

LEADER'S GUIDE

# Jesus and your Unwanted Journey

WIVES FINDING COMFORT  
AFTER SEXUAL BETRAYAL





# Endorsements

“I cannot recommend *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* highly enough. I know of no other resource that does what this one does. It brings concrete and practical gospel wisdom, comfort, direction, and hope to women going through one of the most challenging, heartbreaking, and hard-to-share life experiences. The beauty of *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* is that the content of this resource is anything but general. It is wisely designed to reach into each woman’s individual experience with gospel help that is form-fitted for her particular struggle. It is my prayer that this wonderful gospel tool will receive wide recognition and use.”

— **Paul David Tripp**, Pastor, Counselor, Author of *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*, *Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts*, and *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs To Make*

“Flowing from years of ministry experience, Ellen Mary Dykas has written a biblically saturated, Christ-centered curriculum that provides a wise, compassionate, and hopeful path forward for wives suffering from the pain of their husbands’ sexual infidelity. Full of guided engagement with Scripture and thought-provoking questions for self-reflection and discussion, this is an ideal resource to promote healing for women in a group setting within a local church.”

— **Michael R. Emlet**, Dean of Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), Author of *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us*

“This workbook, and the opportunity it presents for women to pursue healing in a group, is a needed resource for the church—one that fills a glaring void in most of our ministry offerings. *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* is both theologically rich and immediately practical. The readings, exercises, and group discussion questions draw the participant into the healing presence of Jesus over and over. The format is accessible and can be used right away by any group leader who wants to help women heal. Participants will be nourished.”

— **Jen Oshman**, Author and Women’s Ministry Director

“In *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey*, author Ellen Mary Dykas draws from years of experience working with wives of all ages who find themselves desperately struggling to survive after sexual betrayal. In a culture saturated with sexual sins, every church should be equipped to walk alongside both men and their wives in the restoration and healing process. *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* is a hands-on tool that will aid church leaders as they shepherd their flocks and walk women through the pain, emotions, and healing after sexual betrayal, bringing each one to a place of beautiful surrender under the Lord Jesus Christ.”

— **Former group member of a Harvest USA wives’ biblical support group**

“My own unwanted journey began long before I encountered the wives’ group at Harvest. I was weary and hopeless, and I joined the group unwillingly at first. It soon became a refreshing place for me. I found rest, comfort, validation, and even conviction as I sat among understanding and caring women and was soaked in scriptural truth. The road before me continues to be difficult, but the Lord has used the wives’ group to equip me and strengthen me for whatever lies ahead. I wholeheartedly recommend these materials to any woman who finds herself on this unwanted journey.”

— **Former group member of a Harvest USA wives’ biblical support group**

“This much-needed resource draws from Ellen’s years of experience walking alongside women whose hearts and marriages have been crushed by their spouse’s infidelity. As you go through this material, you will find a safe place to share what is really going on inside and help to put words to the pain you’re feeling. You’ll find you are not alone as you read the testimonies of other women and learn to run to Jesus and pour out your heart to him. Even in the midst of so much grief and loss, your Savior will not leave you. He is committed to turning your ashes into beauty!”

— **Former group member of a Harvest USA wives’ biblical support group**

“*Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* is like a friend who comes alongside you in your darkest hour when no one else is willing or able to. Ellen Mary Dykas acknowledges the painful realities of sexual betrayal with raw honesty, but even more, with the profound comfort, healing power, and life-giving hope of Jesus. May these pages be a balm to your wounds and a practical but gentle guide that will help lead you into the safe and healing arms of Christ.”

— **Sarah Walton**, Coauthor of *Hope When It Hurts* and *Together Through the Storms*, Author of *Tears and Tossings*

“What courage it takes to open this book after betrayal. What you will find within these pages isn’t idle words or a list of tasks. Instead, Ellen serves as a gentle and humble guide, carefully carving out a safe place for you to fix your eyes on the Lord and draw near to him. Ellen helps us adjust our perspective amid the fog of hurt so that we better see not only our circumstances and our story, but also the Lord who loves us. He knows our hurt and is present, tending to us, caring for us, and helping us. This is a resource I’m grateful to have as I come alongside women. Not only will this book help you begin to share your hurts, but it will enable you to consider your unwavering hope in the community. Your faithful Savior loves you and is with you in each step of this journey. Ellen reminds you that you are not alone, that even holding this book in your hands is one courageous step nearer to Jesus who has offered himself as the Way, Truth, and Life! My prayer for you is that the truths found in this book will be more than a bandage for your hurting heart, but rather a balm that will work deeply from your head, into your heart, and eventually be lived out by faith in the days and years ahead.”

— **Meaghan May**, PCA Elders’ Wives Liaison, PCA Committee on Discipleship Ministries

“What a wonderful resource to help the multitude of women who are experiencing betrayal with the epidemic of sexual brokenness among men. When you are suffering it’s so, so important to be grounded in the comfort and wisdom of Scripture. Thank you, Ellen, for helping the church with this guide to sanity and wisdom!”

— **Paul E. Miller**, Author of *J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*

“Coming alongside women who have experienced betrayal is challenging. We struggle to know how to enter in and what to say or do to provide lasting help. To this end, Ellen Mary Dykas has given the church and Christian counselors a gift. With *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey*, she’s taken out the guesswork by providing a resource that offers these women what they need most—Jesus, the One who knows what it is like to be betrayed and who is able to enter into their every emotion. Even more, he fills the emptiness, hurt, and shame with himself—the perfect Bridegroom.”

— **Kristen Hatton**, M.A., LPC-C, Author of *The Gospel-Centered Life in Exodus, Face Time, and Get Your Story Straight*

“The majority of the men who come to Harvest USA for help are married, and the majority of their wives are struggling to find support in navigating the pain, confusion, anger, and fear that accompanies sexual betrayal. This curriculum is the fruition of 15 years of faithful, patient, humble ministry to hundreds of hurting wives by my colleague Ellen Mary Dykas. If you or someone you know has just had their entire life turned upside down by infidelity, this resource will meet you in the trenches. You will be cared for, you will be given space and time to grieve, you will not be judged, and most importantly, you will be consistently led to your sympathetic high priest, Jesus Christ.”

— **Mark Sanders**, Director of Discipleship, Harvest USA, Coauthor of *Discovery: A Biblical Support Group Curriculum for Men Pursuing Sexual Integrity*

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[www.harvestusa.org](http://www.harvestusa.org)

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Cover Design: Polyrhythm Studio, [www.polyrhythm.studio](http://www.polyrhythm.studio)

Interior Design and Typesetting: Polyrhythm Studio, [www.polyrhythm.studio](http://www.polyrhythm.studio)

ISBN: 979-8-9858702-1-3 (eBook)

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# Acknowledgments

There's one group of people I must acknowledge as this workbook goes out: the hundreds of wives (and more than a few single women) who entrusted their hearts and stories to me over the years.

In the beautiful messianic prophecy given in Isaiah 61 we see the heart and impact of our Savior Jesus's ministry to brokenhearted sufferers and sinners. It contains a promise that many recipients of God's grace will "be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified" (v. 3).

My dear sisters, I see you as oaks of righteousness even as you have suffered and had your hearts broken by sin in so many ways. Thank you for inviting me (and the Women's Ministry Team of Harvest USA) into your brokenness. It has been my deep privilege to be allowed to know you and your story. So many times I would ask the Lord, "How is she still standing? How is she not crushed to dust by her circumstances?!" Indeed, many of you would say that this is exactly how you felt.

Yet you got up and walked forward again. You sought Jesus, our merciful Savior, and he grew you more into his likeness. You have been a tangible picture of his glorifying, life-changing work that allows his people to become oaks of righteousness. By him, for him, through him. This isn't the journey you signed up for, but it's a part of what God has allowed in his mysterious and sometimes deeply painful sovereignty.

I honor you, care about you, and thank you so much for discipling me through your example of costly obedience and faith.

With gratitude,

**Ellen Mary Dykas**

Director of Women's Ministry

Harvest USA

# **Preparing to Lead a Group**



# Preparing to Lead a Group

I am so grateful for your willingness to facilitate a group for hurting wives. The need is greater than we'd ever imagine for Christ-centered, biblical support groups for wives facing sexual betrayal in their marriages. There is also a vital need for groups to help women in their personal struggles with sexual integrity! Women, like men, need to have their experiences of sexuality and relationships redeemed and made whole by our Savior. Women who profess faith in Christ are also walking into life-dominating patterns of sexual sin and messy relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Our Women's Ministry team has heard hundreds of stories from wives who have faced the trauma of sexual betrayal. To say it's an "unwanted journey" barely touches the surface of the pain these women are forced to walk through. Yet, as I say in the introduction to the Participant's Guide, I've been astounded and humbled over and over to journey alongside so many of these women who have clung to Jesus and the hope only found in him.

## Before You Begin

Leading a group of hurting wives may seem daunting to you. Perhaps you've faced this excruciating trial yourself and you're unsure if you're "healed enough" to lead others. Maybe, like me, you've not experienced marriage and you wonder if you'll have the wisdom and compassion to lead hurting wives. Regardless, my sister, you can trust in God's Word to be true!

This beautiful Scripture passage is framed in my office, given to me by a woman who was in the first wives' group I led:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

I have deeply experienced these promises to be true, and my hope and prayer is that you will too! Have you been hurt, disappointed, betrayed, or abandoned in this life? Have you experienced God's comfort to you in that pain? As you prepare to lead a group for hurting wives, your most important ministry tool is not your knowledge or your experience of marriage betrayal (though these can help you). What you most need is God himself, and a humble dependence on the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of Scripture to love, comfort, and disciple women.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvest USA has many resources to help women and men (and their family members) who are facing the fallout of sexual sin. Check out the Harvest USA website for many free resources, as well as books for purchase: [www.harvestusa.org](http://www.harvestusa.org).

As you begin to facilitate a discipleship relationship, whether one-on-one or in a group context, God will supply all you need as you offer your time, energy, and love for the benefit of others (2 Pet. 1:3–4). These Leader's Notes are provided to guide you.

## Who Should Lead a Group for Wives?

First, you don't need to be an expert on sexual sin or marriage! You also don't need to have had the exact experiences of suffering that the women in the group are facing. However, here are some key markers which are important for a group leader to have.

- A love for God and a compassionate heart toward hurting wives.
- The ability to facilitate a discussion with gentleness and boldness.
- Willingness and bandwidth to study and to invest time into knowing the women.
- The right timing in your life—you shouldn't be in the throes of your own pain regarding a husband's sexual betrayal, or in the initial process of healing.
- Willingness to be transparent about your personal neediness for Christ.

Ask trustworthy friends who are mature Christians, and ask church leaders, to help you discern if now is the right time for you to lead a group like this. If you determine that, yes, God has prepared you, then it would also be wise to enlist prayer support from these friends!

## Starting Your Group

Here's a checklist to review as you prepare to lead a group. The intended individual user of this curriculum is a professing Christian with at least a basic understanding of Scripture. If you're walking in a one-to-one relationship, adapt as needed.

1. **Advertise and promote the group**, inviting interested women to reach out to you for more information. The product description does the hard work for you in explaining what this resource is. Check it out on the [Harvest website](#). I've found it best to have a group of 4–8 women.
2. **Meet one-to-one with interested women**. You'll want to have a conversation with potential members to explain what the group is. See the Participant's Guide introduction for an explanation of what the workbook is and isn't, and be ready to explain this to women who reach out for more information. Wives facing sexual betrayal will have complex needs that cannot be met solely through you or this group! Talking individually will also help you discern if a woman is ready to be part of the group, especially in two aspects.

First, is she emotionally, mentally, and relationally stable enough to participate as a group member, rather than needing one-to-one, focused counseling and care? A wives' group provides the blessing of women who can empathize and encourage each other; however, the presence of raw emotions and PTSD reactions can derail the group's focus. This is not to say that painful emotions aren't welcome! Ask God to give you insight as you meet with such women. When I meet wives who seem to be overwhelmed by painful emotions (anger, fear, despair, confusion), I may suggest that we meet individually a few times and delay her participation in a group. Or I may refer her to a pastoral or professional counselor to provide the extended care she needs.

Second, is she willing and able to commit to attendance, active engagement with the material, and humble recognition that she is one member of a group of hurting women? She may want to be in the group but can't commit to the requirements because of various factors. Gently probe through questions to discern her situation.

3. **Choose a venue for the group that will feel non-threatening**, maybe in a private area of church or in someone's home. The most important ingredient isn't a fancy home, expensive furniture, or a latte bar! Rather, you want a space where the women in your group will feel comfortable and safe.
4. **Set your schedule.** This curriculum contains 10 lessons that, ideally, are worked through over the course of 10 or 20 weeks (meaning a weekly or bimonthly group). The wives' groups I lead for Harvest USA have always been bimonthly rather than weekly. I've found that this provides space for family responsibilities and counseling (which many are also involved in), as well as giving adequate time to work through the sessions in a meaningful way.

The 10 sessions should be worked through outside the group time. It'll take approximately 1–2 hours to engage the reading and homework. The group meetings should be 1.5–2 hours. You can choose your pace and make adjustments as you go along.

## Your Role as a Facilitator

### PRAY FOR YOUR GROUP

In John 15:5, Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." These words remind us of the necessity of prayer for effectiveness in ministry. Do not neglect this. Begin by praying for the women in your group, your co-facilitator (if you have one), and yourself. Pray for understanding of the Word. Pray for honesty and transparency. Pray for faith to believe gospel promises and for the comfort of Christ to be real to each woman.

## PREPARE FOR EACH SESSION

While your job as a group facilitator is not to teach, you should be familiar with the content of each session so that you can guide the discussion and keep it on track. As you prepare for each session, work through the Participant's Guide yourself—and don't rush! Seek to hear God and be encouraged by his Word. This will help you experience the questions as the group members will.

Then, read the Leader's Notes. These notes are not meant to be read to the group, but as you lead the discussion feel free to share information from the Leader's Notes which you think will help the women understand the concepts more deeply.

## MAINTAIN PACING

Pacing refers to maintaining the momentum of the discussion in order to give appropriate space to every question in the allotted meeting time. You should decide upon an approximate time frame for each question (it's helpful to write these timings in your notes) and adjust if necessary as the discussion proceeds. This will not only ensure the group covers the whole lesson, but it also keeps the group from following long “rabbit trails” that derail the session's focus.

Keep in mind that not all questions are equal. Allot more time to questions that you anticipate will generate more talk, like those asking for personal sharing or application, and less time to questions that seem quicker, like those asking for a simple observation of content in the Scripture passage. The latter are there to guide the women's personal discovery of the text; exercise freedom and discernment in including them in the group discussion.

## PERSONAL SHARING

The other tool you can use to direct the discussion is sharing your own personal answers to key questions. In general, your goal is to draw the women out and sometimes this happens beautifully when the leader leads with vulnerability. However, keep tabs on how much you're doing this so as not to create an expectation that the group should wait for you to share. Be willing to allow for silence, and don't be too quick to jump in when there is a lull or pause. Groups need the freedom to have a few minutes of silence occasionally to process a question. However, as the facilitator, you have the advantage of the Leader's Notes alerting you to important considerations on particular questions.

## Working as a Facilitator Team

If it's possible, I recommend that groups be led by two facilitators. This not only gives facilitators a break and some schedule flexibility, but it also provides the opportunity for mutual encouragement and improvement. Co-facilitators can give helpful input during a discussion time even on the weeks they aren't leading. A facilitator team can also meet regularly to give feedback and encouragement to each other on their leading skills.



## Final Encouragement for You

Do you really believe that God's grace is sufficient in your weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9)? That he uses simple clay jars filled with his glory to reveal "that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7)? The gospel of grace, wisdom, love, and power is yours, and you need it just as much as the women in the group do. How our Father delights to give us what we need to love others in his name! Pray for a heart of compassion, wisdom, and emotional courage, as you'll be invited into painful circumstances that wives never imagined they'd face in their marriages. Ask God to help you notice and show loving attention to the fear, shame, pain, disappointment, rejection, and anger in the lives of the women. Ask also for God to help you discover how he is at work in their lives, and share with the women what you notice.

Now, may our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, "give you peace at all times in every way" (2 Thess. 3:16). He is with you and will not fail you as you minister in his name!

# Introduction

# Introduction

Hopefully the women will arrive at the first group session having read the introduction in their Participant's Guide, including the explanation of what this workbook is meant to provide. The following introductory remarks are meant to be done before you begin discussing Session 1 and should take no longer than 10–15 minutes.

To start the first session, introduce yourself and share why you're thankful to be leading this group. Then invite each woman to introduce herself simply by sharing her name, her husband's name, how long she's been married, and one hope she has for being in this group.

Ask the women if they have any questions regarding the introduction, including about the group guidelines on page 6. It would be wise to read the group guidelines together and ask the women to verbally affirm they agree to them. This may seem overly formal but I find it to be a helpful way to ensure all the members are on the same page. It also provides some accountability to you as the facilitator.

It's important for you to lead gently yet firmly from the very start. In particular, I encourage you to share with the women (after going over the group guidelines) that you take seriously your role to facilitate the discussions each week in a way that guards the group dynamic. Share that you have two goals: firstly, to make the group a safe place for all members; and secondly, to guide the discussion so that it's honoring to Christ and each other and in line with the session notes. This doesn't mean there's no flexibility in how you lead, but you want to guard against distracting tangents.

The way I do this is to promise the women that if we get off track on either of those two points, I will gently interrupt the discussion and redirect us. I tell them ahead of time that I'll do this because I care for them individually as well as for the group. This helps down the road when I need to interrupt and redirect (which almost always happens!) since the women are expecting it and are less likely to be offended.

Each session in the workbook follows the same format:

1. A private reflective reading from God's Word
2. Opening thoughts
3. Biblical, discipleship-oriented questions for study, application, and discussion
4. Homework

As the Participant's Guide explains, the women actually go through each session twice: on their own and then in the group context. You've probably heard the teaching tip that repetition is a powerful way to digest material! In a wives' group like this, extra digestion is all the more needed. When the women go through it on their own, they'll experience the content in a deeply personal way. In the group context, they have the opportunity to absorb the content alongside others who get it and who are in the throes of similar suffering. The group experience provides a unique opportunity for the private study and reflection to be shared so that empathy and wisdom can be reflected back to each individual.



SESSION 1

# Unexpected Suffering

FACE PAINFUL REVELATIONS

# Unexpected Suffering

## FACE PAINFUL REVELATIONS

**Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:**

- Understand Christ's love for them as he sees them, draws near, and speaks words of life and healing over each of them.
- Have compassion for each other even as they are hurting personally.
- Be humbly willing to discern what kinds of self-care they need to engage in.

## Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Luke 4:16–21

I've included a passage of Scripture and three reflective questions at the beginning of each session. This is for the women (and you!) to engage on their own when they work through the session. So after opening the group meeting, you can go right to the Opening Thoughts section to begin the discussion time.

## Opening Thoughts

The Opening Thoughts section explains the general ideas that the session will address. Some are longer than others, depending on the topic. If the section doesn't have a specific question asking for a response, you can choose one of two options: read the Opening Thoughts together aloud as a group (time permitting), or simply ask if the women have any questions or thoughts they want to share in response to their own reading of it.

I encourage you to read the entirety of Session 1's Opening Thoughts, and then go right to question 1.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

*The Leader's Notes for each session will correspond to the same numbers for the questions in the Participant's Guide.*

1. Session 1 intentionally brings the reader face-to-face with the reality of her situation. Keep in mind that the women in your group will be at different points in their processing of what's happening in their marriages. Some women have known for years about their husband's sexual sin while others may have found out recently. Invite the women to share their answers to this question if they want to. It's important for you to place boundaries around this sharing, as we'll also explain in the notes for Session 2. You might say something like this:

*Ladies, as we've already discussed, this group is meant to be a safe space for you to be honest about what you're facing and how you're really doing in the midst of it. At our next group meeting, you'll each have an opportunity to share more fully about what's happening in your marriage. For now, let's focus our sharing on what the question asks: How are you responding so far as we begin this workbook?*

Expect the women to be all over the map in their responses, and don't feel the need to give feedback or commentary. Simply listen and draw out the women to share. If someone seems overwhelmed, starts crying, or is obviously angry, acknowledge and affirm her honesty. If any woman seem to be oversharing, or is in an especially raw place as she shares, gently redirect the discussion this way: *I'm glad you can put words on how you're feeling. The first meeting of a group like this prompts a variety of emotions and thoughts in all of us. Since we can't take the time now to go deeper into what you've just shared, let's be sure to pray about it, and perhaps you and I can also talk about it one-on-one.*

2. Again, simply invite the women to share anything they wrote for this question with no commentary. If you hear similar threads of thoughts or experiences you might comment on that, but be cautious not to oversimplify what is painfully unique for each woman.
3. Invite women to share what resonated with them in the testimonies. The testimonies sprinkled throughout the workbook are meant to help group members put words to their situation and, perhaps even more importantly, show them they're not alone!

## JESUS SEES YOUR SUFFERING

The story in Luke 13:10–17 is a powerful one! Read the passage aloud (or ask a volunteer to read it) and then invite the women to share their answers to the questions that follow.

4. Expect a variety of answers as women seek to apply the physical bentness of the woman in the story to their situation. Possible answers might be:
  - Feeling alone, confused, and like she's going crazy.
  - Feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. People who are controlled by their sin (including sexual sin) become masters of deceit and manipulation, and can lose touch with reality in many regards. This often creates a discombobulating experience for their wives, as life as she knows it has been undone.
  - Loss of reputation, especially if her husband's sin has been exposed publicly.
5. You might give the women a few minutes to review this section or summarize it by reading aloud the bolded headings. Then invite them to respond to the questions at the end of the section.

- a. Possible ways the women might relate to the bent-over woman include feeling marginalized, disordered, isolated, and ashamed. She may feel hopeless that anything can ever change in her marriage. She may know that to get the help she needs, she has to take the potentially scary step of reaching out to male church leaders. Differences the women might bring up include that the bent-over woman's condition was visible for all to see, while some of the women may be completely hidden and isolated because nobody outside of this group knows what they're facing. It would be wonderful if any of them testify that they experienced compassion and help (rather than dismissal) from the leaders in their churches or from counselors. If you have faced sexual betrayal yourself, share your answers to this question in a way that can provide empathy and hope to the women.
- b. Invite the women to share, if they want, what they wrote for their prayer. No need for commentary but thank anyone who does share! This is a courageous step of vulnerability. Finish the discussion on Luke 13:10–17 by reading the text after 5.b., then go on to the next section on self-care.

## SELF-CARE MATTERS

Please be sure to cover this section! I've had so many wives say that no one has brought up these things to them and it's vital these dear ones know that their hearts and well-being matter. Counselors Eliza Huie and Esther Smith express it like this:

Self-care is an extrabiblical word that contains essential biblical truth. We define biblical self-care as the practice of drawing on divinely given resources to steward our whole lives for personal enrichment, the good of others and the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>

Briefly review questions 6 and 7 and ask the women if they have any questions or reflections. Emphasize that this is *not* meant to be one more thing to burden them with, but rather an opportunity to consider what needs to be implemented, step by step, into their regular rhythm of life (while they're in the group and then for the long haul). Encourage them to start with one goal in each area (her physical needs and care for her heart) for the next week or two. Affirm that they are each at different places and will have different needs and abilities. This isn't a task to complete and get a grade on; it's an invitation for them to experience God's love for them.

**Close in prayer based on the themes of Session 1 and ask that the Lord will comfort each woman as you begin to work through this workbook.**

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<sup>2</sup> Eliza Huie and Esther Smith, *The Whole Life: 52 Weeks of Biblical Self-Care* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 6.



For the close of this first group meeting, invite the women to share one need they have, and then pray for each other as a group.

**Touch base on the homework for the next session.**

The homework before Session 2 is to prepare to share their marriage story. The instructions in the Participant's Guide provide everything you and they need to know. Remind the women to read it over carefully and to follow up with you if they have any questions or concerns.

SESSION 2

# Broken Marriage Vows

SHARE THE STORY OF YOUR SUFFERING

# Broken Marriage Vows

## SHARE THE STORY OF YOUR SUFFERING

Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:

- Have the courage to share their story and to listen with kindness to each other.
- Experience freedom from shame as they bring their story into the light.
- Not give in to the temptation to unhelpfully compare their story to others'.

## Opening Thoughts

You may choose to read aloud this entire section before beginning the story-sharing time.

## Story Sharing<sup>3</sup>

Take note that sharing this painful part of their story will be terrifying for some, a relief to others, and profoundly frustrating to others still. Generally, when women are willing to be in a group like this, they do want to be known, helped, and encouraged. However, it's scary to consider, *How will the others respond to what I share? Will my story be the worst?* I've found that while it usually is difficult for the women, and there's a temptation to compare stories, this step of faith and trust is a comfort and a powerful part of the group's bonding. God will shepherd you as you facilitate the time!

If you already sense from your one-to-one meetings or the first session that you may have a group member who would be willing to go first, ask her ahead of time to kick off the sharing. Otherwise, ask in the session if anyone would like to go first. Gently remind the women that the reason we take time to share stories is so that each one can be specifically known, and thus specifically cared for and encouraged.

If you have experienced sexual betrayal in the past, it would be appropriate for you to share your story as well. However, be cautious to share what will help the women to see hope in your story. Your story is most likely in process like each of these women, though at this point you are further along in the healing journey.

If you haven't experienced sexual betrayal in marriage, I want to caution you too! Don't feel like you need to justify or apologize that you've not suffered like these women. This will only serve to create unhelpful space between you and them. As I shared in the Participant's Guide introduction, not only have I not experienced sexual betrayal in marriage, I've not been married

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<sup>3</sup> This session's structure is unique for the sake of sharing stories.

(at least not yet)! This is God's unique story for me, as yours is for you. He will faithfully use you and your life experiences to love these women.

Remind the women of the time limit and that you'll have a gentle timer on your phone to indicate when they need to start wrapping up. This may feel too formal or intrusive (I felt that at first!) but it really is helpful for maintaining boundaries, which protects the overall group experience. If the women have understood from you to share in 6–8 minutes, for example, and someone goes on for 15–20 minutes, someone else may not be able to share and other members will be frustrated. Acknowledge that sharing their marriage situation in only a few minutes is difficult; you realize that each of them could easily share for 3 or 4 hours! Encourage them that this is the beginning of them getting to know each other over the coming months together.

After each woman finishes sharing, or perhaps after two, pause to pray for them in light of the prayer needs they shared, and then go on to the next woman.

## Reflection and Discussion:

1. There are always similarities in the women's stories, even though they each have a unique experience. Listen for common emotions like fear, pain, anger, and shock. Often women will express anger at God for letting them marry a man with these kinds of sin struggles. Some of the women may share that while they've hated this ordeal, they are amazed at how much closer to God they've become. Sadly, women may also share that they are devastated at the deceit their husbands have been able to manage for so many years.
2. The women can look to Jesus by praying for each other and reading God's Word for hope and encouragement. You should ask God to protect their thoughts, memories, and emotions (including from the temptation to compare their story to the others).

Keep in mind that comparing their stories will most likely happen. The woman who has a more "severe" story of a husband's physical adultery over many years may feel ashamed in comparison to women who are "only" facing a husband's pornography battle. Women who are younger and have been married for only a few years will most likely feel anxious and afraid as they hear wives sharing about deceit and sin over decades. These younger wives hear what could be their situation in 10, 20, or 30 years; it's a frightening prospect.

Leader, with these difficult possibilities, you too must collapse upon the grace of God in humble dependence. We can't control how the women react to each other, but we can pray, set the tone for the story sharing, and gently encourage the women to look to Jesus when comparisons rise up in their hearts.



Close in prayer yourself, as the women have had an emotionally full time. Thank God for their courage to share and their humility to be in this group, and ask him to help you grow through the following sessions.

**Touch base on the homework for the next session.**

Let the women know that Session 3 is longer than most in the workbook and may require 30–45 extra minutes to work through the content. Read this from the homework section:

Next week's session addresses suffering. To prepare your heart, consider reading Psalm 13 then praying from it. This psalm is an individual lament in which the psalmist expresses despair over his circumstances. As you think about your current life circumstances, how does this psalm resonate with you? You can honestly ask God, "How long, O Lord?" as you contemplate your marriage situation (v. 1). Maybe you feel that God has abandoned you (v. 2); if so, you can ask God for help, even as "How long?" looms large in your heart. Pray that he would respond by ministering to you and the other women in the group according to each person's needs (v. 3). No matter how painful life is, God will be faithful to lead. In this season, you can pray for God's grace that, amid trials, you would reaffirm your trust in him, like the psalmist does, and that he would grow your confidence in his steadfast love (v. 5).

SESSION 3

# It Hurts So Much

SEEK JESUS IN YOUR SUFFERING

# It Hurts So Much

## SEEK JESUS IN YOUR SUFFERING

Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:

- Experience the comfort of God's Word and Spirit.
- Connect meaningfully with and find hope in Hannah's story.
- Understand Jesus's love and care for them more deeply than they do presently.

## Opening Thoughts

This session addresses suffering and the trauma which results from sexual betrayal. Friend, do not let this intimidate you, but call out to our compassionate God for the wisdom you need! He knows what the women in your group have endured (even better than they do) and he provides what they need to walk forward.

Read the following wise thoughts regarding trauma to orient your heart.<sup>4</sup> You may choose to share portions of this with the women in the group—use discernment.

### Christ's Trauma for Our Trauma

The temptation for many people is to seek to explain the “why” of trauma. We want to offer a reason for why God allowed the awful events to occur in the life of the individual. We believe that a sufficient explanation will provide the victim the necessary freedom to process their grief and move on. There is, however, no sufficient explanation. What reasons can be given for [marriage betrayal, a deceitful husband, church leaders who overlooked his sin], rape, war, or abuse? Yet the presence of trauma doesn't mean that there is no meaning at all. While we can't always point to a specific explanation for the personal trauma we can look to significant meaning beyond our experiences. Counselors want to point people to the great meaning found in the gospel.

The gospel story involves the suffering of the very Son of God. To tell the story of Jesus is to tell the story of a traumatic event. Jesus is betrayed by his closest friends. He is mocked, stripped, beaten, and publically humiliated. He is falsely accused, wrongly condemned, and when He speaks truth no one believes Him. His attackers spit on Him, pull His hair, and call Him names. He is alone, left in darkness, and abandoned even by His own Father.

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<sup>4</sup> Dave Durham, “Trauma and the Significance of Meaning,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (blog), August 9, 2017, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2017/08/09/trauma-and-the-significance-of-meaning/>. Used by permission.

Jesus knows the experience of trauma, the suffering of betrayal, violation, and violence. If anyone knows what it means to suffer, it is Jesus. He can relate. In fact, the post-resurrected Christ still carries in His body the scars of His trauma (John 20:24–29). He speaks eternally to victims by continuously holding out hope. Christ isn't washing suffering [away], He is transforming it.

Jesus did not have to suffer and die, it was His choice. He did so in order that He might transform brokenness, to set all things right. He came in order to begin the process that will one day conclude in the resolution of all brokenness. His trauma gives hope to all the brokenness we experience. His trauma promises that trauma will not always last. There is meaning beyond my experience because Christ experienced suffering in order to end it once and for all (Isa. 25:8).

### **Repeatedly Pointing to Christ**

Good counselors know the importance of meaning. We ought to move slowly and carefully with victims of trauma. We are not attempting to explain the “why” of their specific devastating experience. There is no good “why” that we can offer. We are attempting, among many other things, to point to hope beyond the experience. Meaning for life comes as victims see and experience the transforming grace of God which redeems even the worst trauma. He redeems it not by making it go away, but by enduring His own scars for all eternity; by wrapping trauma up into glory (Rom. 8:28). So when victims of trauma repeat their shock again and again, good counselors don't dismiss or rebuke them. Rather they seek to point them, again and again, to the meaning that Christ's trauma provides.

The Opening Thoughts section notes are long this week. Give the women a few minutes to review them, and then introduce the discussion by reading aloud (or asking someone to read) the lyrics of the hymn “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul.” Then read the final two paragraphs of the notes, from “These are heavy burdens to bear” to “will help you persevere through it too.”

## **Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion**

Open the discussion by highlighting that the story sharing they engaged in last time reminds us that “we” (not just “me”) are walking this journey. In other words, sharing their stories and listening to one another allows suffering to be shared rather than endured in isolation. Session 3 will be difficult for most women to work through but they don't have to walk it alone!

- I. a. Invite the women to share their responses and be ready to share any personal reflections you had about the hymn.

- b. You might revisit the list in the Opening Thoughts section and then invite the women to share any that they connected with, or any others that weren't mentioned. Don't feel the need to add commentary on what the women share, but if God prompts you to do so, great! One thing you'll want to keep in mind as you lead this group is occasionally to thank the women when they share in a particularly vulnerable or courageous way. Overdoing this can dilute the effect but the reality is that these women are truly being courageous, and that can be a powerful thing to witness.
  - c. Invite the women to share their responses. Be ready to share a passage of Scripture that has brought comfort to you recently.
2. a. Responses might include the following, which do not represent the Bible's explanation of suffering:
- God always punishes those who sin against him, even those who don't know any better.
  - God allows sin to rule. One day he'll make everything better but for now he's sitting on his hands until Jesus comes back.
  - The devil made me do it. The devil made my husband do it.
  - God is mean and untrustworthy. I know I sing all those worship songs, but I don't really believe them.
  - Suffering exists because sin does, but if I'm sincere, devoted, and trusting Jesus then my life should be mostly comfortable and pleasant.
  - I can understand wars and crimes done by unbelievers and people with mental or emotional disorders. But my Christian husband having an affair? Paying for sex with prostitutes? Having sex with me one day then sex with a man the next? No . . . this is an utter nightmare that disgusts me. If I'm honest, God disgusts me too for allowing this kind of suffering in my Christian marriage.
  - God helps those who help themselves and so suffering enters the lives of those who are weak and unfaithful Christians.
  - Well, as they say, I made my bed and now I have to lie in it. I'm to blame for my husband's sin, so I guess this is suffering that I just have to endure. (Many wives assume they are to blame for their husbands' sexual sins. Some have in fact been told this by their husbands and other leaders with horrible reasons like that they haven't been faithful to take care of their appearance, or they weren't as sexually available or fulfilling as their husbands needed.)

b. Here's a sampling of unhelpful responses the women may have experienced.

- It's your fault he did this. What else can you expect when you've treated your husband the way you have?
- Well, God helps those who help themselves. Stop whining, get up, and trust the Lord!
- You should be thankful your husband only struggles with \_\_\_\_.
- You do realize that almost all men, including Christians, struggle with lust, right?!
- You don't deserve to suffer. You should get out of this marriage ASAP.
- How much have you *really* prayed for your husband? You are his helpmate after all! If you don't pray, who will?
- Suffering only comes into our lives when God wants to prune us. This is rough but there must be something that needs to be cleaned out from your marriage.
- How often are you giving him sex? Men have needs, after all.

Hopefully *this lesson* will be helpful, but perhaps the women have already experienced other helpful responses.

- No words. Just someone sitting, listening, and crying with you, holding your hand or having her arm around you.
- I'm so sorry . . . your suffering is deep and wide.
- Your husband's choices are devastating. His sin is *his*, not yours.
- How can I help you this week? What do you need? Some meals or childcare? Can I help you find a counselor or go with you to talk with your pastor? Would it be okay to text you each day to check in?
- Yes, you probably do need to go get an STD test. I'm so sorry for this. Would you like me to go with you?
- I don't understand why God has allowed this either; I'm here to listen and pray with you.
- Jesus hasn't left you, and he is *not* okay with what your husband has done. How about if we pray? Or if you don't have words, I'll pray for you and read some Scriptures over you.
- You're right, my friend, you've not been a perfect spouse either. But that's not the main thing to focus on right now. Jesus cares about your hurting heart. He'll shepherd you through anything he wants to change in you in the season ahead.



- You're *not* going crazy! But it makes so much sense that you feel that way. I mean, what you just found out is unbelievable . . . but it's true. It's normal for your emotions to be a hot mess. One day at a time.
3. a. Some aspects of Hannah's suffering the women might bring up:
    - Hannah (along with Peninnah) is the victim of a polygamous marriage. She is forced to be in an adulterous situation as her husband has taken a second wife.
    - God "shut up" her womb.
    - Peninnah harassed her.
    - Eli made a wrong judgment about Hannah and rebuked her.
    - Elkanah made things more about himself rather than about Hannah's pain and desires.
    - As a barren woman, she would have faced the burden of cultural shame.
    - Like Hannah, a woman may be weary of the ways God has "shut" her in to a difficult marriage or wondering why he hasn't changed her husband. Maybe she's been misjudged, harassed, rebuked, or shamed because of her husband's sin.
  - b. Hannah weeps bitterly with grief. So many wives aren't given permission to grieve the tremendous losses and pain they face when a husband's sexual sin comes out. There are various reasons for this but among them is the conviction that a husband's repentance is the most urgent priority. The wife's struggle may even be labelled as antagonism or an obstacle to the Lord's work in his life, which adds shame and grief to the wife. But God wants to hear about our pain. Hannah cries out to the Lord of Hosts—a name for God that has military overtones but also points to God's rulership over all. He is ready to intervene on behalf of his people.
  - c. Essentially, Elkanah communicates, "What about me?! Am I not enough for you?" He says nothing of how she is grieving a hard providence of the Lord (her infertility), not to mention being mistreated by his other wife!
  - d. So many wives experience even the most well-meaning leaders completely missing them. Many wives experience what Hannah did:
    - Husbands may guilt their wives into certain things (like having sex or keeping silent about his sin) or manipulate her with arguments like, "I'm doing the best I can . . . why isn't that enough for you? I've done this and that for you and the kids. So I mess up a few times and *I'm* the bad guy?"

- Church leaders may, like Elkanah, gravely misinterpret a wife's trauma as craziness, manipulation, ingratitude, or selfishness because she's hurting and can't trust her husband in the fallout of such broken trust.
  - Well-meaning leaders, counselors, and friends can unwisely "see her mouth moving" and make assumptions about what's happening with her. Rather than talk to her, ask questions, and listen, so as to learn what sexual betrayal is like for a wife, would-be helpers respond to her based on perceptions and self-guided assumptions. None of this is to imply that wives are perfect in their process of suffering! They will and do sin in response to being sinned against. The point here is to validate the ways that, like Hannah, many wives are effectively abandoned in the throes of their vulnerability and pain.
- e. Both Elkanah and Eli could have reacted better.
- Elkanah: express sympathy and compassion, weep with her, assure her of his love, ask her questions and listen, confront Peninnah for her mean behavior, acknowledge how difficult he's made Hannah's life by marrying a second woman.
  - Eli: pray to the Lord for Hannah (who was obviously troubled) and then move toward her with gentle love and care, ask questions about what was happening, listen, perhaps call on other women of Israel to comfort Hannah, even confront Peninnah.
- f. We don't want to finish this study of Hannah's suffering in such a way that the women have a sour taste in their hearts due to the way Elkanah and Eli respond. Indeed, they didn't love or care for Hannah as the Lord would have wanted. However, Hannah does not respond with bitter words, revenge, or walking away—she turns to the Lord! Pouring our hearts out to the God Most High is what we all need on a daily basis. Suffering is a megaphone inviting us toward Christ.

## Who Jesus Is for Us

This is a lengthy section about Jesus. You might want to simply say aloud the section headings about him: he is our steadfast refuge and tender comforter, our faithful Bridegroom forever, our eternal true home. Then, invite the women to share their personal insights and reflections about Jesus.

**Lead the group in a closing prayer time.**

**Touch base on the homework for the next session.**

SESSION 4

# I'm a Hot Mess

BRING YOUR EMOTIONS UNDER  
JESUS'S CARE

# I'm a Hot Mess

## BRING YOUR EMOTIONS UNDER JESUS'S CARE

Hopes for this session and how to pray for the women:

- Receive the help of the Holy Spirit to face their painful emotions, take steps in bringing them to Christ, and grow in understanding what they feel through God's mercy and truth.
- Take steps of faith toward freedom and healing (especially for women who are stuck in unhealthy emotions).

## Opening Thoughts

This session will most likely stir strong emotions in the women! Pray and ask God to fortify your heart as you may hear, see, and sense raw emotions of anger, grief, and fear during your discussion.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

1. Open this time by guiding the women to share specifically how they relate to (or don't relate to) the three depictions, without feeling any need to defend or explain why they feel that way. The rest of the discussion will give ample opportunity to do that, so you want to guard this opening discussion starter as a time for each woman to be heard and known in how she approaches emotions.

## EXPLORE YOUR EMOTIONS WITH JESUS

### Face your emotions by honestly naming them

2. Invite the women to share what the Wheel of Emotions helped them to identify as their main emotional experience at the moment. The seven key categories are *bad*, *fearful*, *angry*, *disgusted*, *sad*, *happy*, and *surprised*.
3. You might read each Scripture passage and invite the women to share their answers. Or you could open it up for general sharing, inviting the women to share how this exercise helped them, or what they learned from doing it.

### Seek Jesus at the throne of grace

This section helps the women to consider two beautiful truths about Jesus: he is our *loving and sovereign Lord* (Ps. 24:1–2; Rom. 8:28–29; Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:15–18) and he is our *gracious Lord* (Matt. 11:28–30; 2 Thess. 2:16; Heb. 4:14–16).

4. and 5. Read the listed Bible passages for these sections and refer back to them as the women share their personal reflections about Jesus. Be mindful that most of us wrestle in various ways to believe that God is loving and gracious. Painful suffering such as marital infidelity can seem like evidence of God abandoning us rather than remaining steadfast in his love for us. The women in your group are in different places in their processing of their husbands' sin, as well as how they think they "should" feel about it—and that's okay! We don't want them to stay stuck in unbelief, paralyzing pain, confusion, or raging anger, yet we also need to have patient faith as helpers.

It's tough to bear up with people in pain, especially when it seems to go on and on. Our goal for this session isn't to have the women wrap a bow of faith on their painful emotions and be done with them. This is utterly unrealistic!

### Pray your emotions

Read the testimony aloud.

In my weariness one morning, I felt the Lord speaking to my heart through 1 Kings 3:5–14. Just as God gave Solomon a discerning heart, I felt the Lord calling me to bring to him my confusion and concerns and let him give me the discernment I need. As I [have sought] him, I have watched the truth surface over and over in his timing, and without me having to play a "detective" role. I have seen his faithfulness and grown to find security and rest in him as my protector, defender, comforter, and guide as I journey each day and face the unknown.  
—B.J.

Say something like, "This woman brought her weary heart to the Lord and experienced the peace that comes only from him. Notice that she was present with the Lord and reading his Word. This is the vital combination we all must seek to pursue regardless of how messy we feel."

Prepare the women for an extended time of prayer, following the steps in this session: *face your emotions, seek Jesus, and pray!* God's Word calls his children to pray together and to carry each other's burdens as we meet together, confess our weaknesses, encourage each other, and stir each other up to love and faithful lives (see Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25; James 5:16).

You might open this time like this: "We've covered a lot of difficult and important ground in this session. We've explored our emotions and learned about Jesus—how he welcomes us with love and invites us to bring all our feelings and struggles to him. Perhaps you were able to pray privately with the Lord as you worked through this session on your own; maybe that felt too hard. We want to take some extra time today to pray together. Let's start by opening our

workbook to pages 49-51, which list out all the passages from the Psalms which we studied. We can use these as a guide for naming our emotions and then praying specifically for each other.” Then invite someone to start, and tell the women that you’ll close the time after 10–15 minutes.

**Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.**

**Touch base on homework for the next session.**

Remind the women to look at Appendix A for the “I Felt, I Thought, I Did Diary.” Encourage them to try using this if they feel ready to engage an exercise like this. It would be helpful for you to use it over the next weeks to gain insights into your emotional world and the influence it has on your thinking and actions.



SESSION 5

# Shame

FIND YOUR IDENTITY AND WORTH IN  
JESUS ALONE

# Shame

## FIND YOUR IDENTITY AND WORTH IN JESUS ALONE

Hopes for this session and how to pray for the women:

- Understand how Scripture addresses shame and apply that truth to their hearts.
- Recognize if their view of marriage has contributed to their experience of shame, and find renewed hope in the shame-cleansing love of Christ.

## Opening Thoughts

Shame is a difficult emotion to discern and unpack because it is usually tied to so many different experiences and beliefs. Sometimes the shame that wives experience in the face of sexual betrayal may seem more like anger, self-hatred, or paranoia rather than disgrace, embarrassment, or humiliation (what we more commonly associate with shame).

Consider the following examples of how wives may express feelings and beliefs that are tied to shame they carry.

- I can't measure up to what he watched on those screens. So playful, dirty, crazy, and aggressive—all the things I'm not in the bedroom. All the things I *don't want* to be. That dirt is now on me . . . in my heart and body. I'm trapped and can't escape from the nightmare that is my marriage, that is *me*.
- We've been married for 30 years and he's been unfaithful to me all that time?! How could I be so stupid to have not known this, to not even sense that something was off? How naive and blind could I be to have completely missed this? Everyone knows we're a Christian family—aren't we? How could he do this to me, to us? Am I so worthless as a wife that he needed to go pay for sex and attention from others? I'm destroyed.
- I can't hide; there's no escape from this nightmare! Everyone knows that he's a porn addict and that he's exposed himself in our favorite park, the very place I take our kids! What an idiot . . . and this has been going on for the last year?! There's nowhere I can get away from this yuck . . . I *am* yuck.
- How could he do this *again*? Putting my clothes on, secretly getting into my closet while I'm out grocery shopping so that I can fix him dinner every \$%@\*# night.<sup>5</sup> What's wrong with him? I'm his wife and he's supposed to be my husband, a man who loves me, delights in me, and isn't controlled by so many perverted desires to *be* me.

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<sup>5</sup> You may hear “colorful” language as hurting women get honest. My aim here isn't to minimize the ugliness of expletives but rather to prepare you for the way that hurting, sinful hearts can manifest with words.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

1. Invite the women to share any reflections or questions they have so far. It can feel, well, shameful to admit you're carrying shame. As you begin this session, acknowledge this to ease fears the women may have.
2. Read the list aloud when you discuss this question and mention that the women may have connected with one or all of these. The mere act of naming things aloud, when done with humility and gentleness, can diffuse shame!

Regarding the husband's choice of sin, most wives do feel shame around their husbands' specific sins—and some bring unique kinds of shame. Wives of men who are tempted toward and have engaged in adultery with other men will experience shame in their sense of womanhood (*How could I marry a man who doesn't even get excited about women. . . . Is he really attracted to me?*). Similarly, wives of husbands who are gender dysphoric or perhaps have a fetish for wearing women's clothing will also carry shame in a complex way, including (as one wife said), *Why am I not enough for him as a woman, that he wants to be a woman? I married a man to have a husband. . . . If he doesn't want to be a man, then what does this mean for me?!*

Don't feel that you need to help the women unpack every detail of how their husbands' choices plant seeds of shame in their thoughts. Your goal is to invite them to consider how they've attached their sense of identity and worth to their husbands' specific choices.

Note: As mentioned in the introduction, this workbook does not address the nuances of criminal sexual behaviors such as child pornography and sexual abuse or assault. However, the reality is that the wives in your group may have husbands who are perpetrators, even if they haven't disclosed this to their wives. Do not fear! God knows, and according to his will he will bring all of our deeds (good and evil) to the light in his holy presence (2 Cor. 5:10). A wife may have a nagging sense that her husband has committed crimes, or she may know and be terrified of the consequences should other people find out. This is a heavy thought, so pray and ask God to do what only he can do: comfort, counsel, and convict in the hidden places of each wife's heart.

3. All these passages translate the same Hebrew verb or related words as “shame,” “put to shame,” or “ashamed.”<sup>6</sup> The meaning is “an external and subjective experience ranging from disgrace to guilt. To act shamefully is equivalent to acting unwisely (like a fool). To be ashamed is to experience distress [from disgrace or guilt].”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The noun form of this Hebrew verb is *busah*, and it's only used four times in OT. The meaning is clear as it comes from the verb: to be ashamed, or to act shamefully, or to be put to shame. Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003), 124.

<sup>7</sup> Baker and Carpenter, *Word Study Dictionary*, 124.

## a. Psalm 25:1–5, 16–22

*Verses 1–5.* David looks to God with trust in response to the threat of shame at the hands of his enemies. He has confidence that no one who waits for or trusts the Lord will be put to shame, while those who are selfish and treacherous *will* be put to shame.

*Verses 16–20.* Shame leads us to feel lonely and afflicted, yet David turns to the Lord, honestly expressing how troubled he is and crying out for rescue and help. He acknowledges that he's not innocent. He is a sinner too, yet he has confidence to ask God to protect him from shame as he finds refuge in him.

David fights the threat of shame, in part, by asking God to keep him faithful and upright as he waits for God in the midst of his many troubles. This is where God always wants to lead us: trusting him when we face enemies who sin against us. Through Christ the faithful one in whom we have a home (John 15:1–5), we are righteous! The identity we have in Christ because of our union with him is the most powerful shame destroyer!

## b. Psalm 34:4–7

This passage contains a powerful promise: as we look to the Lord, place our trust in him, and find our identity in him, we'll never be put to shame.

The fears and troubles that wives face are painful, yet they're common in the sense that God's people have faced betrayal, deceit, and abandonment throughout history. Sinful people sin against each other. The solution, though it doesn't erase the pain, is to look to the Lord more than we gaze at whatever is provoking feelings of shame.

## c. Psalm 44:13–16

This psalm powerfully expresses the communal shame experienced by God's people, as they live in a fallen world. It seems that “without apparent reason, God rejected his people and broke his promise of care. This psalm's movements actually reflect the unfolding drama of redemptive history, with the people of God experiencing what Christ will actually experience on their behalf to save his covenant people—with whom the Lord will never truly break faith, despite sin.”<sup>8</sup>

God allowed circumstances in the lives of his people that brought humiliation and shame, even though no explicit sins are mentioned. However, all had sinned (Rom. 3:23). This psalm gives a heartfelt example of crying out to God amid apparent injustice and unanswered questions about why it's happening.

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<sup>8</sup> George Robertson, study note on Psalm 44 :1–8, *ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 768.

A wife will feel like “shame has covered [her] face” (Ps. 44:15) when her husband’s sin comes to the light, especially if it’s been publicly broadcast (at church, in the media, through gossip, etc.). The splashes of shame on a wife’s heart, as well as the hearts of other family members, are very difficult to bear. She may feel like there’s nowhere to hide from her new identity as the betrayed wife of a sexual sinner.

d. Psalm 69:1–13, 18–20

David recognizes that God knows all about the shame he carries. His heart is broken and he is in despair, as he feels utterly alone with no one to comfort him. Wives long for their husbands to have the humble heart posture that David expresses in verse 6—that her husband would pray for her to not bear shame or dishonor due to his sexual infidelity.

Women often feel like David in verse 20. Even the most well-meaning friends don’t know what to say or how to comfort her when they find out about her husband’s sexual sin. Wives can, like David, turn radically toward the Lord in their pain and isolation.

- e. Invite the women to share their reflections. If you have a talkative group, you may want to preface the sharing with something like, “Let’s take turns sharing which one of these passages spoke most specifically to how you have felt shame, if there’s a passage you deeply connected with.”

## JESUS DEALS WITH YOUR SHAME

4. Read the opening words to this question, then invite the women to share what they learned from the passages.

a. 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

God turns things upside down through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The foolish and weak are chosen to shame the wise and strong. God sets the stage for his glory by eliminating any possibility of boasting in ourselves. We only have life, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption in and through Christ who now dwells within his people.

Wives can find comfort in these amazing truths on so many levels. They may feel they’re foolish and weak because of their husbands’ sins. But God calls them righteous in Christ. They may have things said to them that are hurtful and based on worldly standards for what is good, worthy, and right. But God calls them his beloved, chosen daughters who are holy because of Jesus, regardless of what their husbands have done (see Col. 3:12).

b. Hebrews 2:10–13

Jesus is our Older Brother, and the Captain and Author of our faith (see Heb. 12:1–2). We’re linked to Jesus now, united to him in his death and resurrection. Jesus has

absorbed the shame we deserve for our sins, as well as the (undeserved) shame we might feel because of how the sins of others have affected us. Through our union with Christ, we're born into the family of God and thus are heirs to a shame-free existence, even as we are still shamed by people and feel ashamed in this life. The shame wives experience because of their husbands' sins is real and yet must be brought to the cross and understood through the lens of what Christ has done. Most of us wrestle throughout our lives to see all of life through Christ rather than through our feelings, experiences, and opinions. Suffering can be a powerful competitor to a Christ-centered lens!

c. Hebrews 12:1–3

The women in your group are in the throes of a challenging season in their race of faith. What they're facing in their marriages is happening in the context of a bigger story: God's redemptive purposes for the world and all who live in it. They are not running this race alone! Not only do they have each other, but also the Author, Perfecter, and Champion of their faith: Jesus.

This oft-quoted passage instructs them how to live in light of their marriage suffering. They are to fix their hearts and hopes on Jesus, throwing off distractions, temptations, and their own sinful responses to their husbands. We can look to Christ because he is familiar with our suffering and shame.

d. Invite the women to summarize their reflections from these passages.

### THREE VIEWS OF MARRIAGE

5. Give the women time to review the Three Views of Marriage chart and then invite them to share their reflections, including which view best fits their understanding and personal experience of marriage.

Views 1 and 2 highlight the temptation to find identity, worth, and hope outside of our union with Christ. This temptation is common to all of us! Wives need to honestly assess if their husband and marriage have in fact displaced Christ from his rightful lordship over their heart. As we saw earlier in our study of various Bible passages, it's only in and through Jesus that shame is taken care of and rightly located outside of us, rather than "inside" us as a permanent fixture that controls us.

Identifying shame and why we feel it can be difficult. In the context of marital sexual betrayal, which cuts at the most emotionally and physically vulnerable component of marriage, the shame of a husband's sin seems to powerfully enter into a wife's soul. Yet Scripture says something different! Christ's work on the cross destroyed shame, and as we live hidden in him, shame has no right to be a roommate.



A wife can identify with her husband's sin or with Christ on the cross bearing the wrath of her husband's sin. She can attempt to find ultimate worth and preciousness in her husband's love or in Christ's steadfast, merciful love. Sin *is* shameful, but sin is not our identity.

How can wives move from Views 1 and 2 into View 3, the Christ-centered marriage? Thankfully, she can proactively seek to have her understanding transformed by the Word of God, regardless of her husband's choices or beliefs. Her beliefs need to be made new, grounded in Scripture rather than her feelings. As she grows slowly yet steadily to find her deepest comfort and value in Christ—resting in his unfailing love—the way she views her marriage will also change. This is not an overnight process, but a journey that's walked one thought at a time, one day at a time, with the companionship of Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

6. Invite the women to share insights they've gained. As you prepare for some time in prayer together, you might encourage them to pray what they wrote down.

**Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.**

**Touch base on homework for the next session.**

SESSION 6

# Breathe

PAUSE IN THE JOURNEY TO REST,  
REMEMBER, AND REFLECT

# Breathe

## PAUSE IN THE JOURNEY TO REST, REMEMBER, AND REFLECT

### Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:

- Receive the gift of rest this week and believe they have a loving invitation and permission from God to pause, reflect, and rest.
- Not resist any invitation from the Lord to pause and reflect on him.
- Be refreshed and strengthened for the journey in front of them.

### Opening Thoughts

This is such an important topic that I've chosen to dedicate an entire session to it. This session serves in part to give the women permission or encouragement to slow down and remember the Lord's presence and ministry in their lives. It's an opportunity to reflect and rest after the intentional heart-work they've done in this workbook so far.

There are minimal leader's notes for this session. I encourage you to simply offer the women time to share their reflections from their "pause." You might open the time by asking something like this: "Most of us struggle to slow down and silence technology and other distractions. The quiet can be frightening if we're not used to it. Or as you've been walking such an emotionally intense journey in your marriage, perhaps it felt impossible to truly pause to be still. Maybe you've kept yourself busy to silence the painful noise in your mind, which is so normal for wives in these difficult circumstances. How about each of you share: Did you find this session easy, difficult, or somewhere in between? Explain why you think you felt that way to the degree you are able."

1. Have two of the women read the prayers for rest. Then gently move through the other suggested ideas and journaling questions, inviting the women to share if they engaged them and how it impacted them.

### Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.

**Touch base on homework for the next session.** Mention that Session 7 will ask the women to apply a biblical framework, the Harvest USA Tree Model, to help them understand how sin develops, with a specific application to their husbands. Acknowledge that this will be a challenging but needed session as it provides insight into how their husbands "grew" into their various patterns of sexual sin. Encourage them that it's okay if they find these exercises difficult or impossible—you still want them to read through the explanations of the Tree Model so they gain understanding of how patterns of behavior develop. This will be important for Session 8 as well, when they'll be asked to apply the Tree Model to themselves.

SESSION 7

# How Could You?!

LEARN HOW SIN PATTERNS DEVELOP

# How Could You?!

## LEARN HOW SIN PATTERNS DEVELOP

### Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:

- Grow in a biblical understanding of how sexual sin develops in the life of a person.
- Gain humble and hopeful insight into her husband's life story.
- Grow in wonder at Christ's radical love and power that changes us from the inside out.

### Opening Thoughts

Read aloud the entire section of Opening Thoughts (minus the testimony). Ask the women if they have any questions in response. The Harvest USA Tree Model is the core of our discipleship to men, women, spouses, and parents. As the Participant's Guide explains, it's a way of understanding biblical concepts of why we do what we do.

Gently open the discussion time by acknowledging that these women are on a journey that requires perseverance—yet they don't walk alone! To take concentrated time during this session to apply a biblical model to their husbands' lives can be challenging and yet also empowering. Wives frequently ask questions like, "How could he do this? Why would he do this?" The Tree Model won't answer every detail, but it does explain how patterns of sexual sin develop out of the same place that all sin does: the human heart!

Session 8 will lead the women to look at their own hearts in relation to the Tree Model. Over and over, I've heard humble wives acknowledge things like, "Wow, I've been so hurt by his sin, and it's offensive to God and me. Now I'm realizing how my heart is just as sinful as his!"

Encourage the women that Sessions 7 and 8 are challenging yet important, as they take the time and energy to honestly apply the Tree Model to both their husbands and themselves. Remind them that the goal isn't to answer the questions just for the sake of completing the homework. God is personally and actively inviting the women to grow in wisdom and insight—even if it's painful—that will help them stand on the truth of God in their situation. Christ is with them to comfort, counsel, and provide for every need.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

### THE HARVEST USA TREE MODEL<sup>9</sup>

The text in the Participant's Guide gives a solid overview of the Tree Model, which forms the basis for Sessions 7 and 8. Read over it to become as familiar and comfortable with the Tree Model as you can!

#### The Seed

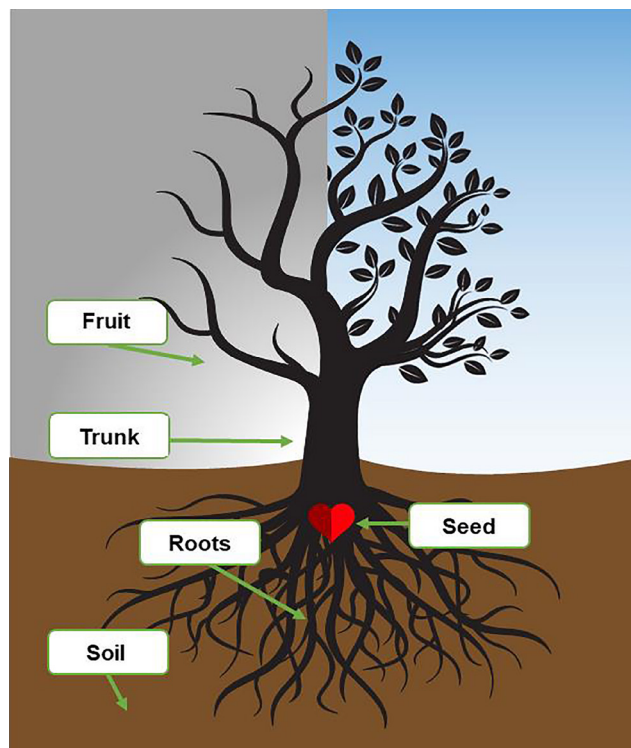
1. Responses might include that their husbands are hardened against God, rebellious, confused, humbled, or hungry. Some wives will say honestly that they have no idea of what's happening in the heart of their husband.

#### The Soil

2. Open this question with some boundaries around what the women share. You might say it this way: "The soil is an important category for all of us to understand in our lives. In a couple, it's vital for both spouses to have a growing knowledge of significant influences (for good or not-so-good) on their partner's life. What came to mind for you as you reflected on this question? Let's share answers in a broad strokes, rather than specific details. For example, some of your husbands may have suffered abuse in their childhood. We want to know that if you want to share it, yet for now, let's not get into the specifics of his abuse."
3. Invite the women to share and be prepared that these questions may trigger strong emotions of fear and anger. It can't be overemphasized how world-rocking and mentally discombobulating it is for a wife to learn 5, 10, or 30 years into marriage that her husband has hidden significant details and stories from his life. Also, most likely some of the women in your group have not yet received a "full disclosure" (see Appendix D of the Participant's Guide).

#### The Roots

4. Wives may be able to articulate that their husbands crave the desires listed in the question. Invite them to use other words if something else seems to fit best.



<sup>9</sup> Harvest USA Tree Model © Harvest USA, 2022.

## The Trunk

5. Most of us have two facets to our belief system, the “trunk” of our tree. As the lesson explained, we have our spoken, verbalized faith (*I believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord; God is my good Father and in control of all things; God is faithful to provide for his children*). However, in reality, our thoughts and actions often give evidence that we don’t actually believe—at least not consistently—what we profess to believe! This tension is always at work in the belief system of believers who are stuck in sin, including sexual addictions.
6. Answers may be along the lines of:
  - I have no idea.
  - I’ve only recently found out that my husband is an anxious, insecure man. I had no idea he thinks so poorly of himself.
  - He’s always valued control as the most important thing in his life, and that comes out in the way he leads our family and pursues his career.
  - He seems to deal with stress okay, but now I’m realizing he simply suppresses his feelings because he doesn’t believe they’re important to think about.

## CHRIST CAN TRANSFORM EVERY TREE

You may choose to read the opening two paragraphs in this section (beginning with “One of the basic truths . . .” aloud before discussing the final question.

7. This may be a difficult exercise for the women, especially if they’re newer Christians or have never thought about these things. It may prompt hope for change or doubt that their husband could actually change. Remind the women that we’re focusing on a *Christ-transformed* tree, rather than changes that their husband can accomplish in his own power. Also, if needed, remind the women that none of their husbands got stuck in sin overnight and the process of transformation will also be slow: a gradual trajectory of growth and becoming more like Christ. Below are some ideas to share if the women are stuck.
  - a. Christ-transformed heart:
    - Humility
    - Sympathy toward me as the one he betrayed and deceived
    - Sorry over his sin in a godly way, not just because of the consequences
    - A willingness to grow as a worshiper and disciple of Jesus



b. Soil:

- Courage to face these influences
- A willingness to understand how God brings healing and freedom from painful events
- A growing contentment in and acceptance of who God has made him to be
- A willingness to forgive those who sinned against him

c. Desires:

- A hunger for Christ and the Word
- Loving and being loved in ways that honor God
- Trusting God in the pain of life more than wanting to escape the pain
- Loving me, the kids, and others
- Developing *real* friendships with godly men

d. Beliefs:

- That God loves him and will never abandon him
- That he is God's servant rather than his own man
- That God's Word is true, sufficient, and what he needs for every detail of life

e. Fruit:

- All of the above . . . one piece of fruit at a time!
- Relationships that are meaningful, Christ-centered, and encouraging
- An ability to listen and communicate in ways that help me and others to be known and to know him
- Increasing victory in overcoming the pull of temptation and so a decreasing giving in to sin
- A "whatever it takes" commitment in regards to fleeing sin and pursuing Christ

**Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.**

**Touch base on homework for the next session.** Most likely, the women in your group will be in various stages of readiness to engage the “heart work” that Session 8 will ask them to do. I hope that the previous seven sessions have prepared them to look at their own hearts and perhaps to be eager to do so. However, regardless of where each woman is at, Session 8 provides a piece of the discipleship map that is important for their journey forward.

SESSION 8

# Your Heart

ASSESS HOW YOU ARE RESPONDING

# Your Heart

## ASSESS HOW YOU ARE RESPONDING

**Hopes for this lesson and how to pray for the women:**

- Have humility to honestly reflect on the status of their hearts and to assess how they're responding to their husbands.
- Find encouragement from how the Tree Model gives them insight into what's been confusing and painful about their responses.

## Opening Thoughts

Gently remind the women as you begin to discuss their personal Tree Model work that the goal isn't to turn inward on ourselves but to humbly assess what's happening in our hearts. Applying the Tree Model is a way to invite the Lord to search them out and lead them forward with his grace, truth, healing, and strength. He alone knows the timeline of how that will happen in their individual lives.

Read this section quoted the Participant's Guide aloud and invite any questions or thoughts in response:

For some people, it's a major shift in thinking to begin focusing on deeper issues rather than surface behaviors. We often want to feel better or get fixed so badly that we simply want the behaviors to stop. We want a program that will do a quick fix or provide a series of steps that will change our behaviors.

In most cases a programmatic approach to changing behavior fails because behaviors are merely symptoms of a deeper problem: Our hearts are sinful and in need of change. Our desires need to be understood as our servants and not our masters. We 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, praising him, etc. Our thought lives need radical transformation in order to be aligned with God's truth and ways.

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. . . . Healing and change is a process. A broken bone does not heal overnight—neither does a spiritually broken heart!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen Dykas, ed., *Sexual Sanity for Women: Healing from Sexual and Relational Brokenness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2013), 19.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

You may choose to read the two passages (Jer. 17:5–10 and Gal. 5:13–26) before you begin the questions.

- I. The two passages describe the God-dependent life in contrast to the self-dependent life, the barren life in contrast to the one bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Listen for reflections such as:
  - I've felt like a "dry tree" Christian for most of my life. I go to church, read my Bible, and talk about God with people but, honestly, it doesn't seem to really make a difference. I thought marrying a Christian man would bring fresh life to my relationship with God.
  - My life used to feel like a green tree, but now it's a parched, barren desert. I don't feel God at all.
  - I'm beginning to sense God's growth in me, moving me from Jeremiah 17:5–6 to verses 7–8. I'm still pretty anxious but have actually been noticing the fruits of the Spirit emerging a bit more, especially gentleness and self-control when I talk to my husband.
  - You know, I always thought of myself as so self-aware. But this whole experience has shown me not only how self-deceived my husband has been, but that I have been too! Until my husband's sin came out into the light, I thought I was such a strong Christian. I'm sad to say that the pain of all this has exposed how surface-level my relationship with God has actually been. But I'm growing.
  - Well, I haven't been sexually immoral, but the list of other things in Galatians 5:20–21 sure has a lot of words that describe me. I've often been an envious, jealous, and angry woman. Somehow the Spirit is helping me to be aware of those more and more and to ask God for help.
  - I don't understand what it means to "walk in the Spirit"? *With newer believers, and even those who have been in Christ for decades, the life of the Spirit can be mysterious and difficult to understand. A deep dive into this is beyond the scope of this workbook. However, you might consider the following two books for women who seem young in their faith: A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of God's Love by Milton Vincent, or What Is the Gospel? by Greg Gilbert. These both give a wonderful explanation of the Christian life in view of God's mercy and grace.*

2. a. and b. Good fruit are underlined and bad fruit are bolded.

As the months crept by after the discovery of my husband's ongoing struggle with pornography, I found myself slowly growing cold and numb. *[Some women might mark "growing cold and numb" as a bad fruit but this could be the impact of the trauma on them rather than a willful choice; so in that regard it's the result of soil.]* I said that I was "just busy," but I was **using work as a way to avoid** relating to my husband. **Sex felt like a ritual** I needed to perform to try to stave off his temptation), and so I **tried to force myself** to be alluring to him – while **my heart grew more and more distant**. **Bitterness** crept into my heart like a poison that threatened to destroy me. I was not only bitter toward my husband but toward marriage in general, and ultimately toward God as well. If God was sovereign, why did he allow me to marry a man with such a struggle that was so isolating for me? As God worked on my heart through a couple of friends who journeyed with me through this season, I began to see that I needed grace as much as my husband did. **My lack of forgiveness** was just as despicable to God as his pornography. At the foot of the cross, we were equally in need of Christ's mercy.

Whenever my husband and I discussed "his problem," he would promise to stop, and beg me not to tell anyone. I thought it was my duty as a Christian wife to comply, so years went by and **we both lived a lie**. We **pretended** to have the perfect marriage and family, even to each other. In order to keep up our marriage, **I had to act** as if his infidelity wasn't happening and didn't hurt. But **living in denial** took its toll. I became a like a robot, going through the motions but with no life inside me.

**After living a lie for decades**, I threatened to expose my husband's problem to our church leadership if he didn't do it himself. He met with them soon afterward and received their discipline, but also found grace, forgiveness, and support rather than further condemnation and shame. Meanwhile I was left alone and abandoned in my pain. I went through waves of anger, **jealousy, and rage** over the next few months because **he, who had wallowed in filth, was receiving support, forgiveness, even kindness . . . while I, who was completely innocent** [this hurting wife had a view of herself based on **unbelief**], was abandoned, isolated, and treated as if I were unclean.

Over the next seven years, without my being aware of it at all, **bitterness camped out in my heart and eventually rotted into hidden subtle hatred towards God and my husband**. I **withdrew emotionally**, preferring to engage with my husband on a personal level as little as possible while still functioning fine together in the business of raising the kids and doing life. I became increasingly **critical of him and curt in my responses**

to him, which became uncomfortably noticeable to our kids and others. I could feel my unkindness, but I couldn't understand why these things erupted out of me when I had forgiven my husband, and I couldn't seem to change. Finally, through the Tree Model (as well as a similar explanation in a counseling class) the Lord showed me how black and full of hatred my heart was. Even more, he convicted me that my harbored hatred toward my husband was as heinous a sin as his pornography! I finally saw that I was no better than he was. That changed everything!

## PERSONAL TREE EXERCISE

First, ask the women if they had any questions about Appendix C and Ellie's Tree.

4. and 5. The women have been asked to do a good bit of self-reflection this week. Remind them of what the Participant's Guide said: the goal isn't to feel like they must fill in every detail, but rather to grow in self-awareness. Invite the women to each share in 5–10 minutes (depending on how many you have in the group) how they answered these questions.

The goal is to listen to each other without commentary. Discussion will come afterward. You want to listen specifically for ways women feel they've changed either through growth in the Lord or through moving away from Christlike behavior. This will most likely be a humbling and difficult exercise for the women, so pray that the sharing time will be encouraging and inspiring so it drives them toward the Lord for help.

6. Envision your Christ-transformed tree. You might hear things like the following:

a. Christ-transformed heart

- A growing trust in and love for God.
- Learning to bring my thoughts to God and pray about them.

b. Soil

- Seeing my disappointing marriage through the lens of eternity rather than through the pain I feel.
- Growing to trust that for some reason, God didn't allow me to know about my husband's sexual addiction before we got married.
- Finding comfort in knowing that one day God will enact justice on the person who abused my husband and will somehow bring redemption to all the pain that has happened because of that abuse.

## c. Desires

- Desiring to trust God more than just wanting to feeling better.
- Longing for Christ to be honored in my responses, including in how I grieve honestly.
- My husband's growth in loving Jesus more than he loves his sin, and even more than he loves me.

## d. Beliefs

- God, you are faithful, holy, and good to me.
- God, you are able to bring change in my heart and my marriage.
- My husband is not my worst enemy—sin and Satan are.
- My sin is ugly and needs God's grace just as my husband's sin does.

## e. Fruit

- Fruits of the Spirit manifested more and more!
- Learning to pause and pray before confronting my husband.
- Seeing my husband the way God does, believing that he is a loved child of God.
- Decreased desire for revenge.
- Courage to talk to someone at church.
- Choosing to not turn to some coping mechanism (like TV, social media, food, or wine) when I'm feeling sad, but to cry out to Jesus instead.

**Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.**

**Touch base on homework for the next session.**

*Extra notes in view of Session 9 covering a weighty and sensitive topic: forgiveness.* You want to emphasize (and most likely repeat) that Session 9 is *not* meant to guide the women through forgiveness from beginning to end, much less through rebuilding trust in their marriages. The main goal is to give a helpful, biblical overview of what forgiveness involves. Forgiveness is an event that begins a process; a wife comes to the place of being ready and able to extend forgiveness to her husband. This sets the stage for the possibility of rebuilding trust in the context of a reconciled marriage; however, this is not guaranteed because it's dependent on a husband's repentance! Forgiveness is *not* equal to reconciliation or being able to trust a husband.



Sadly, many wives are counseled and even coerced to say they forgive their husbands with no thought of her own process of healing.

Unfortunately, many women think that if they offer forgiveness, then they should also be able to trust their husbands, no questions asked. This is unwise, unrealistic, and unbiblical! Scripture doesn't mandate that we trust people who are untrustworthy, not even a spouse. More on that in Session 9, but I wanted to include these thoughts to guide you as you set the table for discussing the content.

SESSION 9

# Forgiveness

UNDERSTAND WHAT IT INVOLVES

# Forgiveness

## UNDERSTAND WHAT IT INVOLVES

**Hopes for this session and how to pray for the women:**

- Grow in understanding of what forgiveness is.
- Find comfort and guidance from God's Word, especially for any women who have been given unbiblical and harmful counsel about forgiveness.

## Opening Thoughts

As you open up the discussion time, reiterate that this lesson will not coerce the women to get somewhere that they're not ready for yet. This session addresses one of the heaviest and most difficult topics that broken marriages must confront. The goal of this lesson is to give an explanation of forgiveness and how a wife can extend it to her husband. However, the women in your group may not be ready yet to forgive, and that's okay! Pray that God will give you wisdom and courage to address the questions they may ask, and trust that God knows where their hearts are at. He is the only one able to soften, strengthen, and heal their hearts so as to be ready to forgive.

As the session will address, anyone who refuses to forgive will eventually become hardened in heart. Our Savior's forgiveness of us serves to keep us soft and humble. Ask the Savior to give you a heart like this as you lead.

## Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

1. Women may have had things like the following said to them:

- *He's doing everything we (the church leaders) have told him, so you must forgive him and move on.* This effectively discounts her heart and assumes that she knows what she's being asked to forgive. Without a full disclosure of his sin, the wife doesn't know what she is facing, much less what she is being asked to forgive. She can forgive her husband based on what has been revealed to her, and how she has experienced being sinned against. However, a partial disclosure of sin will severely hinder any possibility of rebuilding trust.

Also, he may be "checking the boxes" but continuing to inflict wounds by his pattern of behavior. Forgiveness does not mean you're not hurt and angered by ongoing mistreatment.

- *Your refusal to forgive your husband is an obstacle to his growth and healing.* While it can be true that a wife's ongoing, hard-hearted refusal to forgive her husband may have negative fallout on him, many wives are not "refusing" to forgive. They are unable to consider it

due to the traumatic impact of his sin and just aren't ready! To attempt to force a wife through this process with blame and shame is devastating. Many women effectively shut down in their hearts and go through the motions of saying "I forgive you," only to suffer in silence. They've been completely missed, not only by their husbands but by their helpers as well.

- *You're a sinner too, so what makes my sin so much worse that you can't forgive me?* This minimizes the husband's sin and discounts how his sin has impacted her heart and their relationship.
- *Like God you must forgive and forget.* Except she's not God! Trauma is rarely, if ever, completely forgotten. Forgiveness is not "sentimental amnesia."<sup>11</sup>
- *If you can't trust your husband, then you obviously haven't forgiven him. You should keep praying through 1 Corinthians 13 until you can truly believe and live out "love always trusts" (NIV).* Forgiveness does not equal rebuilt trust or restoration! Another way of putting this is that love trusts people, or sees them through the lens of the gospel: as sinners for whom Christ died and in whom he can bring beautiful change. Forgiveness can be extended in a moment; trust is earned over time.
- *When you're free of pain, then you're ready to forgive him.* This isn't true! God never says to base our obedience and faith on our feelings.
- *When he proves that he'll never do this again, then you need to forgive; otherwise you're "throwing pearls before swine."* Besides taking this verse out of context, this discounts the progressive nature of repentance and overcoming sin patterns. Forgiveness is *not* based on a husband's perfect record but on Christ's!

2. a. Psalm 103:1–5

The Lord is the One who forgives *all* our sins. This is one of the most profound benefits we enjoy as his children. It's important to note how David blessed the Lord for many things: he is a healer and redeemer and crowns us with his unfailing love and mercy; he satisfies and renews us. Forgiveness is one part of the "grace package" that is lavished on us so we can lavish it on others.

b. Matthew 6:9–15

We ask God to forgive us and, by faith, we extend that forgiveness to others. Forgiveness, however, is an aspect of the Christian life that exists alongside all the other needs we have

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Hambrick, *True Betrayal: Recovering from the Betrayal of Your Spouse's Sexual Sin*, workbook (2017), 39, <http://bradhambrick.com/truebetrayal/>.

on a daily basis. Verses 14–15 explain a liberating and sobering truth: those who receive the forgiveness of the Lord are able to forgive anyone. A life of repentance will include a forgiving heart. Conversely, a person who remains resolved in refusing to forgive is not someone who has received the forgiveness of God the Father.

c. Luke 23:32–35

One Bible commentator writes of this passage:

Jesus fulfills his own teaching about loving one's enemies (see Luke 6:36) and highlights the fact that his death was providing the very basis upon which those who crucified him could be forgiven (see Isa. 53:12).<sup>12</sup>

d. Romans 12:19–21

As the “beloved” of God, we trust him to avenge any wrong done against us, because ultimately all sin is done against him. God is holy and so he is the only one worthy of enacting vengeance.

Christians are called to much more than offering words of forgiveness—as Christ's disciples we imitate him by offering gracious, undeserved blessing to others. In so doing, we participate in the kingdom work of overcoming evil with God's goodness.

e. Ephesians 1:3–10; 4:31–5:2

Through Christ's death on the cross, all our sins are forgiven, according to the riches of God's grace that has been lavished on us. In response, we actively put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander. We're to instead be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving to others because God in Christ has forgiven us.

f. Colossians 1:13–14; 3:12–14

God's forgiveness of us looks like this: we were once separated and alienated from God, controlled by hostile, antagonistic minds and evil deeds. Now, however, we have been forgiven and our relationship with God is restored! We lived in the kingdom of darkness and have been brought into an entirely new existence as citizens in the kingdom of God's beloved Son. We are holy and blameless, free from shame and guilt. We “prove” our new standing through a lifestyle of faith and repentance.

The second passage from Colossians 3 beautifully applies the truth of the first. God's children are dearly loved, holy, blameless, and chosen. Our new identity in Christ allows

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Grudem, study note on Luke 23:34, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2010.

us to bear the fruit of his life in us through active compassion, patient forbearing, and forgiveness to others who sin against us. Love is the glue that holds all of this together, fueling and empowering these good works that are impossible to do without God's help.

- g. Invite the women to share their insights. You may want to note that none of these passages say anything about our feelings! This is liberating and challenging to us. It's liberating because we don't have to wait to feel the right emotions in order to forgive someone; we can walk by faith not by emotions. Yet this is challenging too! We want to feel good, comforted, and strong before we forgive someone, but God calls us to trust him—not ourselves—in order to please him.

## UNPACKING FORGIVENESS AS YOU CONSIDER YOUR MARRIAGE SITUATION

It would be helpful for you to listen to Tim Keller's sermon mentioned in the Participant's Guide as this section draws from his wisdom.

As you walk through these four ideas about forgiveness, invite the women to share honestly about where they're at in the process. Assure them that this is not a race or competition but a map to guide them forward.

### Identify with the wrongdoer

3. Over the years I have been edified and challenged to hear woman after woman acknowledge that through the exposure of her husband's sin, she's had to look long and hard at her own heart. Here are some of the similarities I've heard.
  - My self-righteousness and hard heart have been revealed.
  - I've spoken so boldly about Jesus and my faith in him, and yet now I see how I've used God to feel good about myself rather than loving him.
  - My identity in Christ has not been nearly as important to me as being married to my husband and having a "perfect" marriage.
  - I've carried shame and insecurity for so long about sins in my life.

### Inwardly pay your husband's debt

4. Invite the women to share their reflections and where they would place themselves on the spectrum.

It's important to recognize that there's disagreement among Bible teachers on a crucial point about forgiveness: Should we forgive someone who is unrepentant and doesn't ask for

forgiveness? Some believe, based on Luke 17:3–4, for example, that “if he repents, forgive him” means we’re required to forgive someone who sins against us only if they repent and ask for forgiveness. For more on this view, see Ray Ortlund’s article “Real Forgiveness.”<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, others apply the clear exhortation of Ephesians 4:31–32 to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us, arguing that because of the lavish, pursuing mercy of God to us in Christ, we freely extend forgiveness as a lavish act of humble mercy to others. Ernie Baker argues for this view in his article “Lavish Forgiveness.”<sup>14</sup>

I recommend reading both of those articles so you can wrestle with your view of forgiveness. Personally, I agree more with the latter view and so this session is guided by that conviction. I appreciate this wisdom from Leslie Vernick:

Forgiveness is something we can offer because of who we are [in Christ]. God tells us we are required and empowered to forgive because we have been forgiven, not because the other person deserves it or has even asked for it. In fact, it is often the person who has hurt us the most who never asks us for forgiveness. They are not sorry, or they simply don’t care. Forgiveness means choosing not to cling to our right for justice or vengeance. We cancel the debt the offender owes us. In order to be able to do this, we must free our heart from the bitterness and resentment we often feel when someone wounds us.<sup>15</sup>

### Overcome evil with good

5. Encourage the women that any step toward imitating Christ should be celebrated! Remind the group that they are walking unique journeys—God alone knows where they’re at in the process and where he’s taking them.

**Lead the group in a closing time of prayer.**

**Touch base on homework for the next session.**

One more session to go! Well done, leader. I commend you for pressing through this material with the women and I honor the work of the Lord in you. As the group’s journey through this workbook draws to a close, I want to encourage you to remember that the Lord has actively been at work in the hidden places of each group member’s heart, like seeds hidden because they’ve been planted in the soil.

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<sup>13</sup> Ray Ortlund, “Real Forgiveness,” *Christ is Deeper Still* (blog), The Gospel Coalition, March 18, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/real-forgiveness/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ernie Baker, “Lavish Forgiveness: Ephesians 4:32 (Another Look),” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (blog), December 4, 2015, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/12/04/lavish-forgiveness-ephesians-432-another-look/>.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Vernick, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 174.

Some of the women's marriages may seem worse off than when they started this group. Some may be contemplating divorce because their husbands refuse to repent of sin and the destruction is ongoing. Other women may feel stuck in fear or anger, confused and not sure how to go forward. Like them, you must "trust in the LORD with all your heart, and [not] lean on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). As you've encouraged the women to not take responsibility for their husbands' sin or repentance, you also cannot take responsibility for the future of these women or their marriages. We have a trustworthy, strong Savior who alone has the power to heal and strengthen broken hearts. Jesus knows what each woman needs and will faithfully shepherd them as the group ends.



SESSION 10

# Hope

FIGHT FOR CHRIST-CENTERED, FAITH-FUELED  
REALISM FOR YOUR FUTURE

# Hope

## FIGHT FOR CHRIST-CENTERED, FAITH-FUELED REALISM FOR YOUR FUTURE

**Hopes for this session and how to pray for the women:**

- Pray the title of this session! The women will need Christ-filled and Spirit-enabled hope for the journey in front of them.
- Grow friendships with group members and foster a spirit of love and care for each other as the group ends.

### Opening Thoughts

Read this entire section together aloud (minus the testimonies) and invite the women to share any responses.

### Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

1. Women may struggle to articulate specifically what they fear; an unknown future may seem foggy at best. Common fears wives may have after sexual betrayal may include:
  - Ongoing pursuit of sin (and deceit) by their husband.
  - Will their marriage survive? Life as a single-again woman seems daunting.
  - How will her children, extended family, church friends, and church leaders respond to what's happening, if they don't know yet?
  - How will they make it financially?
  - Some of the women have husbands who are truly repentant and doing the hard work to change and follow Christ. The unfamiliar terrain of a Christ-honoring husband can feel discombobulating after years or decades of the opposite.
2. Read the quote aloud to the group and invite the women to share their reflections.
3. a. Psalm 42

This psalm urges the reader to put their hope in God alone. The way it's worded helps us to see that we often need to preach or speak to our own hearts! We remember and reiterate the truth about God: he is worthy of praise and the source of our salvation and hope when we feel cast down, forgotten, grief-stricken, or taunted by adversaries. He alone is the rock in our lives and the sole source of unfailing love.

b. Psalm 119:49–50, 114

The psalmist said that his hope was found in the Word of God and he was comforted in the throes of his suffering by knowing and remembering God's promises. This shows that biblical hope isn't a vague concept but is found in God himself, our sure and steady refuge who is faithful to all his promises to care for his children. Hope can't be ultimately found in any created thing, but in our Creator alone.

c. Psalm 130:5–8

The psalmist waits for the Lord, eagerly hoping for God's new merciful dealings with the nation of Israel. His confident hope was rooted in the Lord's loyal love that assures us of grace, forgiveness, and strength. This is the confidence we need when facing an unknown future as well as present suffering.

d. Romans 5:1–5; 15:13

Faith in God not only frees us from shame (v. 5) but gives us perseverance in our suffering and grows Christlike character in us (v. 4). We can grow in knowing and trusting the "God of all hope" (15:13) who has the power to produce joy and peace in us as we trust in him. This is faith-fueled realism that also gives us the possibility of overflowing with hope in the throes of suffering!

It is sobering that trusting in Christ brings sufferings (v. 3; see also 8:17). But it is satisfying that those sufferings produce endurance, which produces proven character, which produces confident hope in God's enduring and eternal care (5:3–5). God's Spirit gives God's love in abundance. This is the normal yet glorious life of gospel faith.<sup>16</sup>

e. 1 Peter 1:3–9, 13–15

Wives can have hope even as they "have been grieved by various trials" (v. 6) and are tempted to hopelessness and despair. Consider what one commentator says about these verses:

Peter will not let them—or us—believe what the eye sees. The reality is unseen: there is an imperishable inheritance "kept in heaven for [us]" (v. 4) as a result of Jesus's resurrection and our new birth through him (v. 3). And there is no possibility of losing it, for however weak we may feel, we are being shielded by God's power until the moment of salvation comes (v. 5). Our present experiences are all preparatory, making us fit for glory. Jesus too is unseen, but even so, with our eyes

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<sup>16</sup> Robert. W. Yarbrough, study note on Romans 5:1–5, *ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible*, 1681.

fixed on hidden realities, we will love him and our hearts will thrill with a joy that surpasses language and even now partakes of the glory that is yet to be (v. 8).<sup>17</sup>

In our current circumstances, Christ alone is the living hope we need and the future hope we look to. Healed marriages or a husband's repentance can be prayed for but they cannot be our ultimate hope. Wives will cultivate hope that is anchored in Jesus rather than in all their suffering being healed and their marriages being perfectly restored—for these won't happen this side of heaven. We look to the end of the story when we'll be united with Christ in heaven, all will be made new, and we'll enjoy the wedding feast of the Lamb.

4. Invite the women to share their reflections by reading aloud what they've written. Be prepared to share a personal story of hope amid suffering in your life.
5.
  - a. Invite the women to share what they've been learning.
  - b. Here are some ideas to get the discussion started if the women have struggled to come up with their own ideas.
    - Staying committed to be vitally connected to a local church that is faithful to the Scriptures and which exhibits a culture of grace and mercy. If any of the women aren't connected to such a local church, gently encourage them to consider how they might take steps to find one, and offer to assist them if needed.
    - Consistently reading Scripture and sitting under faithful teaching and preaching.
    - In today's world we have easy access to podcasts, audiobooks, and online Bible teaching. Consider sharing websites of trustworthy and biblical ministries that teach the Word faithfully, graciously, and in a way that clearly exalts Jesus Christ.
    - Cultivating Jesus-centered friendships.
    - Listening to worship music.
    - Journaling, painting, or composing music as a way to express their heart to God.
    - Pursuing ongoing, spiritually nourishing guidance such as counseling (perhaps as a couple if her husband is willing) or meeting with an older woman from her church.
    - Finding journey companions who will walk with her as prayer partners, encouragers, and advocates if needed.
    - Review Session 6, "Breathe," for more ideas!

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Motyer, "1 Peter," in Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 1165.

6.
  - a. Invite the women to share specific insights they have. If their answers are overly general (I waste time, I get lost in my thoughts, I have some unhealthy habits) encourage them to get more detailed. Don't pressure them to share information that may feel too private to share, but urge them that the more specific they can get, the easier it will be to take the right steps!
  - b. Help the women come up with practical steps to take. Encourage them to be specific and realistic, as this makes it easier to follow through with their plans.
  - c. Specific areas for the women to consider with faith-fueled realism as they hope in Christ might include:
    - God will help her and guide her faithfully in the steps she needs to take (Ps. 32:7–8; Prov. 3:5–6)
    - Jesus will stay with her throughout her marriage, and will not leave even if her marriage ends (Ps. 23:4; John 14:1–3)
    - He will always be there when she is brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18)
    - He will always listen to her cries for help and lift her out of what seems to be a quicksand of despair; he will sustain her and keep her feet on solid ground (Ps. 40:1–3).
    - God will help her as she faces unknowns and will not abandon her! Each woman will need to keep learning how to hide herself in the Lord and make her relationship with Jesus through the Scriptures a priority (Ps. 139:16–17, 23–24).
7. Invite the women to share highlights from the workbook as well as prayer requests. Guard enough time so you can have meaningful prayer together before you end!

### **Closing thoughts and prayer time as a group.**

Read this final section aloud in your group. You may want to lead the group in singing the hymn “Be Still My Soul” or another song that captures the theme of our hope and comfort in Christ. Take an extended time for the women to share what they need prayer for, and then devote 10–15 minutes to prayer.



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