

~~Rid of My Disgrace~~

Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault  
**Justin S. Holcomb & Lindsey A. Holcomb**

“Careful research, lots of Scripture, and a demonstration that the work of Christ says ‘you are washed clean’ to those who feel like outcasts will speak to victims of sexual abuse.”

**Ed Welch**, Counselor and Faculty, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“I can’t express how grateful I am that someone is tackling this subject with both a pastoral heart and an understanding of how the devastating effects of sexual assault can wreak havoc for decades after the abuse. It is an epidemic issue where resources are scarce. There isn’t a weekend that goes by when we aren’t told a gut-wrenching tale of innocence stolen, then left trying to help a man or woman make sense of the pain. I praise God for the gospel that can heal and restore and for the Holcombs that had the courage and wisdom to write this book for us.”

**Matt Chandler**, Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, TX

“God sees, knows, heals, restores, and redeems. This is the message of hope this book offers to all who have suffered from abuse. How desperately needed this message is in our culture today! In my interaction with teens and young adults, I have heard many stories of sexual abuse. I am so thrilled that there is a resource like this book that offers relevant, practical, biblical hope and healing words of life.”

**Rebecca St. James**, singer; author; actress

“Having experienced much sexual brokenness in my own life and now having pastored a church that ministers to thousands of broken people, I can say with confidence that this book is desperately needed. Justin and Lindsey write to help the abused and to help those who help the abused. It is a must read for all those who live and minister in this sexually broken world.”

**Darrin Patrick**, Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis, MO; Vice President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network

“Jesus says, ‘Blessed are those who mourn.’ *Rid of My Disgrace* gives sexual assault victims, and those who love and serve them, the freedom to grieve the violence against them and the tools to experience healing and hope in Jesus. I am so thankful for this major contribution to my life and the people I love.”

**Grace Driscoll**, pastor’s wife; mother of five; conference speaker; author

“Justin and Lindsey demonstrate a unique level of compassion and concern for victims of sexual assault and the hope for them for healing. The gentle and empathetic tone, along with a sincere belief that victims can experience healing, make this book indispensable for both victims and those who care for them.”

**Craig Groeschel**, Founding and Senior Pastor, LifeChurch.tv

“The world—and too often the church—encourages victims of sexual assault to do more. Self-help advice just adds more layers of guilt and a sense of powerlessness. The authors of this excellent book have good news: literally, a gospel that answers our disgrace with the grace of God in Christ. For anyone who suffers from abuse—as well as those who minister to them—*Rid of My Disgrace* is powerful, healing medicine.”

**Michael Horton**, J. G. Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *The Gospel-Driven Life*

“This is a sad and disturbing book. The ‘dark’ of it will keep you awake at night. But the ‘light’ will cause you to sing with joy and hope. What a gift to the church and to those who have felt the shame of sexual assault or who love those who have! Read it and give it to your friends. They will rise up and call you blessed! It is the best book I’ve ever read on the subject of abuse . . . and I’ve read a lot of them.”

**Steve Brown**, Professor of Preaching Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *When Being Good Isn’t Good Enough* and *When Your Rope Breaks*

“Where will you find a ‘theology of the victim’ from a Reformed theologian? You just found it. If you’ve been the victim of abuse, you won’t find yourself blamed in this book. You’ll find yourself embraced by the love of a God who meets you in your pain. This will be required reading for all of my students.”

**Chuck DeGroat**, Academic Dean, Newbigin House of Studies; Director, City Church Counseling Center

“*Rid of My Disgrace* reminds victims of sexual assault that they are not alone and it is not the end of the story. From King David’s daughter Tamar to the courageous survivors telling their stories today, the Holcombs take sexual assault out of the shadows of shame and isolation and into the light of the gospel. With a solid grasp on both the effects of sexual assault and of redemptive history, the Holcombs thoroughly identify sexual assault and its aftermath. This book calls readers to let even such a painful, hideous act be a part of their stories of redemption through Christ’s sufficient work on the cross.”

**Monica Taffinder**, cofounder and counselor, Grace Clinic Christian Counseling

“Written passionately from the agony that haunts victims, this book also offers a message of hope and healing. It is an invaluable resource for those who have been victimized and a must read for family, friends, pastors, or counselors of victims to be equipped to serve and love them well.”

**Jud Wilhite**, Senior Pastor, Central Christian Church, Las Vegas, NV; author, *Eyes Wide Open*

“Some books are easy to read, but this isn’t one of them. Its difficulty, however, is not a matter of style or prose but of substance. We don’t like thinking about sexual assault and abuse. We’d rather pretend they don’t exist. But the church can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the extent of this problem or to ignore the devastation it brings to both body and soul. What makes this book so worthy of your attention, notwithstanding the discomfort it may cause you to feel, is the wealth of wisdom, gospel grace, and pastoral sensitivity that the Holcombs bring to bear on those affected by this experience. No matter how deep the pain or sense of loss endured by the victims of sexual assault, God’s healing grace and power are greater still. Highly recommended!”

**Sam Storms**, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, OK

“This important book places the powder keg of gospel truth where it is most needed: on the frontline of pastoral ministry. A mixture of clear writing, real-life stories, and faithful Bible exposition makes this a powerful resource in the fight for redemption in the lives of those we are called to serve.”

**Joel Virgo**, Church of Christ the King, Brighton, UK

“This book helped us understand the painful emotions that go along with the particular suffering of sexual assault. But more than that, it showed us how to respond to our twelve-year-old son who was assaulted.”

**Parents of a child victim**

“I thought I had gotten over the abuses in my past—I had forgiven my abusers, stopped feeling like a victim, and felt like I was a stronger person. After reading *Rid of My Disgrace*, I realized there were still underlying issues I hadn’t dealt with that were preventing me from getting close to other people and, worst of all, preventing me from having a deeper relationship with God. Each chapter not only discussed each emotion that had been secretly weighing on me, but also showed me that those emotions don’t have to rule me. Jesus’ death and resurrection apply not only to my sins, but also to the burden of someone else’s sin against me. My identity is no longer as ‘damaged goods.’ It is as a ‘child of God’ and with that comes God’s unending love. I highly recommend this book for anyone who has experienced not only some form of sexual abuse, but also other abuses as well.”

**Adult female victim**

Rid of My Disgrace

~~Rid of My Dis~~grace

Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault  
**Justin S. Holcomb & Lindsey A. Holcomb**

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*

Copyright ©2011 by Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Patrick Mahoney of The Mahoney Design Team

First printing 2011

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

Scripture marked NIV is taken from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica. Use of either trademark requires the permission of Biblica.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from The New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977. Used by permission.

Scripture references marked NRSV are from *The New Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Published by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Scripture references marked RSV are from *The Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-1598-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-1599-6

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-1600-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-1606-1

---

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Holcomb, Lindsey A., 1981–

Rid of my disgrace : hope and healing for victims of sexual assault /  
Lindsey A. Holcomb, Justin S. Holcomb ; foreword by Mark Driscoll.  
p. cm. — (Re:Lit)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-1598-9 (tpb)

1. Sexual abuse victims—Religious life. 2. Abused women—  
Religious life. 3. Abused men—Religious life. 4. Sex crimes—  
Biblical teaching. 5. Sex—Biblical teaching. I. Holcomb, Justin S.  
II. Title.

BV4596.A2H65

2011

248.8'6—dc22

2010028915

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14  
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6

# Contents

Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	13
1 Disgrace and Grace	15

## PART ONE

### **Disgrace**

2 What Is Sexual Assault?	27
3 What Are the Effects of Sexual Assault?	37

## PART TWO

### **Grace Applied**

Allen's Story	49
4 Denial	53
Crystal's Story	67
5 Distorted Self-Image	71
Barbara's Story	85
6 Shame	89
Brian's Story	105
7 Guilt	109
Mandy's Story	121
8 Anger	125
Nicole's Story	141
9 Despair	145



PART THREE  
**Grace Revealed**

10 Sin, Violence, and Sexual Assault	159
11 Grace in the Old Testament	173
12 Grace in the New Testament	191
Concluding Prayer—"Wave upon Wave of Grace"	209
Appendix 1	210
Appendix 2	212
Notes	214
Bibliography	240
General Index	257
Scripture Index	261

# Introduction

If you are reading this, it's likely someone did something to disgrace or shame you. That "someone" may have been a stranger or an acquaintance and that "something" could have been any form of non-consensual sexual behavior. It may have occurred yesterday or decades ago.

The number of occurrences of sexual assaults is staggering. At least one in four women and one in six men are or will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetime.

We wrote this book for the many victims of sexual assault, both female and male, to offer accessible, gospel-based help, hope, and healing.

Also, we wrote this book to help equip pastors and ministry staff as well as family members and friends of victims. As they read what we are saying to victims, we hope they learn to respond and care for victims in ways that are compassionate, practical, and informed.

For many years we have ministered to victims who want and need a clear explanation of how the gospel applies to their experience of sexual assault and its effects in their lives. We have talked to many parents, spouses, ministers, and friends who are looking for solid, gospel-based information that would be helpful in serving victims.

Our experience in the area of abuse, both personally and professionally, led us to write this book. While avoiding platitudes, suspicious questions, and shallow theology, we combine practical victim advocacy, biblical and theological depth, and up-to-date academic research.

Lindsey currently counsels victims of sexual assault. Previously, she worked at a sexual assault crisis center where she provided crisis intervention to victims of assault and conducted a variety of training seminars to service providers. Lindsey also worked at a domestic violence shelter. Many of the women she served were also victims of sexual assault. Her graduate research was on sexual violence and public health responses.

Justin is a pastor and has counseled numerous victims of sexual

assault. Since 2001, he has taught theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. Justin also taught courses on sexual violence in the Sociology and Religious Studies departments as well as in the Studies of Women and Gender program at the University of Virginia.

In *Rid of My Disgrace*, we address the effects of sexual assault with the biblical message of grace and redemption. Jesus responds to your pain and past. Your story does not end with the assault. Your life was intended for more than shame, guilt, despair, pain, and denial. The assault does not define you or have the last word on your identity. Yes, it is part of your story, but not the end of your story.

The message of the gospel redeems what has been destroyed and applies grace to disgrace.

∴ This book contains both footnotes and endnotes. Letters are used to indicate footnotes, which were included so that Scripture references would be readily available to the reader.

## Disgrace and Grace

If you have suffered as the result of a sexual assault, this book is written to you and for you—not about you. What happened to you was not your fault. You are not to blame. You did not deserve it. You did not ask for this. You should not be silenced. You are not worthless. You do not have to pretend like nothing happened. Nobody had the right to violate you. You are not responsible for what happened to you. You are not damaged goods. You were supposed to be treated with dignity and respect. You were the victim of assault and it was wrong. You were sinned against. Despite all the pain, healing *can* happen and there *is* hope.

While you may cognitively agree that hope is out there, you may still feel a major effect of the sexual assault—disgrace, a deep sense of filthy defilement encumbered with shame.

Disgrace is the opposite of grace. Grace is love that seeks you out even if you have nothing to give in return. Grace is being loved when you are or feel unlovable. Grace has the power to turn despair into hope. Grace listens, lifts up, cures, transforms, and heals.

Disgrace destroys, causes pain, deforms, and wounds. It alienates and isolates. Disgrace makes you feel worthless, rejected, unwanted, and repulsive, like a *persona non grata* (a “person without grace”). Disgrace silences and shuns. Your suffering of disgrace is only increased when others force your silence. The refusals of others to speak about sexual assault and listen to victims tell the truth is a refusal to offer grace and healing.

To your sense of disgrace, God restores, heals, and re-creates through grace. A good short definition of grace is “one-way love.”<sup>1</sup> This is the opposite of your experience of assault, which was “one-way violence.” To your experience of one-way violence, God brings one-way love. The contrast between the two is staggering.

One-way love does not avoid you, but comes near, not because of

personal merit but because of your need. It is the lasting transformation that takes place in human experience. One-way love is the change agent you need for the pain you are experiencing.

Unfortunately, the message you hear most often is self-heal, self-love, and self-help. Sexual assault victims are frequently told some version of the following: “One can will one’s well-being”<sup>2</sup> or “If you are willing to work hard and find good support, you can not only heal but thrive.”<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is reflected in the famous quote, “No one can disgrace us but ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

This is all horrible news.<sup>5</sup> The reason this is bad news is that abuse victims are rightfully, and understandably, broken over how they’ve been violated. But those in pain simply may not have the wherewithal to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” On a superficial level, self-esteem techniques and a tough “refusal to allow others to hurt me” tactic may work for the short term. But what happens for the abused person on a bad day, a bad month, or a bad year? Sin and the effects of sin are similar to the laws of inertia: a person (or object) in motion will continue on that trajectory until acted upon by an outside force. If one is devastated by sin, a personal failure to rise above the effects of sin will simply create a snowball effect of shame. Hurting people need something from the outside to stop the downward spiral. Fortunately, grace floods in from the outside at the point when hope to change oneself is lost.<sup>6</sup> Grace declares and promises that you will be healed. One-way love does not command “Heal thyself!” but declares “You will be healed!” Jeremiah 17:14 promises:

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed;  
save me, and I shall be saved,  
for you are my praise.

God’s one-way love replaces self-love and is the true path to healing. This is amazingly good news and it highlights the contrast between disgrace and grace or one-way violence and one-way love. God heals our wounds. Can you receive grace and be rid of your disgrace? With the gospel of Jesus Christ, the answer is yes. Between the Bible’s bookends of creation and restored creation is the unfolding story of redemption. Biblical creation begins in harmony, unity, and peace (*shalom*),<sup>7</sup> but

redemption was needed because tragically, humanity rebelled, and the result was disgrace and destruction—the vandalism of *shalom*. But because God is faithful and compassionate, he restores his fallen creation and responds with grace and redemption. This good news is fully expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and its scope is as “far as the curse is found.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus is the redemptive work of God in our own history, in our own human flesh.

Martin Luther describes this good news: “God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who are sick, gives sight to none but the blind, and life to none but the dead. . . . He has mercy on none but the wretched and gives grace to none but those who are in disgrace.”<sup>9</sup> This message of the gospel is for all but is particularly relevant to victims of sexual assault. The purpose of this book is to proclaim this message of healing and hope to you, because you know too well the depths of suffering and the overwhelming sense of disgrace.

### **Rid of My Disgrace**

To illustrate the trauma of sexual assault and hope for redemption, we will investigate 2 Samuel 13. This passage is the biblical account of Tamar’s assault by her half-brother Amnon. Tamar’s assault reflects the contrast between disgrace and grace. Disgrace versus grace is similar to the contrasts between destruction and redemption, sin and salvation, brokenness and healing, despair and hope, shame and compassion, guilt and forgiveness, violence and peace.

[1]In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David. [2]Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill. For she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her. [3]Now Amnon had an adviser named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David’s brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man. [4]He asked Amnon, “Why do you, the king’s son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won’t you tell me?” Amnon said to him, “I’m in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.” [5]“Go to bed and pretend to be ill,” Jonadab said. “When your father comes to see you, say to him, ‘I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I may watch her and then eat it from her hand.’” [6]So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. When

the king came to see him, Amnon said to him, “I would like my sister Tamar to come and make some special bread in my sight, so I may eat from her hand.”

[7]David sent word to Tamar at the palace: “Go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him.” [8]So Tamar went to the house of her brother Amnon, who was lying down. She took some dough, kneaded it, made the bread in his sight and baked it. [9]Then she took the pan and served him the bread, but he refused to eat. “Send everyone out of here,” Amnon said. So everyone left him. [10]Then Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring the food here into my bedroom so I may eat from your hand.” And Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon in his bedroom. [11]But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, “Come to bed with me, my sister.” [12]“No, my brother!” she said to him. “Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing. [13]What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you.” [14]But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her.

[15]Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, “Get up and get out!” [16]“No!” she said to him. “Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me.” But he refused to listen to her. [17]He called his personal servant and said, “Get this woman out of my sight and bolt the door after her.” [18]So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing an ornate robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. [19]Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went.

[20]Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother. Don’t take this thing to heart.” And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom’s house, a desolate woman. [21]When King David heard all this, he was furious. [22]And Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar.<sup>a</sup>

Second Samuel 13 provides an insightful analysis of sexual assault because it is portrayed through Tamar’s eyes. Tragically, her experience

---

<sup>a</sup>2 Sam. 13:1–22 NIV.

includes manipulation, force, violence, negation of her will, emotional trauma, debilitating loss of sense of self, display of grief and mourning, crushing shame, degradation, forced silence, and prolonged social isolation with desolation. Tamar's social and personal boundaries are clearly violated.<sup>10</sup>

It's clear in verses 12, 14, and 22 that Amnon's actions of assault are violating, shaming, forceful, and humiliating. Violence permeates his words and actions. The words used to describe Amnon's feelings and physical state express sick emotions rather than life-giving ones. According to Phyllis Tribble, Amnon reduces Tamar to the state of a "disposable object."<sup>11</sup> After he assaults Tamar, Amnon commands her to leave by telling his servant, "Get this woman out of my sight."<sup>b</sup> Other translations say "Throw this woman out."<sup>c</sup> Amnon barely speaks of her as a person. She is a thing Amnon wants thrown out. To him, Tamar is trash.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding biblical accounts of sexual assault, Mieke Bal writes, "Rape is an expression of hatred, motivated by hate, and is often accompanied by offensive verbal language."<sup>13</sup> Amnon failed to consider Tamar as a complete person, created with dignity in the image of God. The intensity of Amnon's desire for Tamar was matched only by the intensity with which he hated her.

Verses 13, 19, and 22 repeatedly describe the effects of Tamar's assault: disgrace, shame, and reproach. After the assault, Tamar is privately and publicly traumatized by shame. The description of her outward appearance intends to show her inward feelings. Verse 19 is one sentence made up of four clauses that describe Tamar's state: "Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went."

Dressing the head with a headdress symbolizes dignity, but to the contrary, applying ashes is a symbol of lowliness.<sup>d</sup> Figuratively, ashes signify that which is without value or what is loathsome. Ashes on the head are a sign of humiliation and disgrace.<sup>14</sup> The "shame" that Tamar spoke of before the assault in verse 13—"Where could I get rid of my disgrace?"—is now a reality.

Tamar's robe is a special symbol of her elevated social status; however, she tears her robe. The rending of clothes—often articulated bibli-

---

<sup>b</sup>2 Sam. 13:17 NIV.

<sup>c</sup>New American Standard Bible and New Living Translation.

<sup>d</sup>Isa. 61:3.



cally as “sackcloth and ashes”—is an act of grievous affliction, revealing the sorrow of the heart, and is an expression of loss and lament. Tamar had her dignity torn from her, and the invasion is now expressed with physical gestures. The narrator describes Tamar as a person.<sup>e</sup> But after this violation, her beauty is exchanged for feelings of shame and loss expressed through symbols of emotional distress. Tamar has become a person who has experienced loss of control over her body, over her life, and over her dignity.

To put her hands on her head is a gesture of grief.<sup>15</sup> The book of Jeremiah describes the image of hands on the head to express shame.<sup>f</sup> Covering the head with one’s hands and with ashes is a double image intensifying the expression of the abused person’s state of deep shame and anguish.

The basic meaning of “cry” is to plead, from a disturbed heart, for help in time of distress. Tamar’s cry is not to summon another, but to express her deeply felt distress. Tamar’s “crying aloud” is an audible expression of pain, emphasizing the distress already conveyed through her visual appearance and gestures.

While we read that she leaves crying, we are not specifically told where she goes. The image produced is one of Tamar wandering aimlessly, with her torn dress, wailing like one in mourning, publicly announcing her grief and her disgrace. The assault has reduced her to a state of aimless despair.<sup>16</sup>

Tamar’s body language portrays deep pain. Her actions resemble a rite of shame and link her with all other victims of assault. The post-assault scene is dominated by physical symbols that express Tamar’s inner trauma. She has been grievously wronged by Amnon and left alone by everyone else. Her brother Absalom said, “Be quiet now, my sister. . . . Don’t take this thing to heart” (v. 20). He would rather have kept her assault and suffering hidden. Even though the text says her father, the king, was furious, he did nothing. It was appropriate for David to be angry. However, he should have reached out to Tamar and protected her, even if it was only in a gesture of articulating that anger to her that she had been wronged. When victims are abused and shamed, often the

---

<sup>e</sup>2 Sam. 13:1.

<sup>f</sup>Jer. 2:36–37. “How much you go about, changing your way! You shall be put to shame by Egypt as you were put to shame by Assyria. From it too you will come away with your hands on your head, for the LORD has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them.”

response (or lack thereof) of family and friends continues to pile on the shame. Those who should have been supportive and taken her side did not. They minimized what had happened, showing that they did not understand the depth of Tamar's pain.

Second Samuel 13 describes well the destruction wrought by sexual assault, which includes the violation and its effects, the sin against Tamar, and its consequences. An important question asked by assault victims is echoed in verse 13 when Tamar asks, "Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" Her question was left unanswered in the text. Absalom, her brother, responded to Tamar's pain by plotting to kill Amnon and by silencing her. David, Tamar's father, ignored her disgrace.

However, there was one who later came and entered her pain and shame. Jesus Christ was killed, not for revenge but to bear her shame on the cross<sup>g</sup> and to offer her a new robe of righteousness to replace her torn robes of disgrace.<sup>h</sup> How Tamar felt after the assault, described in verse 19, is shockingly similar to what Jesus experienced leading up to and during his crucifixion.<sup>i</sup> Jesus entered her pain and shame as Tamar's substitute to remove the stain of sins committed against her, and he rose from the dead to bring her healing and hope.

## **Disgrace, Grace Applied, and Grace Revealed**

The message of this book is that the gospel applies grace to disgrace and redeems what is destroyed. This good news for victims is explained in the three parts of the book.<sup>17</sup>

### *Part One—Disgrace*

In order to deal with the issue honestly and directly, the first part (chapters 2 and 3) presents a clear definition of sexual assault and a description of its effects. Numerous misconceptions surround the issue of sexual assault as victims are often unsure if their experiences classify as assault. Sexual assault is not just rape by a stranger with physical force or a weapon. Most victims (approximately 80 percent) are assaulted by an acquaintance (relative, spouse, dating partner, friend, pastor,

---

<sup>g</sup>Heb. 12:2.

<sup>h</sup>Isa. 61:10.

<sup>i</sup>He was betrayed by a close friend, abandoned by his other friends, mocked, beaten, publicly shamed and humiliated, and he felt abandoned by God (Psalm 22 and Matt. 27:45–46).

teacher, boss, coach, therapist, doctor, etc.). Sexual assault also includes attempted rape or any form of nonconsensual sexual contact.

Many victims feel the effects of sexual assault but are isolated or confused because they believe a popular misconception of what sexual assault entails. The purpose of chapter 2 is to let victims know the prevalence of their experiences and the truth about assault. Chapter 3 on the effects of sexual assault is central for this book as it mostly describes the emotional damage done to victims, which is the focal point for applying the gospel of redemption.

### *Part Two—Grace Applied*

Chapters 4 through 9 focus on ways that grace is applied to the disgraceful experiences and effects of sexual assault. Denial, shame, distorted images of self and God, guilt, anger, and the despair that comes with it all can only be dealt with one way: through God's compassion, faithfulness, and grace. To illustrate this, we included six stories from victims who tell bravely of their experiences of disgrace and the grace they receive from Jesus.

We believe that the only thing that gets to the depth of the devastation of sexual assault is God's one-way, unconditional love expressed through, and founded on, the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. And in response to sin and its effects, God's radical grace and redemption are at the center of responding to the pain and needs brought on by a victim's experiences. To illustrate this point, we included six stories from victims who bravely tell of their experiences of disgrace and the grace they received from Jesus.

### *Part Three—Grace Revealed*

The third part (chapters 10 through 12) is for further study for anyone who wants to read about the biblical understanding of sin, violence, and sexual assault, and God's response of redemption. Chapter 10 investigates the original peace (*shalom*) inherent to God's creation, the cosmic treason of human sin, and the violence that follows. We will trace a biblical theology of violence in general and explore what the Bible says about sexual assault in particular. The fall and sin invert mutual love and harmony into domination of and violence against each other. Sex, the very expression of human union and peace, becomes a tool for violence after the fall.

Chapters 11 and 12 trace the drama of redemption starting in the garden of Eden leading to the cross and resurrection and finally to

completion in the new creation. God's steadfast unailing love (*hesed*)<sup>18</sup> and grace are the threads throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Chapter 11 surveys significant, redemptive events in the Old Testament while chapter 12 shows how God's desire to restore peace and bring redemption is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When victims can identify with the horrendous victimization of the cross, they are more meaningfully able to celebrate the victorious resurrection of Christ. Jesus suffered violence that mirrors much of what victims experience today (shame, humiliation, silence, betrayal, pain, mockery, injustice, loneliness, etc.). While Jesus' suffering and death were real and brutal, there was resurrection after Good Friday. The cross is both the consequence of evil and God's method of accomplishing redemption. Jesus proves, by the resurrection, that God redeems, heals, and makes all things new.

As we explore how one-way love heals and replaces the destruction caused by one-way violence, it is helpful to look at the prayer of Psalm 6. Imagine this psalm as Tamar's cry and yours—a mourning of disgrace and longing for grace from God:

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,  
 nor discipline me in your wrath.  
 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;  
 heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.  
 My soul also is greatly troubled.  
 But you, O LORD—how long?  
 Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;  
 save me for the sake of your steadfast love.  
 For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
 in Sheol who will give you praise?  
 I am weary with my moaning;  
 every night I flood my bed with tears;  
 I drench my couch with my weeping.  
 My eye wastes away because of grief;  
 it grows weak because of all my foes.  
 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,  
 for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.  
 The LORD has heard my plea;  
 the LORD accepts my prayer.  
 All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;  
 they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.



# Allen's Story

My name is Allen. It wasn't until my midthirties that I finally discovered something that had happened to me, something I had suspected but kept denying. I'd been molested as a little boy.

When I was eight years old I had what I thought was a recurring nightmare—a large dark figure coming into my room in the middle of the night. I remember it happening several times—screaming for help and crying in fear, with no one ever coming to help. The rest I had blanked out. These “nightmares” stopped when I moved into a different bedroom a year or so later.

Over the next twenty years life went on; I experienced the typical joys and challenges of adolescence and young adulthood. I got married at twenty-one, and my wife and I started a family of our own. Four daughters came along within six years—I felt so blessed, so fortunate.

During all those years there had been recurring signs that I had been molested as a child. I was hypervigilant, had bouts of insomnia, depression, and an obsession with appearing strong and tough (lifting weights like crazy) and, something rather embarrassing, the absolute inability to have a rectal exam.

When I was eighteen I underwent a physical as part of applying for an ROTC scholarship, and when it came time for the rectal exam I started shaking and crying uncontrollably. I was humiliated and embarrassed, and the doctor ended up not doing it. The exact same thing happened about ten years later when I underwent a routine physical exam. Another similar incident occurred when I was on a cruise with my wife after we had been married for years. I got food poisoning, and after a horrendous night I went to the infirmary on board for a shot to stop the nausea. When I pulled my pants down to receive the shot, I started shaking and crying again, just as I had years earlier at my ROTC physical. My wife and I eventually had our fifth child, a son who joined

his four sisters. Once he started getting older, I began having massive anxiety attacks and bouts of depression, which felt like they had come out of left field. At times I found myself literally shaking in my office at work for no reason. I had no idea what was happening or why.

Finally in my midthirties I started seeing a Christian counselor, and he helped me put the pieces together to something I had been denying for over twenty years, being molested as a little boy. The perpetrator was my grandfather. He had come to visit us at the exact time of my recurring “nightmares.” I later learned he had also molested my two sisters. When it all came together, I just shook and sobbed in the counselor’s office. But at least now it all made sense, and the truth of what I had been denying all those years finally came out. After all those years of suspecting that something had happened to me but denying it, it all became clear. It hurt so badly. It still does sometimes. After all, how could a grown man do that to a trusting, helpless little boy, especially his own grandson?

All the years of denial solved nothing. Time did not heal those wounds. Facing the reality of what actually happened was the beginning of the healing process, a process that continues and will not be complete until we are in heaven. What has given me comfort is the fact that the truth is now clear, and while the truth hurts, it also sets us free (John 8:32). I know God wept when I was molested, and I know that he cared for me as an eight-year-old kid, and he still cares for me. I know that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ there is forgiveness available for all of us, including me, and including my grandfather. My grandfather died years before everything became clear, but I have forgiven him; Scripture is clear that we need to forgive others as God forgives us (Matt. 6:14–15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). There are still traces of lingering hurt and anger in my heart—I won’t deny that—but the anxiety attacks and the bouts of depression have stopped. I still have insomnia sometimes, with the accompanying hypervigilance, but markedly less than before. I still lift weights regularly, but as a way to relieve stress and stay in shape, not out of a compulsion to appear strong and tough.

One benefit of all this is that it has made me extra careful and protective of my own kids—in a healthy and not controlling way—so that hopefully they will not experience what I did. As an ordained minister, it has also given me a deeper sense of compassion for those in our

church who have been traumatized by sexual assault or in other ways. And while I am gradually experiencing the healing power of the grace of God as related to this, I look forward with hope to the day when the healing will be complete. In the meantime, I am grateful that the denial has stopped and that God cares for me.





## Denial

Sexual assault often communicates to victims that they are alone, unimportant, beyond hope, and not worthy of sympathy. It tempts victims to deny and minimize. Denial and minimization are key methods victims use for lessening or coping with the pain and trauma from an assault. When we experience pain, our impulse is to escape the bombardment of betrayal and loss. In our desperation, we deny our suffering in an attempt to dull the pain.

Following the initial shock of the assault—and even months later—victims may deny to others or to themselves that anything has happened by suppressing memories in an attempt to gain control of their lives again. If and when there is an acceptance of the assault, victims often minimize it by saying “it doesn’t bother me anymore.” Denial of the assault and its effects can lead victims to minimize the anxiety and distress they are feeling, which can lead to isolation and loneliness. Sadly, some would rather deny or minimize their own emotions than grieve the irretrievable loss of their innocence and trust in others.

Many victims do not fully acknowledge what has happened to them, or they minimize the intensity of the experience. This is especially true for survivors of childhood sexual assault. Initially, denial can slow the process down to create a buffer or safety zone so survivors can begin to cope with difficult emotions.

We all have experiences of disgrace that allow us to learn to cope with the occasional failures, defeat, or rejection inherent in life. In the case of severe trauma such as sexual assault, the interpersonal experience of disgrace is internalized. Once internalized, its distorting effects may function apart from the original experience with progressively destructive consequences. Disgrace becomes a core dimension of their identity. The experience of disgrace can be so painful that victims set in

motion the processes of denial, repression, and minimizing. However, instead of lessening suffering, too much denial and minimization may increase the pain. Denial does not allow the victims to deal with the severe mental and emotional tolls, the psychological destruction, and the traumatic effects of the assault.

One of the most debilitating consequences of sexual assault is victims' suppression of their feelings. Understandably, victims cope by suppressing their terror, pain, and rage, but rather than fostering avoidance tactics, victims need encouragement to grieve. Victims' experiences threaten their semblance of internal and external safety, so it's unrealistic to expect them to simply abandon their reliable survival strategies even amid objective safety. Family and friends should give grace as some level of denial may help as victims learn to cope with how they feel.

You may have learned to cope over the weeks, months, or years by consciously or unconsciously driving the abuse and pain from your memory and conversations. You may find yourself saying to others "Everything is fine," or "It could have been worse." It may be more comfortable to refuse any discussion as if nothing happened. While self-preservation schemes may help to manage your pain and protect against the nightmare of powerlessness, betrayal, confusion, and rejection, no amount of denial will erase your pain; it only postpones healing.

Denial fuels the myth that time heals all wounds. But memory knows no time. Over time the pain may diminish in severity or be masked in other ways, but time alone will not heal the wounds from what has been done to you. Perhaps you try to manage your pain through drugs, alcohol, food, anger, fear, getting tough, running from God, being sexually promiscuous, or isolating yourself. But in order to heal, you need God's compassion and redemptive work applied to your suffering. The more realistic and honest you can be regarding your emotions in response to what has happened to you, the more you will understand that you are not responsible. You have permission to grieve and mourn what has happened, and know that God has compassion for you amid your suffering.

Impulses toward denial are most common among victims assaulted by someone they know. It can be extremely difficult to face the fact that someone you should have been able to lovingly trust betrayed you. In

addition, perpetrators often use their own form of denial and when confronted may defend or rationalize their actions. A perpetrator's denial can be incredibly confusing to victims as they wrongly ponder their own culpability or blame. Sadly, perpetrators often give astonishing rationalizations by saying that what they've done (or are doing) is a form of misunderstood love. Tragically, some victims believe the lies and consequently have difficulty identifying that they've been assaulted at all.

Additionally, societal and familial norms silence victims by preventing them from speaking out about their experience of sexual assault. This is particularly the case for victims assaulted by their relatives, partners, or acquaintances. Families and friends often encourage denial and minimization because the facts are uncomfortable to hear, they don't know how to respond, or they are worried about embarrassing the family.<sup>1</sup> You may have been told not to talk about your assault in a number of different ways: "Don't air the family's dirty laundry," "This did not happen to you," or "Forget the past and move on." In response to the confusion brought about by family and friends, excuses for perpetrators or nonoffending parents are often made. "It wasn't his fault, he was drinking," "I'm sure I did something to lead him on," or "I know my mother would have protected me if she only knew."

In addition, victims from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be denied access to mainstream support systems. Victims with a disability may also be unable to voice their experiences to others due to the nature of their disability. If you are unable to share your emotions and needs with others, you may understandably feel confused, alienated, isolated, in despair, or angry.

In light of all this, adopting a "forget the past and move on" mentality may sound attractive when you are besieged with painful memories of an abusive past or experience. But this strategy is ineffective and is a barrier to healing.

Some level of resistance to restoration is normal for sexual assault victims. There is either a conscious refusal to admit that the assault has any impact, or there is an absence of memory of the past damage. Specific attention to the harm done is needed before the restoration is begun.

While denial is used for self-preservation, if it is never addressed

it is actually a major barrier to healing. Denial can turn from a natural reaction, to a shocking and traumatic event, to a mode of self-protection and self-reliance that avoids honest engagement of one's emotions and God's response to what happened.

As you engage your emotions, feelings of helplessness and grief may grow stronger. While grief can be excruciating at first, the Bible says that you do not mourn alone. God grieves for and with you. God's response toward you is compassion. In light of that, you can cry out honestly to God about what happened and how it affects you. Scripture is filled with people crying out to God and God's gracious and redemptive responses.

The Psalms in particular provoke us out of denial. The book of Psalms is not filled with 150 hymns of joy. The psalms of complaint and accusation—the music of confusion, doubt, and heartache—significantly outnumber the hymns of joy.

While our natural impulse is to deny painful emotions, the psalms expose them to us, others, and God. In light of this exposure, Calvin writes that psalmists “lay open their inmost thoughts and emotions, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.”<sup>2</sup>

## **God Sees, Hears, and Knows**

Instead of denying, minimizing, or ignoring what happened to you, God mourns what happened. Through Jesus he identifies with you and he has compassion. God calls sexual assault what it is: violence, evil, and sin. He doesn't minimize it; he doesn't ignore your hurt. Your dignity as an image-bearer of God has been assaulted, and it is an assault against him since you reflect his glory.<sup>3</sup>

God knows your suffering. He sees, responds, and invites you to participate in the sorrow and grief he has for your situation. You are not encouraged to be silent or deny, but to feel and express your emotions, to cry or weep, to grieve the destruction you experienced. God has compassion for the victims of injustice, and at the root of his compassion is the fact that he witnesses the suffering of the abused. His real (and constant) presence amid violence allows us to understand God's hatred for sin.

*Exodus*

The exodus story<sup>4</sup> begins with God's people being oppressed in Egypt. At their time of greatest need, God heard Israel's desperate cries for help: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew."<sup>a</sup> God sees, hears, and knows the suffering of his people: "I have surely *seen* the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have *heard* their cry because of their taskmasters. I *know* their sufferings."<sup>b</sup> God sympathizes with the groans of his people and gets involved with their suffering. He already sees, hears, and knows your suffering and is facing it in its fullness even before you cried out. Now he is inviting you to face it with him, not alone.

*Psalms*

Many of the psalms reveal the compassionate disposition of God toward those who suffer: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."<sup>c</sup> Suffering does not repel God. Instead it draws God near. God promises never to cut himself off from those who cry to him in distress.<sup>d</sup> This divine attention toward those who are suffering is incarnated in the suffering servant, who we now know is Jesus Christ: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."<sup>e</sup>

*Jesus Christ*

God's compassion for and solidarity with the oppressed is embodied in Jesus Christ. Christ not only suffered for his people but also suffers with them.<sup>f</sup> "The descent of God to earth is the descent of God to the underside of the knife, plague, or rain of fire."<sup>5</sup> He understands our sufferings. His identity was attacked.<sup>g</sup> He was rejected and betrayed by others.<sup>h</sup> He was abandoned.<sup>i</sup> He was lied about, slandered, and person-

---

<sup>a</sup>Ex. 2:24–25.

<sup>b</sup>Ex. 3:7, emphasis added.

<sup>c</sup>Ps. 34:18.

<sup>d</sup>Ps. 9:9, 12.

<sup>e</sup>Isa. 53:3.

<sup>f</sup>Acts 9:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:26–27.

<sup>g</sup>Matt. 4:3; 27:40.

<sup>h</sup>Matt. 26:47–50, 69–75; Mark 3:21; 14:43–45, 66–72; Luke 22:47–52; John 7:5.

<sup>i</sup>Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50.

ally attacked.<sup>j</sup> He was humiliated. He was in emotional agony.<sup>k</sup> He was in physical agony from being beaten and tortured. He was murdered. He experienced the worst agony imaginable, not only physically on the cross, but also emotionally and spiritually as well. At one point, he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>l</sup>

Jesus endured the cross because of his compassion and love for you. The New Testament repeatedly turns to the cross of Christ as the supreme demonstration of the love of God. John provides the most famous example: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. . . . God is love. . . . In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”<sup>m</sup> We can begin to appreciate the contours of God’s compassionate love by reflecting on the cost of the cross and the depth of our need.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus shared in absolute abandonment and the pain of sufferers. He carries the burden of pain with you. Jesus understands your pain, because he was a victim of violence and suffered injustice. He knows what it means to bear shame. He knows what it means to be alone, naked, bleeding, and crying out to God. You can more meaningfully celebrate the victorious resurrection of Christ when you can identify with the horrendous victimizing of the cross. Jesus mirrors much of what you experienced (shame, humiliation, silence, betrayal, pain, mockery, travesty of justice, loneliness, etc.). In your suffering, you can be armed with the confidence that Christ also suffered unjustly.

When considering God’s solidarity in Christ with victims, it is important to highlight how Jesus is merciful and faithful. Hebrews 2:17 connects Jesus’ suffering to his disposition toward us: “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.”

Commenting on this passage, Calvin explains Christ’s desire to sympathize with us as we suffer:

And it is the true teaching of faith when we in our case find the reason why the Son of God undertook our infirmities. For all knowledge without feeling the need of this benefit is cold and lifeless. But he teaches us that Christ was made subject to human affections, that He

<sup>j</sup>John 8:41, 48.

<sup>k</sup>Matt. 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46.

<sup>l</sup>Matt. 27:46.

<sup>m</sup>1 John 3:16; 4:8, 10.

might be a merciful and faithful high priest. . . . For in a priest, whose office it is to appease God's wrath, to help the miserable, to raise up the fallen, to relieve the oppressed, mercy is especially required, and it is what experience produces in us. For it is a rare thing for those who are always happy to sympathize with the sorrows of others. . . . The Son of God had no need of experience that He might know the emotions of mercy. But we could not be persuaded that He is merciful and ready to help us had He not become acquainted by experience with our miseries. But this, as other things, has been as a favor given to us. Therefore whenever any evils pass over us, let it ever occur to us, that nothing happens to us but what the Son of God has Himself experienced in order that He might sympathize with us; nor let us doubt but that He is at present with us as though He suffered with us. . . . An acquaintance with our sorrows and miseries so inclines Christ to compassion, that He is constant in imploring God's aid for us.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus' solidarity with those who suffer is also a ministry of acknowledgment. The humiliation and death of Jesus acknowledges the ongoing reality and striking power of violence and injustice. It is a powerful acknowledgment on God's part of the persevering affliction of pain and suffering. This reflects the seriousness with which God takes the presence of innocent suffering.

### *God's Sorrow*

God's solidarity with and compassion for those who suffer is the motivation for his response of grief. Grief is not negative. People may claim that grief is usually negative and not something God does, but the Bible teaches that sorrow and grief are profound human emotions that help us come to grips with reality. When something of great value is lost, we express sorrow.

In the Bible, people grieve and express sorrow because God is a God who hears and responds. The sorrow of God plays a major role in the Old Testament. Because of his loving-kindness (*hesed*), the Bible reveals that God actually suffers for his people. His love for his people and his desire to be loved by them drives God to suffer with and for us. This is seen most clearly in the cross but is taught throughout the entire Bible. The way toward our healing is painful for God, as Walter Brueggemann writes: "But the way of healing is not an easy one for Yahweh; Yahweh



goes through loss, anguish, rage, and humiliation. The healing costs the healer a great deal.”<sup>8</sup>

Jesus was a man of sorrows and grief.<sup>1</sup> His grief is both for others in their suffering and sin and for what lies ahead of him at the cross. This is not just because he is the God-man and now experiences human emotions since he has a body. In his grief for others, Jesus is expressing the emotions of Yahweh as revealed in the Old Testament. As one who grieves, Jesus has compassion for and knows how to give comfort to those who weep and mourn.<sup>9</sup>

### *Resurrection*

Rather than minimize grief, Jesus experiences it and comforts others in it. But mourning is not the final word. Resurrection is. He gives a word of comfort to those in distress. The knowledge of his resurrection is our hope and a major way of dealing with sorrow: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”<sup>p</sup>

The Bible teaches that our suffering is a place to experience God’s sustaining grace in our weakness.<sup>q</sup> It is clearly taught that grief is a natural response when one experiences loss, but it can be tempered by the knowledge of Christ and the resurrection.

The loss that causes grief is very real, but it is temporary. The knowledge that softens the blow of grief is not an abstract platitude but the real resurrection of Jesus.<sup>r</sup> Our grief now is in the context of a future hope.<sup>s</sup> The hope of the new creation frames, but does not erase our present mourning: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”<sup>t</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Matt. 23:37; 26:38; Mark 7:34; 8:12; 14:34; John 11:35; 12:27.

<sup>9</sup>Luke 7:13.

<sup>p</sup>John 14:1–3.

<sup>q</sup>2 Cor. 1:8–9.

<sup>r</sup>1 Corinthians 15.

<sup>s</sup>1 Thess. 4:13–18.

<sup>t</sup>Rev. 21:3–4.

The type of grieving and mourning we see in light of God’s redemption is not despair, but one of honesty and trust in the character of God with assurance that he knows, sees, hears, and cares. God uses this grief and mourning for your restoration. Geerhardus Vos describes this redemptive grief:

What the Lord expects from us at such seasons is not to abandon ourselves to unreasoning sorrow, but trustingly to look sorrow in the face, to scan its features, to search for the help and hope, which, as surely as God is our Father, must be there. In such trials there can be no comfort for us so long as we stand outside weeping. If only we will take the courage to fix our gaze deliberately upon the stern countenance of grief, and enter unafraid into the darkest recesses of our trouble, we shall find the terror gone, because the Lord has been there before us, and, coming out again, has left the place transfigured, making of it by the grace of his resurrection a house of life, the very gate of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

## Grief

Victims frequently ask: Is it okay to grieve what happened to me? Why do I feel guilty for mourning? Is it because I feel like I’m questioning God’s goodness? The cross is God’s solidarity with and compassion for the assaulted, and the resurrection is his promise that he can heal and redeem your suffering.

Grief is not a sinful emotion but is the result of sin. God and his people have legitimate grief because of sin and the pain it brings.<sup>u</sup> Because of God’s redemptive work, he will wipe away all of your tears.<sup>v</sup> We look forward to the day when grief will be banished. Therefore, you can have hope, which invites you to grieve, but not to grieve as one who does not have hope.<sup>w</sup> We grieve with hope because Jesus’ resurrection is proof to us that God is about healing, redeeming, and making all things new.

In Matthew 5:4 Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”<sup>x</sup> Grief and mourning are a pivotal part of restoration. It can involve an extensive and painful process of identi-

<sup>u</sup>Acts 8:2; 20:37–38; Phil. 2:27.

<sup>v</sup>Rev. 7:17; 21:4.

<sup>w</sup>1 Thess. 4:13; 5:10; 1 Cor. 15:55–57.

<sup>x</sup>Also see Isa. 61:2.

fying and experiencing many losses. There is much to grieve because much has been taken from you: the loss of control over your own body, sometimes a loss of an entire childhood, the loss of not having had a protective or nurturing family or appropriate role models, and/or the loss of trust.

Grief might be ongoing, not just a step that is done and completed quickly, as victims face multiple losses they have suffered and are involved in the process of engaging grief as it emerges. Grieving outside of God's redemptive work can be so overwhelming that it leaves no room for introspection and leads to despair. However, participating in God's grief can be redemptive because you don't have to deny or minimize what happened to you. Sorrow is embracing the sadness of losses that have grieved and angered the heart of God. Victims often fail to realize that God's own sorrow for what has happened is deep and profound. Mourn. Grieve. Cry. God is grieved by and angry at what happened to you. He is even more grieved and angry than you are, so you are invited to participate with God in his grief and anger.

That is why your cry does not need to be one of despair but can be a cry of hope and faith. While the cross shows us that God understands pain and does not judge you for your feelings of grief, the resurrection shows you that God is active in restoring peace (*shalom*), and that he conquered sin and is reversing its effects.

Your mourning and grief can be a protest at how things are. Things are not the way they're supposed to be. And these can be cries of hope that the way it will be—peace restored, no more pain—might be known more fully now.

Grief is not the main or only response to the pain you feel, but it is an appropriate and good response. Grief intensifies the sadness in facing the loss. Grief admits that there are scars that can be removed only in heaven. Grief opens the heart, replacing hardness and contempt with tenderness and vulnerability.

### *Facing the Truth*

The first step in facing the truth about victimization begins when you say, "Yes, I was assaulted, and those who hurt me took something away I can never get back." The past, no matter how painful and overwhelming, may seem like an enemy. But in the process of healing, such

memories are being used by God to transform us, not destroy us. What others did to you with evil intents to harm, God uses for good for you and others.<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28 promises: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

### *Admitting the Damage*

In addition to facing this truth, it is necessary to admit the damage that has occurred. Minimizing your loss may seem courageous and charitable, but it helps no one. You do not help yourself by living in the darkness of denial. It takes courage to admit the devastating effects of the assault to yourself and others. In the process of telling others, you might see that in your denial you tried to protect yourself from further betrayal or comfort yourself by relying on obsessive-compulsive behaviors, abusing drugs or alcohol, creating distance in relationships and isolating yourself, and/or promiscuity.

### *Naming Evil*

The only way to move from denial, isolation, and self-protection is to look honestly at the assault that has been done to you. Healing begins when the secret is disclosed and the shackles of silence are broken. Healing involves naming evil for what it is and seeing how God rages against it to reestablish *shalom* and proclaim his steadfast love for you. About naming the wounds caused by wrongdoings, Miroslav Volf writes:

We must name the troubling past truthfully—we must come to clarity about what happened, how we reacted, and how we are reacting to it now—to be freed from its destructive hold on our lives. Granted, truthful naming will not by itself heal memories of wrong suffered: but without truthful naming, all measures we might undertake to heal such memories will remain incomplete.<sup>10</sup>

### *God's Presence*

As you grieve, no magic words or pious platitudes will make the pain go away. But in the middle of your suffering, you are not alone. This

---

<sup>9</sup>Gen. 50:20.

is not the entire message of redemption, but it is a significant part of it. Somehow, God is present in the darkness and pain. This does not remove the fear, the anxiety, and the struggle, but it does remind us that God is there when we reach out into the darkness.

Psalm 46:1 proclaims, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” David does not promise there will be no trouble or any heartache in this life. He only promises that God is with you in the trouble. The cross and resurrection show you that God mysteriously pulls you toward him even as you squirm and resist. And he is there in the dark places when you feel most alone.

In all of this anguish, God is present even when you feel alone. This is a paradox: How can you feel so alone and yet sense deeply that God is near? David describes much the same experience in Psalm 10. David cries out in verse 1: “Why, O LORD do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” But then David declares unequivocally in verse 17: “O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear.” The laments of this psalm encourage us to risk the danger of speaking boldly and personally to God. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that “the laments are refusals to settle for the way things are. They are acts of relentless hope that believes no situation falls outside Yahweh’s capacity for transformation. No situation falls outside of Yahweh’s responsibility.”<sup>11</sup> Psalm 10 can serve as a prayer for you as you reflect on the temptation of denial and the need for grief and mourning while still hoping in God’s healing and restoration.

## **Confidence**

Because of Jesus, you have the privilege to confidently go to God and receive grace and mercy. Your need and your cries don’t cause God to shun you or distance himself from you. Rather, he has compassion on you. Hebrews 4:14–16 says: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

What happens if you remain in denial? You ignore your need and cling to things that offer false confidence and settle for something besides grace and mercy. However, you are invited to go confidently to God when you grieve and acknowledge your weakness and suffering. He joyfully responds with grace and mercy.



"Careful research, lots of Scripture, and a demonstration that the work of Christ says 'you are washed clean' to those who feel like outcasts: *Rid of My Disgrace* will speak to victims of sexual abuse."

**Ed Welch**, *Counselor and Faculty, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation*

"Gives sexual assault victims, and those who love and serve them, the freedom to grieve the violence against them and the tools to experience healing and hope in Jesus."

**Grace Driscoll**, *pastor's wife, mother of five, conference speaker, author*

"I praise God for the gospel that can heal and restore and for the Holcombs who had the courage and wisdom to write this book for us."

**Matt Chandler**, *Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, TX*

"Reminds victims of sexual assault that they are not alone and it is not the end of the story. From King David's daughter Tamar to the courageous survivors telling their stories today, the Holcombs take sexual assault out of the shadows of shame and isolation and into the light of the gospel."

**Monica Taffinder**, *cofounder and counselor, Grace Clinic Christian Counseling*

"In my interaction with teens and young adults, I have heard many stories of sexual abuse. I am so thrilled that there is a resource like this book that offers relevant, practical, and biblical hope."

**Rebecca St. James**, *singer, author, actress*

**Justin S. Holcomb** (PhD, Emory University) is an Episcopal priest and teaches theology, philosophy, and Christian thought at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He and his wife are the coauthors of *Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence*.

**Lindsey A. Holcomb** counsels victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. Previously, she worked a case manager at a sexual assault crisis center and a domestic violence shelter, providing crisis intervention to victims and conducting a variety of training seminars for service providers.

CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

