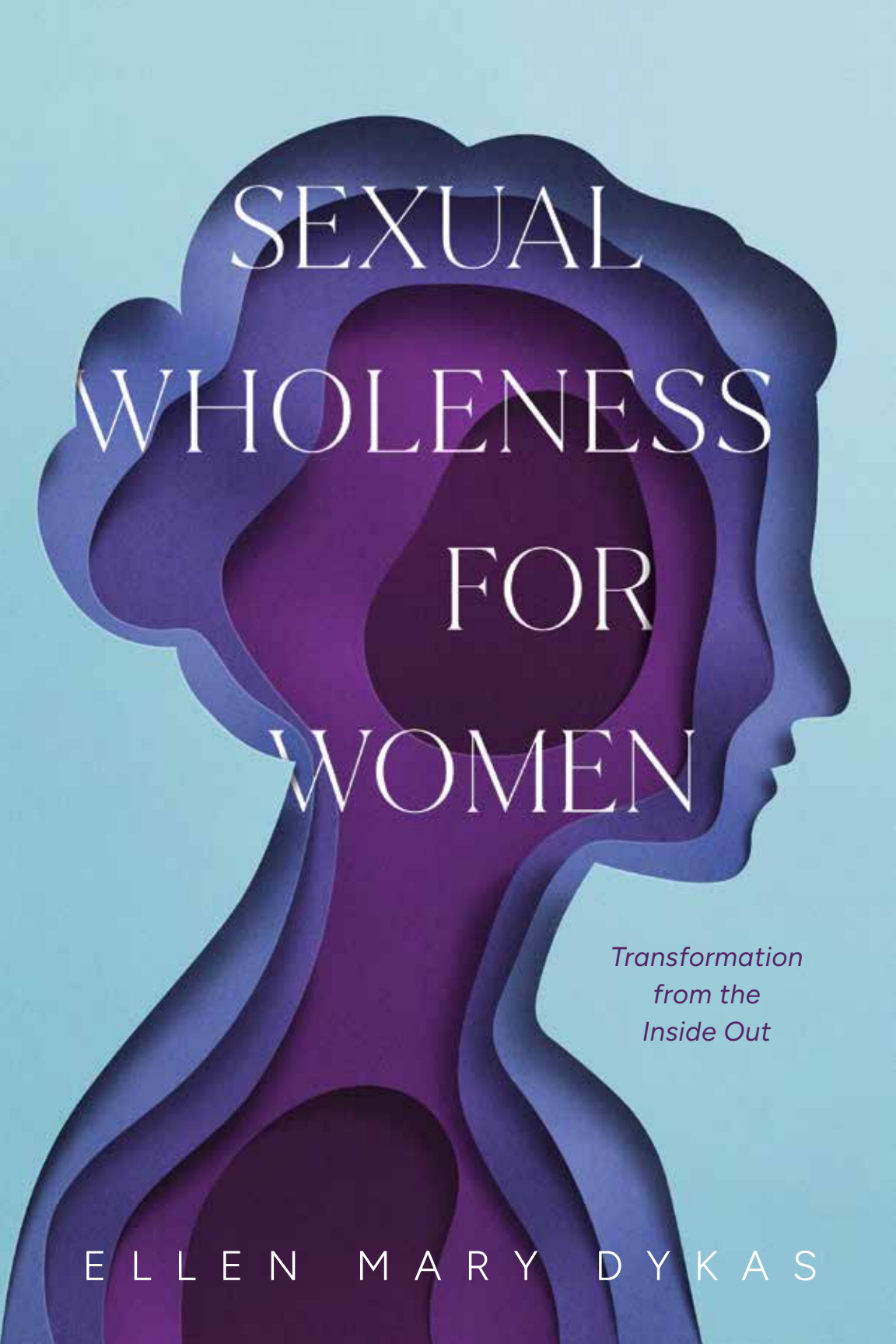

SEXUAL
WHOLENESS
FOR
WOMEN
Transformation
from the
Inside Out
ELLEN MARY DYKAS

"In my ministry to women, I value Christ-centered resources that address real issues. In *Sexual Wholeness for Women,* Dykas skillfully handles the topic of sexual brokenness with compassion and clarity. Her approach considers the wide range of sexual struggles and applies biblical wisdom for genuine transformation. This book will bring hope to hurting women and those who walk alongside them."

Sharonda Cooper, Content Coordinator for Women's Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; author; Bible teacher

"Here is real hope for the woman who has experienced so much relational pain and sexual brokenness. Ellen Dykas has herself experienced freedom through Christ and is a woman of wisdom and compassion. Because *Sexual Wholeness for Women* gently but firmly gets to the root of the pain, the woman who opens her heart to this truth will truly be set free."

Dee Brestin, Author of *The Friendships of Women* and *Idol Lies: Facing the Truth about Our Deepest Desires*

"Helping women understand God's original design for sexuality is a critical need in our culture. So many of the conversations and resources focus only on the sin, but *Sexual Wholeness for Women* provides a way to experience healing and transformation through the study of God's Word. This is not just another book; it is a discipleship tool to help bring the true freedom that comes from living life the way God meant it to be. It is a resource I'm excited to share with others in our ministry."

Donna Noonan, Director of Women's Staff Development, Fellowship of Christian Athletes

"In our post-feminist, hypersexualized culture, women are confused about what the Bible teaches about sexuality. *Sexual Wholeness for Women* is an eminently practical small group resource that will minister to women who are addicted to pornography, struggle with same-sex attraction, feel guilty from a lifestyle of promiscuity, or just need to understand what God has to say about sexuality. It deals with the issues frankly while pointing women to gospel truths in a compassionate way. A must-have resource for every women's ministry."

Melanie M. Cogdill, Managing Editor, *Christian Research Journal*; host, the *Postmodern Realities Podcast*

"From years of counseling, Dykas understands the complexity and depth of sexual brokenness. Further, she knows Christ the healer and how to lead women to him with skill and nuance. This book is rich in truth, thorough in reflection, concrete in help, sensitive to suffering, strong in discipleship, and hopeful in gospel power."

Clint Estes, Associate Pastor of Discipleship**,**
New Life Presbyterian Church, Dresher, PA

"*Sexual Wholeness for Women: Transformation from the Inside Out* is a desperately needed resource. A generation of iKids has known sexuality from the perspective of technology and the internet. We need solid discipleship materials to help us teach those entering our church settings with heart-wrenching stories how to push the 'reset button' on their sexuality. Ellen Dykas has written a creatively useful workbook for the church and counselors working with any woman who needs to retrain her heart to think about sexuality as a gift from God. This is a solid resource to use with college-aged women on up, including new believers. Harvest USA has hit the nail on the head yet again."

Penny Nelson Freeman, LPC, Serving Leaders Ministries

"Ellen Dykas and the staff of Harvest USA have written a compassionate, insightful, and practical book that is faithful to God's Word in addressing the relational and sexual brokenness unique to women. This book speaks with truth and love to the issues that women in our churches are facing. The gospel of Jesus Christ applied in this way will bring hope and freedom to many."

Ron Lutz, Pastor Emeritus, New Life Presbyterian Church, Dresher, PA

"In this transformational workbook, Ellen Dykas shows that real change begins internally and happens within Christian community. As someone who struggled alone with sexual sin for many years, and as a reviewer of the updated content, I can honestly say this book reminds us of the hope we have in a God who loves us and brings true freedom."

Former Harvest USA group member

SEXUAL WHOLENESS FOR WOMEN

SEXUAL WHOLENESS FOR WOMEN

Transformation from the Inside Out

Ellen Mary Dykas

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This workbook is for women who struggle with sexual faithfulness and would like to learn more about the transforming love of Christ, and how to engage the battle against sexual sin.* For over forty years, Harvest USA has been sharing how the gospel can free us from our mistakes, sins, and shame, and we have seen how God repairs broken hearts and lives as people turn to him in faith. If you feel broken, disappointed, or trapped, then this resource is for you.

Understanding your own heart and then seeing how Jesus meets and transforms you is the starting point for experiencing freedom from the shame, discouragement, and relational brokenness that accompany sexual sin struggles. The readings and questions in this workbook will guide you in knowing and loving Jesus, growing as his follower, and learning how the process of change works from the inside out.

What Led You to This Book?

Sexual struggles can take many forms. Perhaps you are struggling with pornography. Maybe you feel like you are addicted to hooking up with guys. Perhaps you can't stop developing messy emotional and sexual relationships with women. You might have previously embraced the identity of being a gay woman, and now you realize this isn't God's plan.

Whatever your struggle, you are here, holding this book, because you want to be different. But how will that happen? Most likely you have already tried to change what you are doing. But this resource takes a different approach from mere behavioral change. Because, as the Bible explains, women who wrestle to live a sexually faithful life have heart struggles as well as sinful behaviors. And

* This workbook is an expanded and updated version of the content in *Sexual Sanity for Women* (New Growth Press, 2013). Used with permission.

so, for real change to take place, we have to address what's in our hearts—how we think, what we want, what we avoid, where we seek comfort, and what makes us feel loved and valuable. Painful experiences, confusion about what the Bible really teaches, and unconscious conclusions we've made about how life should work all contribute to what's happening in our hearts. All this affects the way we live, including our sexual lives.

Your heart is also profoundly affected by the suffering you may have experienced. This workbook can't provide in-depth counseling for the pain brought on by trauma and abuse. If you have experienced this kind of suffering, professional or pastoral counseling by wise, mature Christians is highly recommended to help you process your personal history and struggles. Ultimately, healing and change is the beautiful work of our Savior Jesus Christ, who came to heal the brokenhearted and to set the captive free—including you, daughter of God!

God created women to be sexual beings just as much as men. However, women often experience an even "louder silence" from the church regarding their sexual sin and temptation. The Christian community has taken steps in recent years to address issues of sexuality, including sexual addictions. However, the opportunities for women to have the gospel specifically applied to their areas of relational and sexual brokenness have been few and far between.

This workbook provides guidance for women to receive encouragement and teaching that will help them to "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let [them] run with endurance the race that is set before [them], looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1–2).

Getting the Most Out of This Book

What this workbook isn't: This isn't a general women's Bible study, a sex addiction therapeutic guide, or a spiritual formation book to pick up when you've got some free time.

What this workbook is: It is a *workbook*. That means that there is work to do as you read through it. This workbook will guide you in understanding how the Bible addresses sexual sin and the hope for change for believers in

Jesus. You'll be asked to read articles, look up passages in the Bible, and apply what you're reading to your situation.

Use the Glossary of Terms: There are lots of terms used throughout the book that may not be familiar to you or might be familiar, but you don't know exactly what they mean. In the back of this book is a **glossary of terms** that defines concepts used throughout the study. Each of the terms is underlined in its first mention in the workbook's sessions.

Getting the Most Out of Your Time

Understand the session format: Each of the twelve sessions has the same format, with the content divided into two parts:

1. **On Your Own**. Please work through this section **before** you meet with your group or mentor. The material is designed for you to spend up to an hour reading, reflecting, and writing answers in response to the Key Idea, the Article, and the Personal Study and Reflection section, which includes several questions for you to answer.
2. **Group Discussion and Prayer**. The group time is for processing what you've already worked on in the Personal Study and Reflection section. A general timeframe of 90 to 120 minutes should be appropriate for most discipleship settings.

   Review the questions for the group time and prepare to share your responses in the way that will be most helpful for you. Your leader will guide the group time to include discussion of the questions and prayer together. If you can't meet with a group, look for a mentor or friend to work through the material with you.

Understand your commitment: In the small group time, you'll be encouraged to talk about your insights, struggles, and questions with others. You've probably heard the saying that "you'll get out of it as much as you put into it." This workbook provides a unique opportunity for you, over the course of twelve sessions, to dedicate time, effort, and focus to this area of struggle in your life. In starting this journey, you are making a commitment to do these things:

1. Work through the "On Your Own" section before each meeting.
2. Attend group regularly.
3. Support and pray for the other women in your group.
4. Name your struggles appropriately. (Ask your leader for feedback before sharing sensitive information.)
5. Participate in the group discussions and seek to listen patiently to others.
6. Keep confidential the sensitive information other group members share.

There are **Leader's Notes** at the back of the book that provide supplementary ideas for each session and are designed for group facilitators and mentors, but they can benefit all readers.

Remember, change *is* a process experienced over time. It may involve briefly returning to familiar sin or learning to accept that certain temptations may remain, even as they lessen over a lifetime. Christ-centered realism steadies our hearts to believe that the Lord is faithful to transform our lives as we surrender to him. We trust the work of the Holy Spirit to form us more and more into women of whom it can be said, "She followed Jesus, and sometimes it felt messy, but the beauty of Christ was increasingly evident in her life." May God grant you wisdom, hope, and grace as you go through this material. Our prayer is that much glory will come to King Jesus as women are set free to love, serve, and worship him.

Ready? *Let's get started!*

Leaders: Please also read the Introduction to the Leader's Notes on page 155.

INITIAL GROUP GATHERING: GETTING STARTED TOGETHER

Leaders, see Leader's Notes about this optional gathering.

Open in prayer together.

Now read the following aloud and answer the questions together.

Most of us like to know where we are going before we get on a plane or hop in a car. Some might find it exciting to go on a mystery trip without being told the destination, simply starting with instructions to pack a small suitcase with some walking shoes and clothes for a moderate climate. The majority of us, though, are comforted with a few more details. That's what this initial group gathering is intended to provide.

Joining a group that is dedicated to sexual integrity, turning from troubling behaviors, and hoping for real change is a huge step. And you did it—you're here! This workbook will guide you through twelve sessions to understand how Jesus brings transformation to our lives from the inside out and help you to actively engage the process day by day. Walking this out in a group context can be a powerful experience as women come together, admitting, "I need help; I can't change myself," and then hear others say, "Me too!" The good news is that you're not alone in this battle. Jesus is with you, as are your group leader and the other women here. So let's get oriented together for the journey ahead.

Getting to Know Each Other

1. Take two or three minutes each to share your name, how you found out about this group, and one hope you have for being a group member.

2. Psalm 23 is a familiar passage of the Bible, even among people who don't go to church. Jesus names himself as our shepherd when he says, "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 10:14–15). Read Psalm 23 aloud and share how any words or phrases connect with your heart* as you begin this workbook and group process.

The LORD is my shepherd;
I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
he leads me beside peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honor to his name.
Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.
You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the LORD
forever. (NLT)

3. Look at the table of contents and review the titles for the twelve sessions. Do any of the sessions particularly grab your attention? If so, why?

* Underlined words are included in the Glossary of Terms in the back of the workbook.

Getting Oriented to the Workbook and Group Process

Each session is formatted the same way with two main sections. There's an **On Your Own** section you'll do privately. Then when it's time to gather with the group, you'll discuss the **Group Discussion** questions and pray together.

The **On Your Own** section gives an overview of the key idea of that session's content, includes an article for you to read, and ends with a section of questions for your personal study and reflection. For this initial gathering, your leader will read a portion from session 1's Key Idea and Article.

From Session 1: Jesus, Your Sin Struggles, and the Transforming Hope of the Gospel

Key Idea

The gospel of Jesus transforms us from the inside out, starting in our hearts and bringing lasting change from our battles with sin.

No matter what struggles led you to this workbook, real change is possible through Jesus Christ. We will return to this main point again and again throughout this study. The gospel teaches us that through God's gracious, loving rescue, we receive a completely new reality as forgiven, beloved daughters of God. Jesus is the starting point, means, and goal of our spiritual journey.

The message of Christianity is not a list of commands to be a "good Christian woman" or an exhausting search for a secret method to stop doing bad things. *No!* The gospel, or "good news," is beautifully and simply this: Jesus Christ came to secure an eternal relationship with people through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, and he graciously offers a new life in him based on his forgiveness. What's your part? To trust that his death has paid for all your sin and to commit to learning how to follow him in every part of your life. We can't do this by ourselves, but God sends his Spirit to live in everyone who has trusted in Jesus, and the Spirit is hard at work enabling us to become more like Jesus.

With the help of the Spirit, disciples of Jesus spend their entire lives learning, growing, and maturing as followers and "obeyers" in all aspects of their earthly experience. This journey is done with the sure hope of heaven

in mind. The gospel is what you need to overcome patterns of sexual sin and find healing from shame and brokenness. God's love for you through Christ enables you to grow into a woman of sexual faithfulness and wholeness.

Jesus, Sexual Sin, and the Transformation of Your Heart

How do you think about yourself and the sexual struggles you're dealing with? What messages have you picked up on, or maybe been told directly, about women who are addicted to porn, or who can't stop turning to sexual fantasies and masturbation before sleeping, or who've never felt romantically attracted to guys but would rather cuddle in the arms of a woman? Some women secretly wish they had been born male, and they feel "other" as a woman, as though they don't fit in "girl world." Maybe you've privately cried out, "What's wrong with me?" or "Is this actually who I am?"

What about Jesus? How does he think about you, and what does the Bible say about any of these behaviors? God's Word *does* speak into these sensitive areas. God loves you and is after so much more than merely getting you to stop sinning. Jesus was consistently compassionate to individuals struggling with sexual sin and showed tender care to women who were sexual strugglers (Luke 7:36–48; John 4:7–26). He listened, loved, and brought hope and transformation into their lives. You can have confidence that at this very moment, Jesus is not condemning or shaming you but is inviting you to receive his loving help.

God (and this workbook!) is about the transformation of your heart—which means that the deeper, inner issues in your life need to be addressed and then "re-dressed" with the grace and truth of Jesus.

4. Share any initial thoughts you might have in response to the above excerpt from session 1.

5. This workbook will guide you to consider your sexual sin struggles through the Bible's message of hope, new life, and freedom from sin that can be a real lived experience through Jesus. Many women experience a combination of cautious hope and fear when participating in a group focused on personal struggles with sexual sin. Can you share in one sentence how you need prayer for this study?

Summary of Commitments *(from the Introduction)*

In the small group time, you'll be encouraged to talk about your insights, struggles, and questions with others. You've probably heard the saying that "you'll get out of it as much as you put into it." This *work*book provides a unique opportunity for you, over the course of twelve sessions, to dedicate time, effort, and focus to this area of struggle in your life. In starting this journey, you are making a commitment to do these things:

- Work through the On Your Own section before each meeting.
- Commit to attending regularly.
- Support and pray for the other women in your group.
- Name your struggles appropriately. (Ask your leader for feedback before sharing sensitive information.)
- Participate in the group discussions and seek to listen patiently to others.
- Keep confidential the sensitive information other group members share.

6. Discuss any questions you have in response to the group process and format of the workbook, then close in prayer, asking for God's help for the journey ahead.

Time to get started! For the next meeting—session 1—work through the **On Your Own** section and review the **Group Discussion** questions.

SESSION 1
Jesus, Your Sin Struggles, and the Transforming Hope of the Gospel

ON YOUR OWN

Key Idea

The gospel of Jesus transforms us from the inside out, starting in our hearts and bringing lasting change from our battles with sin.*

Article

No matter what struggles led you to this workbook, real change is possible through Jesus Christ. We will return to this main point again and again throughout this study. The gospel teaches us that through God's gracious, loving rescue, we receive a completely new reality as forgiven, beloved daughters of God. Jesus is the starting point, means, and goal of our spiritual journey.

The message of Christianity is not a list of commands to be a "good Christian woman" or an exhausting search for a secret method to stop doing bad things. *No!* The gospel, or "good news," is beautifully and simply this: Jesus Christ came to secure an eternal relationship with people through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, and he graciously offers a new life in him based on his forgiveness. What's your part? To trust that his death has paid for all your sin and to commit to learning how to follow him in every part of your life. We can't do this by ourselves, but God sends his Spirit to live in everyone who has trusted in Jesus, and the Spirit is hard at work enabling us to become more like Jesus.

* Underlined words are included in the Glossary of Terms in the back of the workbook.

With the help of the Spirit, disciples of Jesus spend their entire lives learning, growing, and maturing as followers and "obeyers" in all aspects of their earthly experience. This journey is done with the sure hope of heaven in mind. The gospel is what you need to overcome patterns of sexual sin and find healing from shame and brokenness. God's love for you through Christ enables you to grow into a woman of sexual faithfulness and wholeness.

Jesus, Sexual Sin, and the Transformation of Your Heart

How do you think about yourself and the sexual struggles you're dealing with? What messages have you picked up on, or maybe been told directly, about women who are addicted to porn, or who can't stop turning to sexual fantasies and masturbation before sleeping, or who've never felt romantically attracted to guys but would rather cuddle in the arms of a woman? Some women secretly wish they had been born male, and they feel "other" as a woman, as though they don't fit in "girl world." Maybe you've privately cried out, "What's wrong with me?" or "Is this actually who I am?"

What about Jesus? How does he think about you, and what does the Bible say about any of these behaviors? God's Word *does* speak into these sensitive areas. God loves you and is after so much more than merely getting you to stop sinning. Jesus was consistently compassionate to individuals struggling with sexual sin and showed tender care to women who were sexual strugglers (Luke 7:36–48; John 4:7–26). He listened, loved, and brought hope and transformation into their lives. You can have confidence that at this very moment, Jesus is not condemning or shaming you but is inviting you to receive his loving help.

God (and this workbook!) is about the transformation of your heart—which means that the deeper, inner issues in your life need to be addressed and then "re-dressed" with the grace and truth of Jesus.

Trees, Sexual Sin, and Gospel Hope for You

The Bible often compares people to trees: They can be planted by water (Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:7–8) or in the house of the Lord (Psalm 92:12–15). People can be like a dry tree (Isaiah 56:3) or live like a shrub in the wilderness (Jeremiah 17:5–6). They can survive through harsh heat and drought yet still have lush,

green leaves (Jeremiah 17:8). Trees bear fruit and can grow into "oaks of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:3). Sadly, trees can also be fruitless (Jude 12).

Jesus referenced trees in his teaching, too, when he explained how our hearts are connected to our behaviors. He put it this way: "The tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33; Luke 6:43–45). He taught that not only our words but also our behaviors reveal our hearts. He radically said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19). He explained that our inner world of thoughts, will, and decision-making is the root of our speaking and doing.

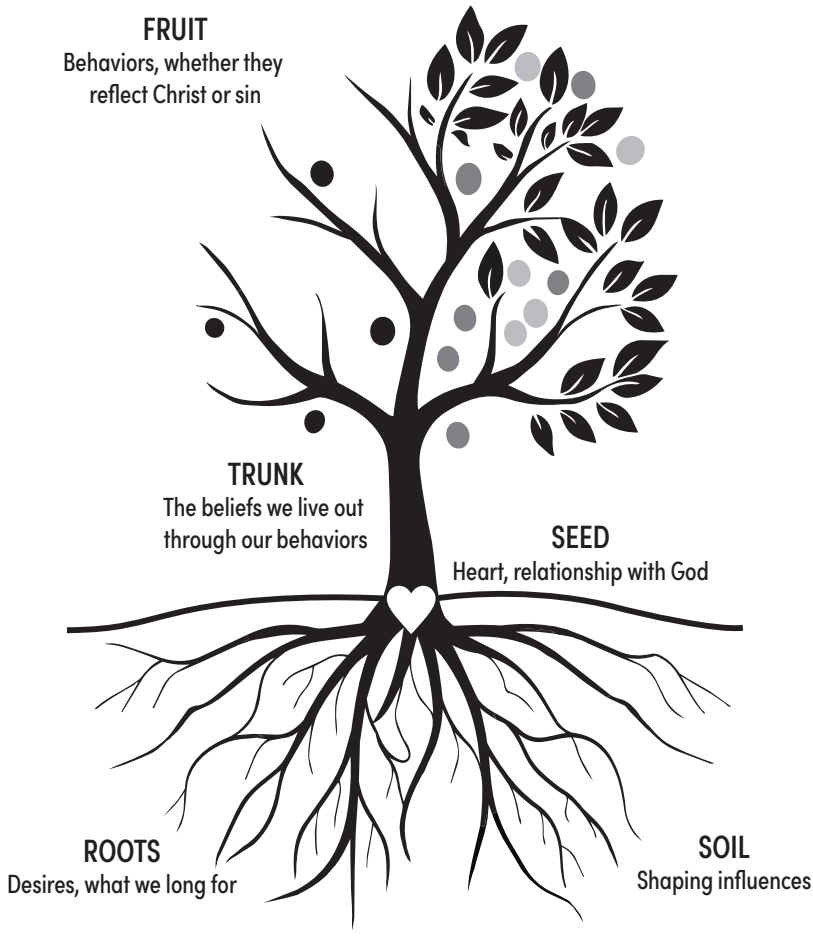
The Tree Model: A Biblical Understanding of Behavior[1]

Where does sexual sin come from? The Tree Model shown on the next page uses the biblical metaphor of comparing people to trees to help us understand why we do what we do. The Bible explains how all sin ("bad fruit," or the things we do that go against God's Word; see Galatians 5:16–17 and Colossians 3:5–10) originates in our hearts. The human heart is the control center of our lives, so it is connected to and shaped by our desires, beliefs, and a variety of influences that exert shaping power over our lives. The Tree Model also explains how the beautiful attributes of Christ's character (good fruit) grow out of our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–25). Like a tree, there's a lot more going on besides the behaviors (external fruit) that are visible in our lives. This means that you are so much more than any sexual sins you are struggling with.

Consider how a tree is made up of several parts—a seed that has been planted in soil sprouts out into a root system that draws nutrients from the soil where it is planted. The seed sprouts upward as well, forming a shoot that becomes a sturdy trunk with branches, eventually bearing the fruit of whatever kind of seed was planted—an apple from an apple tree or an orange from an orange tree. Apples and oranges don't grow from pine tree seeds.

The Tree Model explains the intricacy of human beings as image-bearers who have a soul (or heart), body, desires, and the ability to think and believe certain things, and who also experience life in a world marred by sin and suffering. This session gives a quick summary of these concepts, and then we'll explore them in detail in the sessions that follow.

Figure 1. The Tree Model



SEED — represents our heart or soul, the spiritual and volitional center of our will from which we worship, love, obey, or disobey God. We are born with dead spiritual hearts, fallen in sin, but we can be made new and alive in Christ through spiritual birth. Believers in Jesus are "born again" (John 3:3) through the instantaneous work of the Holy Spirit to impart spiritual life to a person dead in sin.

SOIL — represents the influences on our lives, many of which are often outside of our control and exert shaping power upon our hearts,

thinking, and emotions. For example: our body type, the family or caregiving environment we grew up in, our gender, our physical characteristics, traumatic experiences, and the presence of evil in the world through Satan and the kingdom of darkness.

ROOTS — God-given desires for things like love, purpose, comfort, value, relationship, intimacy, control, and significance.

TRUNK — our true beliefs; the conclusions we've developed over the years about God, life, ourselves, others. It's the reality of what happens in our minds and the lens through which we view and interpret our world—how we believe life works.

And finally, the **FRUIT** — our behavior and character manifesting out of our heart (the seed of the tree).

Maybe you're asking, "Okay, but what does this have to do with my addiction to pornography, my history with same-sex attraction, my vivid sexual fantasy life, etc.?" Well, if you're a Christian, you've been made new, given a *new heart* through faith in Jesus, and forgiven of sins past, present, and future (Psalm 103:1–3, 12). You are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God who gives you everything you need to resist sin and pursue holiness as Jesus's disciple. This includes overcoming sexual addictions, messy relationships, and thought lives that seem ruined with darkness.

The Tree Model helps explain how your new spiritual heart, though still tempted by disordered desires to live independently of God, can continue to be transformed through Christ. Your behaviors have no "right" to control or enslave you anymore; you belong to a new Master, Jesus the Lord, who is actively pursuing you to bring not only conviction of sin but hope and healing from the pain and scars you carry. God our Father brings comfort and mercy to us (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). The Holy Spirit, the presence of God within us, empowers our repentance, the turning away from our sin and toward God. Real change works outward from our hearts, as our behaviors become reflective of who we really are because of Jesus.

Personal Study and Reflection Questions

1. Write out any questions, new insights, encouragement, or hopes you have in response to the article.

2. Read the Bible passages below and write one to two sentences for each about who God is, who believers are in Jesus, and what our hope is for battling against sin.

- 2 Corinthians 1:1–5; 5:14–17

- Ephesians 2:1–10; 5:1–2

- 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

3. The article explained how the Tree Model is a way to understand the biblical metaphor of comparing people to trees and get to the heart of why we do what we do. Read through the expanded explanations below and then answer the questions that follow.

> **Fruit:** These are behaviors, which include thoughts, fantasies, actions, relational patterns, and attitudes. The fruit of your tree is most likely why you picked up this workbook. It is what comes out of the heart, revealing who or what's really controlling the heart of a person. "You can tell a tree by its fruit." You may want to read Matthew 7:17–18 to get a better grasp of this concept.

Seed: The heart is that part of each person that is totally unique—the soul or spirit. As mentioned earlier, though we are born dead in sin with a fallen heart, we can be born again through faith in Jesus and the instant work of the Holy Spirit to give us a new heart.

The heart is the center of our will and the location of a war that rages throughout our earthly days. From the heart worship springs forth—worship for our Creator God through a life of obedience and love, or worship of anything besides God. When we choose to value pleasure, comfort, control, or someone's attention over the Lord, the Bible calls this idolatry: the worship of false gods. While worship of statues is often what comes to mind when we think of an idol, God says that when we seek life in anything besides him, we've made an idol of that thing. All of this comes from the sinful human heart, and every single person deals with it in one way or another.

Our sinful hearts make self the focal point as we experience life and relationships in this world. We are born sinners, completely in need of Jesus Christ. Believers are new creations in him and now have the ability to live differently with Spirit-wrought fruit growing in our lives. All of this means that the state of hearts, even as believers, can be a combination of teachable, humble, hard, deceived, rebellious, and more. We need a Savior not only to be saved for salvation, but for our hearts to be rescued on a daily basis from temptations and sin that war against God's desires for us to trust and obey him.

Before moving on, it is important to consider if you have personally confessed your need of a Savior and asked for forgiveness from God. This simple step is the most significant decision you'll make in your life! You may have heard of phrases like "being born again" and "receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord." They all refer to the same thing: a conscious decision made with humble (not perfect) faith to acknowledge your need for Jesus's death and forgiveness to make you a new person from the inside out . . . from the heart. First John 1:9 promises that if we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us of all sin and to cleanse us of everything that is not right in our lives.

Soil: Life in a fallen world, lived alongside fellow sufferers and sinners, creates a unique soil in which you've been planted. We've already seen how our behaviors are born out of our hearts. However, living in a world broken by sin—in which we are sinned against and experience a unique mix of pain, suffering, joy, blessing, and healthy and unhealthy relationships—*does* impact us. Various soil influences include

- temperament and emotional disposition
- the voice and values of culture, peers, and society
- the childhood faith environment (Christian, atheist, other religions)
- family and caregiving dynamics
- ethnicity
- gender
- body type
- talents and personal strengths and gifts
- trauma through death, abuse, abandonment, painful losses, etc.
- physiology and other biological factors
- spiritual warfare (Satan and the kingdom of darkness, which actively oppose God and his purposes in our lives)

Can you identify any soil categories that had or still have a strong influence in your life? Why did you identify those?

Roots: These are God-given desires that every person has. You desire certain things because you are made in the image of God! When you long for love, safety, comfort, purpose, close relationships, and a meaningful life, you are essentially "proving" that you are made by a Creator who also desires these things for us. He's given you the ability to long for certain things and to avoid others at all costs. He created you to love him with every part of who you are, to love others, and to also hate sin as he does.

Sin brought utter disorder to our desires. Maybe like the apostle Paul, you've thought something like this: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). Can you relate? For example, many women who engage in pornography desire to feel wanted, beautiful, in control, or powerful. What they *don't* want is to feel lonely, unattractive, weak, or vulnerable. The world that porn puts in front of their eyes gives an illusion of being desirable and powerful and avoiding uncomfortable and painful realities. Desires are actively motivating them in a direction!

Can you identify any desires that may be connected to your struggles?

Trunk: Each of us has come to conclusions about life and how it works, about what God is like and how he treats us, about people and what we can expect in our relationships. Yet because we still battle with sin and are influenced by both suffering and blessing, our expectations and interpretations are tainted. We live, relate, respond, and behave out of our faulty understandings of God, men, women, relationships, sex, gender, and more. Sometimes we are unaware of how our spoken beliefs are radically different from how we live (which shows what we actually believe!). For example, we may say one thing that affirms the truth of Scripture but actually believe the following:

- Christianity really doesn't work.
- I'm worthless and undesirable.
- All men want one thing from women.
- Emotional pain is death to me, so I need to do whatever it takes to feel good.
- I'm only valued and secure if others need me.
- God didn't protect me, so he obviously doesn't love me.
- Being a woman gives me power.

God's Spirit helps us through the wisdom of his Word and his people, not only to discern our true beliefs but to have our minds and thinking transformed into what is good, right, and holy.

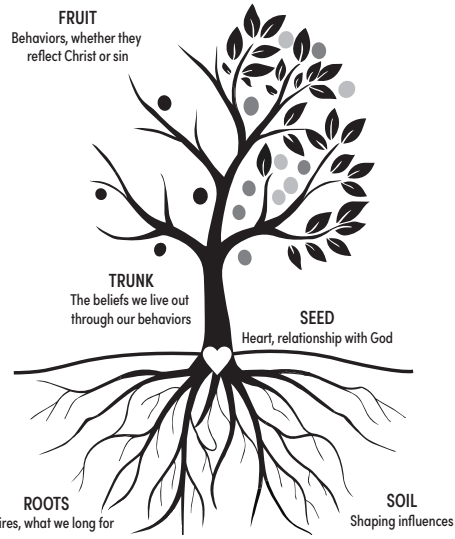
Write two to three sentences about any beliefs you are aware of related to your struggle with sexual sin. Here are some examples of beliefs you might have: *I'll probably never be free of this sin. I'm disgusting because of this struggle, and I'm sure God thinks so too. If I was born with these desires, then why should I have to give them up? I know he/she isn't good for my spiritual life, but I can't live without him/her.* Or maybe you believe something else? If you're not sure right now, that's okay. We'll keep exploring our beliefs in the sessions ahead.

4. Begin to fill out the "My Tree Exercise" on the next two pages. Review the components of the tree and add insights. Then pray and ask God to help you make connections to your life. You can put just a word or simple phrase down for now; don't feel pressure to fill it out completely as you can add more as you go through the workbook. Add good fruit too! How do you see God at work in you? What fruit of the Holy Spirit is evident in your life (Galatians 5:22–23)? You'll have an opportunity at the session 2 group time to share your insights. Don't worry if you don't have words to articulate what is happening in your heart, desires, or beliefs right now, or if the category of soil is challenging to think through.

5. Reminder: Review the **Group Discussion and Prayer** section to prepare for your group or discipleship time.

MY TREE EXERCISE

As you go through the workbook, add insights about the state of your heart, shaping influences, desires at work, beliefs behind your behaviors, and obedience and sin (behaviors).



Seed (Heart)

Soil (Shaping Influences)

Roots (Desires)

Trunk (Beliefs)

Fruit (Behaviors)

GROUP DISCUSSION AND PRAYER

Read the **Key Idea** as a group and pray for your time together.

Key Idea

The gospel of Jesus transforms us from the inside out, starting in our hearts and bringing lasting change from our battles with sin.

Questions

1. What are two to three hopes you have for being in this group and going through this workbook? Are you anxious about anything? *You can skip this question if you had the Initial Group Gathering time*.

2. Take a moment to silently look back at this week's article. What stands out as new insights—hopeful, encouraging, confusing, or something else?

3. Read the following aloud and then respond to the questions:

> Your identity as a loved daughter of God is the most important thing about you! The gospel, or "good news," gives you a new, eternal identity that cannot change. He has made his home *in* you (John 14:23), and now through his indwelling Spirit you are empowered to live faithfully and to grow steadily into wholeness as a woman.
>
> Wholeness (sexual or otherwise) refers to restoration and flourishing according to God's design. We won't experience perfect wholeness until we are home with the Lord in heaven, yet transformation begins the moment someone believes by faith in Jesus. My friend, if you have trusted in Christ as Lord and Savior, you have been rescued from slavery to sin and brought into the kingdom of the beloved Son, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:12–13). This is your true identity: a loved, forgiven child of God who is now united to Christ.

What is difficult to believe from what you just read? What seems hopeful or encouraging?

4. Read the following and then discuss the questions.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news not only that he *said* he came to save, change, and heal us, but that he's *able* to do this.

For some people, it's a major shift in thinking to begin focusing on deeper issues rather than surface behaviors. We want a program that will provide a series of steps that will change our behaviors. Programmatic approaches to changing behavior often fail because they miss the heart, our biggest problem! Our hearts are sinful and in need of change. We also need change in how we understand our desires: They are to be our servants, not our masters. We can let them serve us in leading us to God in a variety of ways—asking for help or blessing, crying out for comfort or encouragement, giving thanks, or praising him. Our thought lives need radical transformation in order to be aligned with God's truth and ways. Our pasts can't be undone, but their impact on us can be changed through the healing truth of God's Word and his presence in our lives.

How have you attempted to change your behaviors so far? How does a gospel-centered approach to change (focused on the person and work of Jesus) differ from what you've known?

5. Your group leader(s) is going to share her tree, which will give you an idea of how to share your tree at the next group meeting. As you listen, try to identify the elements of the Tree Model in her story by writing them below. Then discuss as a group, naming the elements of the tree you heard.

My group leader's tree:

- Seed: the state of her heart
  - » Share some examples of how her heart may have been toward God at different points in her story (e.g., teachable, needy, rebellious, fearful, yielded, humble).
- Soil: unchosen influences that exert shaping power over desires and beliefs

  - » What unchosen influences shaped your group leader's desires and beliefs?
- Roots: God-given desires that can motivate toward the Lord and obedience, or toward self and sin
  - » Share what desires have had a strong motivational pull in your group leader's story.
- Trunk: a woman's true beliefs; what she really thinks about God, herself, and life
  - » Share some potential beliefs your group leader had about "how life works."
- Fruit: behaviors, manner of life; how a woman actually lives
  - » Share some of the good and bad fruit that was bearing out of your group leader's tree.

6. Share how you need prayer as you engage this workbook and the journey it will lead you on. Then spend some time praying together.

A helpful way to pray is using a passage of God's Word as a guide. You might use Psalm 23, which is one of the most well-known chapters in the Scriptures. The process is simply to have the Bible open and to let the words of Scripture guide and inform how you pray. Below is an example to get an idea of this way of praying.

The LORD is my shepherd;
I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
he leads me beside peaceful streams.

God, thank you that you are a shepherd for your people . . . for me. I'll be honest that I don't always want you to be my shepherd because I want to run my own life. Help me get to know you better. I don't always feel that you give me everything I need, but I want to keep learning what this means. Help me!

He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honor to his name.

Lord Jesus, please give me strength as we work through this workbook. I'm kind of nervous and also a little bit excited about what it might mean to be guided on your "right paths." Give me new desires to honor you and trust you . . . and to grow in understanding how to turn away from my sexual sin.

Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.

Father, my life does feel a bit dark right now, but I want to keep walking forward with you. Please help all of us in this group to not be afraid of change or of the steps that you'll ask us to take to follow you, and to let go of things we're doing now. We want to really believe that you love us and have comfort for us.

You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the LORD
forever. (NLT)

God, I don't understand everything that this is talking about. Will you help me to learn more of your Word in the weeks ahead? Give me a hunger to know you, to understand what the Bible says about me and my sin, and to know Jesus and see how your unfailing love pursues me. Please teach me how all this relates to my sin struggles . . . and the fears and sadness I feel about them.