

Thanks so much for your email. And please don't worry at all, none of this is offensive to me. In fact, I think you are wise to be concerned and wary. First of all, be extremely careful counseling this woman, particularly alone. We basically have two options; either she's delusional, and truly believes the false accounts she's telling, or she's a narcissistic abuser herself who is pretending to be a victim to get attention. In the first case, she needs medical care which you cannot provide. In the second, she's in a very advanced state of sin and could pose a real danger to you, your marriage, your family, and your ministry.

Either way, please do not meet with her alone. Always have another person, preferably a spiritually mature woman or professional counselor, present during all meetings. Also, make it a stipulation that if you're going to continue counseling her, she needs to also be seeing a therapist (make sure they're specialized in diagnosing mental illnesses such as schizophrenia). If false reports are habitual for her, it's likely only a matter of time before she accuses you. Whether she's lying or delusional, we don't want to leave any room open for a false report, or for a sick person to go untreated.

Trauma can result in all kinds of erratic and self-destructive behavior. When combined with sin, immoral behavior certainly can result. However, while sin can cause trauma, and sin can exacerbate trauma, I wouldn't say trauma causes sin. Take for example, a physical injury. If a person falls and breaks their leg, their bone and surrounding tissues have been traumatized. In their agony, they may experience a flash of rage or fear, and punch the first person to try to help them up. It could happen, but that doesn't make it OK. Just so, someone with emotional trauma

might hurt other people in their distress, but suffering never justifies sin. It may explain it, and it may make it slightly more understandable or relatable, but it doesn't make it good or healthy.

This type of lie though, in my experience, is not normal even for survivors of horrific abuse, and certainly not healthy. It would be understandable for a survivor to lie about breaking a dish if she fears her husband might get angry, or lie that she was never abused if she fears her abuser may retaliate, but lying that a total stranger has raped you is another thing entirely. The first examples are motivated by fear and are part of a learned self-protective mechanism. Barring mental illness, the third seems designed to destroy a person's reputation, marriage, career, and possibly land them in prison, for no understandable let alone good reason. This isn't something you can pray away. She likely needs serious and professional medical care.

Now, can a delusional or mentally ill person also be an abuse survivor? Absolutely. In fact, many abusers will intentionally select victims who are cognitively disabled or mentally ill because they know people will question their judgement. It is a depraved evil, but it happens. Nevertheless, in the case that she's mentally ill, she needs her illness addressed before you can make headway with her pastoral counseling. She needs to have her perception aligned with reality, so you can communicate with her effectively. Once that's happened, only then can you effectively attend to her soul. In fact, getting her to a doctor would be a life-changing ministry to her.

Of course, in the case that she's not mentally ill, and is lying on purpose, that's something else entirely. There are narcissistic abusers who, in order to get attention or create a scene, will pretend to be victims. Maybe they were victims at one time, or maybe they were never victims at all. They lie so much, it's hard to know what's real. Either way, they now fabricate stories because they enjoy the attention it gets them. In this case, I'm fairly certain that offering to take her to a therapist or psychiatrist will offend her and she'll leave. She'll likely claim you don't love her, or are a fake Christian, and she'll never come back. This may be hard for you, because I know you care about her and have invested a lot of time and energy into helping her. However, you can't help someone who doesn't want help. Whether she's mentally ill or a liar, hopefully, if enough pastors tell her to see a doctor, she'll realize she has a problem. Then someone (maybe not you, but some future pastor) will be able to minister to her.

As Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." You sound like a very empathetic pastor who examines and reexamines his motives. You deeply desire to help others even at the expense of your own convenience or wellbeing. This is a profound strength, but it can also be a vulnerability. Abusers will use your traits of compassion and self-sacrifice to monopolize all your time and energy, drawing your attention too much away from your family and congregation.

If you sense that your energy and time are being absorbed until you have little left for yourself or anyone else, take it as a sign you need to refer her to someone else. If you start to feel anxious, depressed, worried, or guilty following your meetings with her – or when you're unable to meet with her – take it as a sign she may be a psychological abuser, and you need to put serious distance between you and her. There are victims who become abusers, and abusers who pretend to be victims. There are people who will get inside your head and wreck your life. Be very

careful. Be watchful. Ask your wife and elders to help you maintain a healthy balance of self-care, family time, and ministry. Otherwise, you can quickly be taken advantage of, or burnt out.

I hope this is helpful, and I will be praying for you.

Jenn

## THE DRUG DEALING FEMALE ABUSER

Hi Jennifer,

I have a very upsetting situation. About a year ago, during our summer youth camp, a young man in our congregation began exhibiting what we feared was mental illness. He hyperventilated several times, had terrible nightmares, and was acting hysterical. We tried to talk to him, but he made excuses that didn't make sense and seemed suddenly angry. He lashed out at anyone who tried to talk to him.

In subsequent months, he's had ongoing emotional issues, mood swings, panic attacks, paranoia, depression, and he's begun cutting himself. His parents are beside themselves. He seemed completely fine before camp, and we're worried something happened there.

Recently, he told me one of the women in our church gave him Xanax at camp. I checked with his therapist, and this is not a medication he's been prescribed. After researching, I'm realizing that some of the symptoms he's having are side effects of Xanax. To make matters worse, last week he claimed he'd been abused by someone at church, but wouldn't say how.

We checked surveillance cameras, but found nothing. However, I spoke to his therapist and he said the young man is displaying classic symptoms of PTSD. The therapist believes he really was abused, and said it's very common for male victims to never report or refuse to share details.

The other strange thing in all this is that the boy and this woman (who is married) have a strangely close relationship. He visits them frequently and sometimes even spends the night. I want to think it's a mother-son relationship, but I'm afraid, because the side effects of Xanax include memory loss and confusion.

What if she did something, or knows something, and used drugs to cover up the abuse of one of our kids? Please let me know what you think I should do.

Thank you,

Martin

Youth Pastor, Calvary Baptist Church

Hi Martin,

I am so sorry. This is incredibly disturbing, and I will be praying for your strength and wisdom. Please contact law enforcement immediately. Even if this woman was not involved in the abuse, she illegally gave a teenager prescription drugs, which is a crime that needs to be reported. Depending on how law enforcement want to approach the situation, you may need to report the abuse as a separate incident. However, report it you must. As a mandatory reporter, you are required by law to report child abuse, even if the account is vague or you're unsure of what's happened or happening. The police are used to investigating cases that don't make sense on the surface, and figuring out what happened on very little solid evidence. So, don't worry about making it make sense. Just get all this information into their hands as soon as possible.

Since this young man is experiencing ongoing symptoms that look like Xanax side effects, I'm worried the woman could be still giving it to him, particularly because they have such a strangely close relationship. Separate them and stop them from communicating. Make it very clear to this woman and her husband that they are not to have any contact whatsoever with this boy. Work with his parents to put the request in writing so that if she violates your request you can show law enforcement. They may then be able to issue a restraining order or take other action.

Also, give his therapist a heads-up that this relationship is ending so he can monitor the young man for behavioral changes. If he's addicted to prescription drugs, he could begin experiencing withdrawal once this relationship is severed, and that could be very rough or even dangerous. His parents should probably consult a physician as well. Among other things, they might and ask if there's any way to figure out what medication he may be on.

Please keep me posted and let me know what the police say. Thank you for entrusting me with this situation. I am praying for you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer



## DICTIONARY

*The following is a partial list of words and terms you'll likely come across when interacting with survivors, counselors, lawyers, therapists, and law enforcement. The intent is not to give you a legal or medical definition, but a layman's understanding to facilitate communication.*

**Coping Mechanism** – a method of managing stress or anxiety that may be healthy or unhealthy. *Example: After a tough day at work, he'd have a beer to relax. It wasn't a big deal until he couldn't relax without drinking beer. | Julie vented her anger in a kickboxing class.*

**Blackmail** – demanding money or another benefit from someone in exchange for not revealing private, compromising, or damaging information about them. *Example: He told her that if she didn't have sex with him, he'd post compromising photos of her from college.*

**Blame Shifting** – when someone blames their sin on another person. *Example: Adam said, "The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate," Genesis 1:12 | "If Betty would keep the house clean and the kids quiet, maybe I wouldn't have blown up."*

**Child Porn** – an image (including photos, videos, and artistic depictions) of a child or underage minor engaging in sexual conduct or sexual performance. An image or written description of a nude, partially nude, or provocatively posed child which is used for the sexual gratification of someone. State laws vary. Such images and writings must be reported to law enforcement.

**Confiding** – when someone is genuinely concerned about a person or situation, and seeks advice from someone they consider trustworthy, relevant, or knowledgeable. Not to be confused with gossip, confiding is motivated by a desire to improve a situation or help someone. *Example: She confided that she'd found a bottle of painkillers hidden in her mother's coffee tin, and wasn't sure what to think or do. | Randy accidentally saw a text on his friend's phone, and realized he was having an affair. Without naming names, he asked his pastor what he should do about it.*

**COPPA / Children's Online Privacy Protection Act** – a federal law that aims to protect children's personal information on websites (and other internet services, including apps) that are aimed at children under 13 years old.<sup>13</sup>

**Deflecting** – when a person attempts to divert attention off themselves by drawing attention to something or someone else. *Example: When confronted with his affair, Bill brought up how much money Liz spent on haircuts. | Later the pastor realized that while he'd intended to talk to Jessica about her gossip, she'd artfully shifted the conversation over to how irritating Steve is.*

**Enabler** – someone who should or does know better, yet who facilitates the continuation of abuse, either by neglecting to report crimes, minimizing a victim's suffering, excusing the

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/rules/rulemaking-regulatory-reform-proceedings/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule>

abuser's sin, or covering up evidence. *Example: Despite knowing the elder had given his wife a black eye, the pastor insisted prayer and forgiveness – not a crime report or church discipline – were the solution. | She told her daughter, “Maybe if you're a good little girl and don't complain, your daddy will see Jesus in you, repent, and not hit you anymore.”*

**Financial Abuse** – may take on several forms, but ultimately, it is the attempt to control, punish, or deprive another person by withholding money. *Example: Jerry made Abigail ask him before she so much as bought feminine hygiene products or refilled prescriptions, and sometimes he'd withhold funds for no apparent reason other than to cause her stress. | The mother spent lots of money pampering herself, but her kids went without food, clothing, and school supplies. | Autumn didn't report her dad's abuse, because she knew he'd cancel her cell phone plan, which she needed for school and work.*

**Flying Monkey** – a person who an abuser manipulates into harassing, gossiping about, or accusing the victim in an attempt to discredit or distress them. *Example: After Lisa reported her father's sexual abuse, her mother convinced two of her siblings that Lisa was delusional, and they began asking Lisa's husband to take her to a psychiatrist. They also warning Lisa's friends that she was crazy. That's when Lisa realized that, while her dad was a sexual abuser, her mother was a narcissist and an enabler.*

**Gaslighting** – to manipulate someone into questioning their own perception of a situation; their reason, logical processes, senses, intelligence, or sanity. The abuser may subtly yet intentionally influence someone to doubt their memories or perception of reality. *Example: She was running a fever, but her dad told her to stop being a hypochondriac and finish washing the dishes.*

**Gossip** – rumors and hearsay, sometimes packaged as friendly concern or prayer requests, but intended to discredit, embarrass, or make someone else look bad. This is different from reporting a crime or speaking the truth to help, protect, or warn others. We can speak the truth in love, but gossip is selfishly, maliciously, or otherwise sinfully motivated. *Example: She told me that Betty was living in sin and warned me not to trust her, but she wouldn't tell me what Betty did. | The pastor told me that Robert, who he is counseling, is struggling with severe depression and had checked himself into a hospital, but I'm not clear on why he felt I needed to know that.*

**Grooming** – a strategy of calculated actions designed to prepare a child or other victim for abuse, or to prepare bystanders to doubt accusations against the abuser. *Example: The youth pastor let the junior high boys drink beer at camp, positioning himself as a sort of cool and rebellious big brother. | The teacher kept sharing secrets with the little girl, which seemed cute at first, until the secrets grew more and more unsettling. | At first Ryan thought skinny dipping in the pond was weird, and knew his parents wouldn't approve, but everyone else was doing it. Later, after the priest fondled him underwater, he was too ashamed to tell anyone what they'd been doing, and felt like it was his fault. | Terri often told the pastor what a liar little Johnny was, so when the boy told the pastor his mother was molesting him, the pastor didn't believe the child. | The father showed his children pornography to get them used to the idea of being abused.*

**Guilt Tripping** – when someone subtly or overtly tries to make someone feel guilty, especially to manipulate or induce them to behave a certain way or do something. *Example: When she*

*confronted him about his pornography addiction, he reminded her of her tendency to drink too much, and of all the stress he was under. Then he asked why she was such an unforgiving wife.*

**Literary Porn** – written depictions of sexual acts designed to arouse the reader. *Example: The teenager was stunned to read the graphic depiction in his mom's paperback novel.*

**Narcissist** – a psychological abuser whose main motivation seems to be to draw attention to themselves. They will often use gossip, manipulation, and lies to control their victims, sabotage other people's relationships, and try to make others pity or admire them. *Example: Despite her child's illness, she seemed to view herself as the one to be pitied. | He had an annoying tendency to one-up other people's achievements with tales of his own.*

**Mandatory Reporter** – anyone obligated by law to report child abuse, sexual abuse, or other forms of crime to law enforcement; usually medical professionals, school teachers, clergy, therapists, law enforcement officers, etcetera. Mandatory reporting laws vary by state. *Example: As a mandatory reporter, the ER doctor didn't have to report a suspected case of domestic violence, but he reported anyway out of conscience.*

**Pedophile** – a person who is attracted to young children, usually pre-pubescent (infant to around 13), and who may or may not have acted on their deviant lusts.

**Preferential Offender** – a sexual abuser who prefers victims who fall within a certain demographic, for example, white boys ages 5-8, or brunette girls ages 13-15. *Example: The study found extremely high recidivism rates among male abusers who had preyed on young boys.*

**Projection** – when a person projects their own motivations, emotions, or sin onto another person, resulting in erroneous assumptions, false accusations, and sometimes, secret sins. *Example: Gossips often gossip to people who they imagine are also gossips and want to hear gossip. | His mother had often accused him of hiding things and acting like a pot-head. He later found out that she was abusing prescription drugs and had hidden painkillers and weed throughout her apartment. | While he was having the affair, Bob was so paranoid about his wife cheating on him that he read all her texts and emails.*

**Rape** – the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, male or female, without the consent of the victim.<sup>14</sup> This includes a victim below the age of consent (Statutory Rape), or who is unconscious, mentally disabled, drugged, drunk, or otherwise unable to give consent. Laws vary by state.

**Report** – when someone tells a pastor, therapist, police officer, or other mandatory reporter about abuse with the expectation that they'll file a report with law enforcement. When anyone files a report with law enforcement about an incident which may or may not be substantiated.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/updated-definition-rape>

**Revenge Porn** – photos or videos that are published or distributed in retaliation, for example, following a breakup or after abuse is reported to law enforcement. *Example: After he left his wife, she posted naked photos of him on adult websites. He had no idea she'd taken them.*

**Sexual Harassment** – any unwanted sexual attention, especially which persists after the victim has asked the offender to stop, or prior to the age of consent. This may include lewd comments and gestures, stalking, sending lewd photos or messages, and exposing themselves. Laws vary by state. Employers and organizations may require professional standards of behavior in addition to legal requirements. *Example: He was fired for sexting his staff, but charges were never pressed.*

**Sexual Abuse** – any unwanted sexual contact, including unwanted touching or grabbing.<sup>15</sup> Engaging in sexual contact or interaction with someone below the age of consent, or who is incapable of giving consent due to inebriation, illness, disability, or physical or mental incapacity. This includes sending lewd photos or messages to a minor (see Solicitation of a Minor), and exposing private parts to a minor.<sup>16</sup> Laws vary by state. *Example: Her father used to save porn to her desktop and wait for her to find it while she did her homework. | Her dad pretended not to notice his boxers had fallen open, so the girl assumed it was an accident.*

**Sexual Assault** – see Rape.<sup>17</sup>

**Sexual Deprivation** – a type of sexual and psychological abuse, this is when one spouse deprives another of sex for malicious reasons; for example to take revenge on them, humiliate them, or manipulate them; not to be confused with taking a rain check for reasonable, non-malicious reasons (such as illness, tiredness, or pregnancy discomfort). *Example: She was so angry that he hadn't gotten a raise at work, she refused to sleep with him for two weeks. | He told his wife he couldn't have sex with her until she lost five pounds. | "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." 1 Corinthians 7:5 (ESV)*

**Sin** – any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.<sup>18</sup> *Example: Jonathan worried that his depression was a sin, but his pastor assured him that even Jesus wept, and there are some things worth grieving. | Mark claimed his violence wasn't sinful and that he was only disciplining his children, however, his cruelty and malice were undeniable.*

**Situational Offender** – a sexual abuser who may have a broad variety of victims (unlike a Preferential Offender), but tends to abuse under certain circumstances or whenever opportunity arises. For example, when they're alone with a child, when they're drunk, or after a stressful day at work. *Example: Despite being married, the school nurse molested dozens of kids, boys and girls, of all ages and ethnicities. | He was convicted for sexually abusing all his children – sons and daughters, ages 2 to 18 – for over a decade. | Every time she got drunk, she got violent.*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/docs/PE/htm/PE.21.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/PE/htm/PE.21.htm#21.11>

<sup>17</sup> <https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/PE/htm/PE.22.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 14

**SOL | Statute of Limitations** – A window of time in which criminal charges may be pressed and certain kinds of legal action may be taken. *Example: Police could have charged his dad with child sexual abuse, however, the statute of limitations in Kentucky ran out five years after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and until he was 28, he couldn't bring himself to talk about it. | When the pastor realized the SOL was about to run out, he hastened to report the instance of domestic violence.*

**Solicitation of a Minor** – when anyone over the age of 17 communicates in a sexually explicit manner with a minor; distributes sexually explicit material to a minor; or knowingly solicits a minor to meet them or someone else, with the intent of engaging in sexual contact, sexual intercourse, or deviate sexual behavior, regardless of whether the meeting takes place. Laws vary by state.<sup>19</sup> *Example: His Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Carol, gave him porn for his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

**Spiritual Abuser** – a heretic or false teacher; one who uses religion or theology to control and manipulate others; one who twists Bible verses to justify, enable, or cover up sin. *Example: When the girl complained that her dad had shown her pornography, her pastor chided her for dishonoring her father and quoted Exodus 20:12. | When Allie pointed out that the adulterous pastor was disqualified, she was reprimanded for questioning the authority of an elder, and told 'David said, "I will not touch God's anointed."'*

**Statutory Rape** – see Rape.

**Temptation** – when we feel a pull toward sin, and can choose to either resist it or act upon it. *Example: When he saw her, he was tempted to lust, but he looked away and distracted himself with a book. | The pedophile claimed he was only tempted to abuse children, but he'd already succumbed to sinful fantasies in his mind. His lust made him a danger and he was asked to leave the church (Matthew 5:28, Matthew 15:19).*

**Trauma** – a state of emotional pain or sensitivity resultant from a psychological injury. Just as a person with a broken leg has physical trauma, a person who has experienced a violent or traumatic event may have emotional trauma. Expressions of pain, fear, confusion, panic, and overwhelm are very common, but should ease as the person heals over time. *Example: Despite being free from her abuser, Aimee had recurring nightmares for years. | Brad felt so betrayed by the pastor he'd considered a spiritual father; he didn't attend church for over a decade.*

**Trigger** – as human beings, we all have “triggers.” For example, when you smell fresh baked cinnamon rolls, you may instantly feel hungry and happy, because you've had good experiences with cinnamon rolls in the past. For someone with traumatic experiences, a sound, smell, phrase, or object might have a similar affect, but inspire feelings of fear, panic, depression, or a sense of being watched. Unfortunately, traumatic triggers tend to be more intense than happy triggers, and may cause an adrenaline rush, nausea, or panic attacks. *Example: Because John's father had been a violent alcoholic, John experienced intense anxiety if he heard people yelling. He lashed out defensively when anyone got frustrated with him. | For a long time, Grace had seemingly random panic attacks, until she realized her husband's cologne reminded her of her rapist.*

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<sup>19</sup> [https://texas.public.law/statutes/tex\\_penal\\_code\\_section\\_33.021](https://texas.public.law/statutes/tex_penal_code_section_33.021)

## OTHER RESOURCES

In addition to, *Not Forsaken: A Shepherd's Guide*, Jennifer Greenberg is developing a collection of complimentary resources to equip your church and minister to your community. All of these will be made available for free download in 2021 at [www.JenniferGreenberg.net](http://www.JenniferGreenberg.net).

### NOT FORSAKEN: A Shepherd's Guide Online Course

Beginning October 3, 2021, Jennifer will be hosting an online course for church leaders, counselors, and advocates. Together we will work through the materials in her book, *Not Forsaken*, as well as the *Shepherd's Guide*. This free course will be conducted through YouTube and Facebook Live, and to participate, all you need to do is join the Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/notforsakenleadership>

### NOT FORSAKEN: Women's Support Group

A community of female survivors of every sort of abuse, from church abuse to domestic violence. We aspire to love, honor, and support each other in our journey to recovery. To participate, join the Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/notforsakenladies>

### NOT FORSAKEN: Men's Support Group

A community for male survivors of every form of abuse, from verbal abuse to child abuse, aimed to build up and facilitate recovery. This private group is low key, confidential, and focused on finding our identity in Christ: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/notforsakenmen>

### NOT FORSAKEN: RecoverTogether (Coming 2022!)

In development and collaboration with Copperfield Church, this flexible program is being developed for churches and ministries to easily implement. Featuring a 14-week reading plan, practical supplemental lessons, and easy-to-follow teaching guide, RecoverTogether aims to equip God's people to minister to survivors both in their church and surrounding community.

### NOT FORSAKEN: A Survivor's Journal (Coming 2022!)

Written with individual survivors in mind, this study guide includes a 14-week reading plan, additional prayers, and a catalog of encouraging thoughts and helpful tips to ease and speed the recovery process.

### NOT FORSAKEN: A Couple's Journey (Coming 2022!)

Designed for married couples, this study guide provides supplemental reading and lesson plans that a husband and wife can work through together. By embarking on the journey of recovery as a team, they can strengthen their marriage, build their relationship, and glorify God through their shared spiritual growth.