

PARTICIPANT'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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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

Introduction

Please watch this brief video greeting from Ellen and read this section before your first group meeting, at which you'll discuss Session I.



WELCOME

Welcome, sister. I'm glad you've picked up this workbook, though I'm sad about the painful circumstances that have led you here. I hope that in these pages you'll read words of hope to guide you toward Jesus and the comfort, healing, courage, and strength that he alone can give to you and be for you. I'm mindful that it's not a book you ever thought you'd need—no wife would choose this. I'd like to introduce myself to you, as I'll be your primary “journey guide” through these sessions.

WHERE THIS WORKBOOK CAME FROM

I began my ministry with Harvest USA in 2007. Though I had many years of experience in discipleship to women of various ages and situations, I'd rarely spoken with wives who shared about the fallout of their husbands' sexual sin. I was (and am) unmarried so I hadn't experienced marriage, much less the painful trauma of a husband's sexual betrayal and the head-spinning, heart-crushing deceit that is often associated with it. I felt anxious and more than a little intimidated, but I jumped in and began to set up appointments with wives as they reached out for help.

The women who called were of every ethnicity, and from 20-somethings to 70-somethings. They represented all spheres of the Christian family as well as women who were spiritually open to learn how Jesus might comfort them. Some women had been married for decades, others for just weeks. One by one, these women invited me into one of the most vulnerable areas of their lives: their marriages, which had suffered the wrecking ball of sexual infidelity.

Places, situations, and experiences that I'd only heard about became real, like adult bookstores, strip clubs, prostitutes, pornography addiction (and the many genres of porn), and so much more. Story after story was entrusted to me through angry tears, heart-wrenching broken sentences, fear-fueled sobs, and loud silences. We grappled through the initial fog, pain, and disbelief in response to shocking information about their husbands, looking to God to help us connect words with what they were thinking and feeling.

Over these years, I've read a lot of books and consulted with ministry leaders about care for women who are married to a man bound up in sexual sin. However, the most impactful equipping experience has been listening to *women like you*. I've listened, leaned in, learned, and listened some more. How my heart has been broken over what so many women have endured. I felt deep anger at how some of you have been treated and counseled in ways that are so contrary to the heart of Christ and the truth of God's Word. I've felt frustration that you've often been "missed" by even the most well-meaning church leaders.

I've not walked the journey you're on, but tears are coming as I write this introduction. I'm so sorry for what you're facing. Truly. It's not what God intended for marriage, where husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loves his bride, the redeemed people of God (Eph. 5:25–33).

Jesus alone knows the details of your heart's journey. He sees you now as you read this and hears the cries, questions, and confusion that may be swirling in your heart and mind. He knows all the details of what your husband has been involved in; nothing is hidden from our Savior! He is with you in this unwanted journey and knows what *your* heart needs to find comfort, and to begin to slowly heal and move forward. The comfort of God goes to the innermost places of our broken hearts, changing us and giving us strength, courage, and wisdom.

I hope and pray that you will see this journey all the way through, for it's worth it. Others have gone before you, "oaks of righteousness" planted by the Lord for his glory (Isa. 61:3)—women whom I have been honored to walk with over these years. In the sessions that follow, you'll hear their voices and see snapshots of how they've endured their unwanted journeys. They are kind and compassionate guides who get it; they've been here too.

AN UNWANTED JOURNEY: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a journey as "travel or passage from one place to another."¹ The moment you became aware of your husband's sexual sin (for the first time or when you discovered it was ongoing), you began a process from one place to another. Perhaps this journey began only days ago or decades in the past. What you thought was true *isn't*. The nagging sense that something was off, to which your husband (and others) may have said, "That's crazy! I/he would never do something like that," has been proven true. The man you thought you knew, who you married and have lived with, may now seem to be someone you barely know. You don't want this, you definitely did not sign up for this, and yet, here you are.

Your journey in response to an unfaithful spouse, to sexual betrayal, proceeds with God as your companion, shepherd, and heart-healer. He is a trustworthy, generous source of comfort and strength. He knows what unfaithfulness to marriage vows is like; he has been on the receiving end of adultery. The Scriptures reveal God as the faithful Husband to a people of his choosing. He has wed himself to us through the Bridegroom, Jesus the Son of God. Repeatedly the Bible honestly describes how his bride (the church) has not been faithful to the covenant we share with him. Yet, over and over, we read of God's pursuing, faithful, never-changing love for his people. This is one of the primary aims of this workbook: to help you look to God and be strengthened with his comfort and mercy as you honestly and purposefully face the pain of your marriage situation.

WHAT THIS WORKBOOK IS AND *ISN'T*

What *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* IS:

- A Christ-centered, Scripture-fueled guide to help wives draw near to Christ in response to their husbands' sexual infidelity. These two aspects of our Harvest USA wives' groups are what women repeatedly say they appreciate the most: staying focused on Jesus and the Word of God.
- A discipleship process for wives to honestly face, assess, and discern their marriage situation and walk toward personal healing, hope, and transformation through Christ.
- A provision for women who may not have "safe" people to process their pain with, or whose churches don't provide the specific, practical care that wives need in the face of infidelity.

¹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "journey (n.)," accessed September 21, 2021, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/journey>.

What *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* ISN'T:

- A replacement for your local church, professional counseling, or care from equipped and trustworthy leaders in your church.
- A traditional Bible study, group therapy manual, or 12-step program for spouses of sex addicts.
- A book that will place any blame or shame on you for your husband's choices.
- A book that will encourage you in any way to slander or shame your husband.
- A resource that addresses the unique impact of criminal sexual behaviors such as assault or child pornography.
- Going to take you to the end of your healing and transforming journey—but it will get you set in that direction!
- Primarily for women whose marriages have ended or will end in the near future. If you are in this situation, the type of care and discipleship you need is distinct from this workbook, though there is overlap. Not all marriages survive sexual infidelity, and God has specific comfort and counsel for those facing divorce and its consequences.

OVERVIEW: WHAT IS INCLUDED IN EACH SESSION

Here's a quick overview of what to expect as you begin this workbook.

1. **A private reflective reading of God's Word.** I've found that in the groups I lead for wives, it's helpful to have a gentle beginning before launching into discussion. The passages of Scripture were chosen to correspond to the topic that each session focuses on. Your leader may choose to open the group discussion by reading the passage, or not. Regardless, you're encouraged to take time on your own to read the passage and slowly reflect and pray in response to the questions.
2. **Opening thoughts.** An explanation of what the session is about and a way to set the table for the content that follows.
3. **Biblical, discipleship-oriented questions for study, application, and discussion.** Each session in *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey* aims to give you Christ-centered and biblical encouragement, teaching, comfort, challenge, and guidance specifically applied to what you're facing in your marriage. You'll notice questions for you to reflect on and journal about on your own. This portion of each lesson will form the basis of your group discussion. This means that each session, including Session 1, should be completed before the group meeting.

4. **Homework.** Your main homework each week will be to work through the next session: studying Bible passages and engaging in questions that will help you apply God's Word to your heart and situation. Group time will be used to discuss the session together. This effectively gives you two opportunities to digest the material and apply it to your life, and you'll also get to listen to and learn from the other women in the group. As a guide, I recommend you plan for 1–2 hours to work through the material. Sessions 3 and 5 are a bit longer and may require 2–2.5 hours.

HELPFUL GROUP GUIDELINES

When I lead groups for wives, I ask the members to agree to certain guidelines and commitments. The following are suggestions that your group leader will discuss with you.

Members of this group agree to do the following:

1. Respect the sanctity of marriage and the power of Christ to bring change, healing, and forgiveness in the midst of broken marriage vows.
2. Respect God's call to live in dependence upon him and to practice Christ-enabled love and humility toward spouses.
3. Respect the sober reality that not all marriages survive sexual infidelity and that God's grace and mercy are strong enough to sustain someone through the painful losses of divorce.
4. Cultivate an atmosphere of comfort and encouragement through honest sharing and patient listening.
5. Resist the urge to counsel others in the group.
6. Speak honestly about what your husband is struggling with and how you're feeling, but resist the temptation to slander or tear him down.
7. Keep our meeting attendees, discussions, and content confidential.
8. Faithfully attend to help build trust and relational closeness in our group.

LET'S JOURNEY FORWARD TOGETHER

As you get ready to begin Session 1, I encourage you to pray as David cried out to God in Psalm 142. Notice his desperation and honest lament as he has experienced betrayal and been hunted down by those he once trusted. He was brought low and escaped to a cave, yet from his heart rises up faith to proclaim that the Lord is his safe refuge in this life.

¹ With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.

² I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

³ When my spirit faints within me, you know my way!
In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me.

⁴ Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul.

⁵ I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."

⁶ Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low! Deliver me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me!

⁷ Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!
The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me. (Ps. 142:1–7)

I pray as you take this journey that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, will comfort you deeply and specifically in all your pain and suffering, and one day in the land of the living, allow that comfort to flow outward (see 2 Cor. 1:3–4).

SESSION 1

Unexpected Suffering

FACE PAINFUL REVELATIONS

Unexpected Suffering

FACE PAINFUL REVELATIONS

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Luke 4:16–21

Each session begins with a passage from God’s Word and a few questions to guide you in reflection and prayer. This is to help prepare your heart for the session’s content and, most importantly, to encourage you to draw near to God.

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

- I. “The eyes of all . . . were fixed on [Jesus].” Where are the “eyes” of your heart fastened, or focused, today?

2. Notice what Jesus said he was anointed to do. Which of these ministries do you sense you most need *today*? In this season of your life?

3. Imagine being in the synagogue that day and hearing Jesus say, essentially, that he is the fulfillment of this beautiful passage from Isaiah 61 that tells of the coming Savior. Write a prayer to your Savior thanking him for the new life and hope you have in him alone.

Opening Thoughts

If you haven't read the introduction yet, please do so! It contains important information about this workbook and the journey before you as you prepare to go through it.

Painful information has been revealed and, most likely, your emotions and thoughts feel like a piece of driftwood on a stormy ocean. You've been tossed into a world you didn't know existed: your husband's sexual unfaithfulness. Or maybe you knew he had a "little struggle" but the depth and scope of it have come crashing over you, throwing you against jagged rocks. Maybe you married him knowing that sexual sin was in his life but only now have you felt willing to face it (and all the ways it's impacted you). Your unwanted, unexpected suffering has upended what you thought about your life, husband, and marriage—and what kind of future you have with this man.

Jesus is with you in this unwanted place and his first words to you are not “get over it,” “forgive and forget,” or “this is your fault.” No! His invitation is to draw near, listen for his love, receive his comfort, and lean on his strength. The journey in front of you will not be short or easy but he will be with you each step of the way.

Most of us expect this life to include painful experiences. As little girls, adolescents, teenagers, and young adults, we’ve felt excluded, lonely, or insecure for various reasons. Our family dynamics may have been healthy and loving, or traumatically abusive. Perhaps yours was somewhere in between. Health issues, lost dreams, and deaths give us consistent reminders that this world is not our ultimate hope or home.

So we’ve learned to expect suffering—but not *this* suffering. When sexual infidelity hits a marriage it’s almost always traumatically unexpected. Wives can generally assume their husbands won’t be perfect reflections of Jesus. Of course they’ll have sin struggles! But when a secret pornography addiction is revealed? When hidden receipts confirm paid sexual encounters with women, men, or both? When secret email accounts are discovered that expose an affair and affection shared with someone else? The pain is world-rocking and devastating.

Take heart, sister. Jesus is near as you grapple with your new reality. Our ever-present God is with you in the pain of the revelations that have created a new terrain for your life; he’ll stay with you as you walk forward in this unwanted journey.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

- I. How have you responded to what you’ve read so far in the introduction and this session? Have anger or revenge exploded in your heart? Perhaps you’re just so sad and overwhelmed with the grief of your circumstances. Write your thoughts out below.

2. In the next session you'll have the opportunity to share your specific experience of suffering and the revelations about your husband that have come out into the light. For now, what are the words or phrases that describe how you felt when you *first* discovered the truth of your husband's sexual sin? Do you feel differently now?

3. Read these words of other wives who have been in a similar place to you and write, underline, or highlight what connects with your heart and experience.

When my husband's sexual sin was revealed to me, it was like peeling the layers off an onion. As each layer of truth was revealed, more tears flowed. He had lived in a lie for 30 years! How could I have been so blind? I suddenly felt like I was living with a stranger. I walked around in a daze, with a hurt inside of me that I never could have imagined. My shock soon gave way to anger and grief. I felt a livid, raging anger—an ungodly anger. It was directed at my husband but also at God. I was overwhelmed with grief over the “loss” of the perfect marriage I thought we had. I felt like my life was over.

—I.V.

A couple of decades into our marriage, unable to sleep one night, I went downstairs and decided to check my email. Without knowing how, I stumbled upon evidence of porn in the history section. I was shocked . . . horrified . . . then devastated. I don't think I slept at all the rest of that night.

When I confronted my husband with this revelation the next day, he was shamefaced and turned white. He admitted to viewing it “only occasionally,” confessed he knew it was wrong, and said that it would not happen again. I believed him, and we put safeguards on our computer. Though he never pointed any blame at me, I was convinced it was my fault somehow . . . that I wasn't fulfilling his needs sexually or else he wouldn't have done this. My personal identity was shattered and insecurity took root, but I swallowed it and consciously worked on trying to be a “better wife” and please my husband more in bed. By the way, we had several children at the time. It was excruciating to pretend everything was fine, but I learned to plaster a smile on my face and live that lie!

—B.B.

Deb Laaser tells the painful story of “the darkest, loneliest day” when her pastor husband, Mark, came home from work with two colleagues, sat her down, and proceeded to tell her of his secret sexual sins, his inappropriateness with women he had counseled, and his double life that had been built for years on a complex web of deceit. After giving her this information, her husband’s colleagues asked if she had any questions.

Of course I had questions! Are you people idiots? Are you sure you have the right guy? You can’t be describing *my* husband. He wouldn’t do things like that. I know—we’ve been intimate partners for fifteen years. He loves me and loves our kids. . . . Are you crazy, thinking you can march into my house and in a matter of five minutes expose these awful secrets and then fire my husband? . . . But I said, “No, I don’t have any questions.” And they left—just like that. Five minutes was all it took to deconstruct my whole reality.²

Deb’s world as she knew was almost entirely gone. “Almost,” because her God remained the same and he was near to her. Yet he had allowed her husband’s grievous sins to go on for years, wreaking havoc not only in her life but also in the lives of many others whom he had misused for selfish pleasure. Wave after wave of pain washed over Deb, tossing her into deeper levels of sadness and grief as she grappled with this new reality.

JESUS SEES YOUR SUFFERING

We’re now going to dive into a passage that, at first glance, may not seem to connect with you as a wife. The woman who has a transforming encounter with Jesus isn’t suffering because of a broken marriage, but rather because of a broken body. She has no power to change her condition or make people *really* see, know, and love her.

² Debra Laaser, *Shattered Vows: Hope and Healing for Women Who Have Been Sexually Betrayed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 14–15.

Read Luke 13:10–17 and answer the questions that follow.

4. Let's first consider the woman's situation.

There's a lot happening in this passage. Jesus is seeking to illustrate what the Sabbath is really for: God's gracious and committed loving-kindness experienced by his people. To understand the context of this story, consider that the synagogue was the center of Jewish instruction. Religious leaders (men) would read a passage from Scripture then explain it for those in attendance. Men would be sitting in the center area, closest to the speaker. Women were allowed to attend but were confined to a separate area, perhaps on the periphery of the synagogue, on a balcony or behind a thin veil. The woman in the story was present at the synagogue yet at a distance from Jesus—separated not only by space but also by many men.

Because this woman had lived “bent over” for 18 years—basically living at a 90-degree angle—daily activities were incredibly difficult. Things we might take for granted were a struggle for her: hugging her children (if she had any), walking to the well to get water, reaching up to get a bowl. In addition, she most likely experienced shame and judgment. At the time it was believed that if you were suffering, you must be a bad person under the punishment of God. She very well may have been the object of sneers and whispered gossip from misinformed and selfish onlookers. Perhaps she was avoided because, after all, what do you say to someone in this kind of situation?!

This woman's physically bent and disordered body is a picture of how our hearts can become bent and disordered through sin's impact upon us, through betrayal and trauma. How do you feel “bent” now that your husband's sinful behaviors are in the light? For example, you may feel weighed down with anxiety or depression or as if you're shuffling through life, unable to see what's next, as this woman would have experienced physically.

5. Now consider how Jesus responds to this hurting, nameless woman.

He is present.

He's more than a teacher or speaker in a synagogue. He has now come to make his home in us, our indwelling Lord who has come near to the brokenhearted. He's not a God who texts or video chats with us; he is *here*. He sees us as we really are.

He is a teacher.

Jesus was there to teach people that day, and we all need help learning, don't we? Through Christ and his Word we have a gentle, wise teacher to show us how to navigate not only sexual sin in marriage, but also marriage itself.

He sees her and calls her to come near.

Our Savior is relational! He doesn't merely notice this woman, seeing her from a distance in her bent-over state. Remember, she's most likely at the back of the room. Yet Jesus sees her and goes out of his way (stepping out of normal synagogue protocol) to call her to himself. Jesus puts his radical love and compassion on display as he also allows her weakness to be on display.

How we "hear" his tone of voice is significant. We don't know what his voice sounded like, but based on what you know of Jesus in the Gospels alone, would you guess his voice to convey shame? Impatience? Offense at this broken woman? No! Repeatedly we see and hear Jesus moving compassionately toward the broken and hurting, drawing the isolated and marginalized near to himself.

He touches and heals her.

Jesus could have accomplished this same healing privately. He could have noticed the woman and just healed her as she sat back alone. However, he loves her in a very public way as he proclaims freedom over her and then touches her, which would have been another offense to the religious protocol. Can you imagine what this woman felt as she heard these words and felt his hands on her back (or maybe her head)?

He defends and celebrates her.

She's a daughter of Abraham . . . one of God's people whom he loves! Jesus beautifully puts God's heart of compassion on public display through this woman's broken situation. How comforted she must have felt to be noticed, invited, known, touched, and healed by this loving teacher! And yet, can you imagine how ashamed she might have felt when the religious leaders pushed back on what Jesus had done for her? Jesus confronts their utter selfishness by exposing that they cared more about their livestock than about her. The very ones who should have served, cared, and offered her compassion failed to do so.

- a. What's your response to Jesus's actions toward this hurting woman? How is your marriage situation similar and different to what she faced?

- b. Just like this woman, you didn't choose your situation. Just like this woman, you have a Savior who sees you and invites you to draw near and receive his words of hope, healing, defense, and celebration. He does not take lightly the pain or bentness you carry today because of your broken marriage. Will you draw near to him? Will you courageously journey toward him, regardless of what others may say? Write a prayer expressing your thoughts and feelings to God.

Let's finish our reflection on the passage by considering what Jesus said to his opponents:

¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (Luke 13:16–17)

Yes, she should be set free! Jesus advocates for this woman, defending her dignity and worth. Perhaps in your situation you've had no one advocating for you, much less defending you. Jesus is! And you certainly may not feel able or even willing to stand up in praise like the bent-over woman did after her encounter with Jesus. But are you willing to be *made* willing, my friend? You can pray Philippians 2:12–13, asking God to move in your heart with words like these:

Lord, this is not the way I ever wanted to walk out my faith in you, but here I am. Cause my heart to long for what you desire, to be willing to receive what you are working into me through this severe trial. I know you find no pleasure in my husband's sin or my pain, and yet you promise to work all of this into something good. Help me, Lord . . . help me to believe and trust you. Amen.

Remember, you're on a journey from one place to another. Jesus will carry and lead you where he wants you to be.

SELF-CARE MATTERS

Before we go one page further, I want to be sure you hear something crucial: *your heart and well-being matter!* It makes sense that women facing sexual unfaithfulness seem to look outward, inward, and upward for guidance on how to fix their situation. Counselors, pastors, friends, and books are consulted and leaned on. God may be cried to, yelled at, or completely ignored. A wife may turn on herself, punishing herself with self-loathing, condemnation, and accusation. There's a lot that's unhelpful (if not harmful) in these responses. In the throes of what you're facing, it's important for you to care for your heart and health. One book describes self-care this way:

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.³

Here's a list of wise steps for you to regularly consider.⁴ Take time to journal and reflect, asking God to help you make decisions that fit your situation and personal bandwidth. If you need help, consider asking your group leader for guidance.

³ Eliza Huie and Esther Smith, *The Whole Life: 52 Weeks of Biblical Self-Care* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 6.

⁴ This section is adapted from Brad Hambrick, *True Betrayal: Recovering from the Betrayal of Your Spouse's Sexual Sin*, workbook (2017), 6–14. The workbook accompanies the True Betrayal seminar and is available on request via <http://bradhambrick.com/truebetrayal/>. Brad Hambrick is a faithful pastor and biblical counselor who has produced so much rich content to help hurting people, including this workbook that I've utilized in my ministry to wives.

6. **How will you care for yourself physically?** The following five things are essentials, not luxuries! It's easy to toss these aside in the trauma of sexual betrayal, but as a woman created with a soul *and* body, your physical health matters. You probably have other responsibilities and trials in addition your marriage situation, which can make it difficult to attend upon these things. Nonetheless, pray and seek how you can pursue them consistently.

- Exercise regularly
- Do life-giving, refreshing activities that energize you
- Get enough sleep and rest
- Eat well
- Go to your doctor when needed

7. **How will you care for your heart?** Consider what emotional, spiritual, and relational support you need as you face this suffering.

- Seeking God is vital! What are bite-size ways for you to take in God's Word?
- Trustworthy friends who can be journey companions with you
- One-on-one counseling with an older believer, church leader, or professional counselor

One of the reasons it's important to plan for self-care is that you're in this for the long haul. Your husband's repentance (if he's turning from his sin) won't be a short process. Your heart isn't going to heal quickly, and your emotions will likely be all over the place. Good self-care habits will help you endure. The way you engage this will be unique to you! Guard against making this a burdensome "to do" rather than a gift God wants you to receive from his gracious hand.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read through Session 2 to prepare yourself for the discussion after the time of sharing stories.

Next week's session is dedicated to sharing your stories, listening to each other, and giving encouragement and prayer. You are, of course, free to not participate, but this is a unique opportunity for you to be known by others who understand because they're on a similar journey. This won't necessarily be easy. You might be tempted to compare how your pain measures up to others, or to fear what others may think when you reveal your husband's sin and the impact it has had on you. Your group leader is aware of these possibilities and is praying for the women in the group to have courage, humility, and gentleness as you share and learn from one another.

Prepare to share your marriage story using these guidelines.

PRAY

- That you will know what to share with the group. Ask God to shepherd you in this process and to protect your heart and thoughts as you verbalize to others what is so painful.
- For God to prepare you to hear the stories others will entrust to you. Sexual betrayal touches the most vulnerable and intimate places in a wife's heart, affecting her sense of identity, security, and worth.

PREPARE

Plan to share your story for 5–10 minutes, or whatever time frame your group leader suggests. If it's easiest for you to write it out and read it aloud, that's fine. This is *your* story to share in the way you choose.

However, please refrain from sharing:

- Names of people who may have been involved in your husband's sin.
- Specific locations or names of places your husband may have gone to in pursuit of sin.
- Specific types of behaviors or activities that will leave images in our minds—paint the landscape of what he's been involved in without detailed descriptions.

For example, perhaps your husband has pursued sin through homosexual pornography and sexual encounters with men, or had an affair with a coworker or your cousin, or visited venues to pay for sexual encounters with women. Name these things but please don't share the names of those he committed sin with, the details of where the sexual encounters took place, or specific sex acts he engaged in (and how he may have described them to you). This will prevent unhelpful images and associations from becoming lodged in the minds of group members. If you have questions about this, ask your group leader for guidance.

Ideally you'll cover these points:

1. Your husband's name and how long you've been married.

2. How you met.

3. How you found out about his sexual sin and what behaviors he has engaged in. Feel free to name these: physical adultery (with women, men, or both), pornography, paying for sexual experiences, gender-related temptations, cross-dressing, emotional affairs, etc.

4. How you've been doing since finding out. If you've known for a while, share how you've coped with this knowledge. How are you experiencing God in the midst of your circumstances? We're not looking for cleaned up, pretty emotions here: *feel free to be real and honest.*

5. Give 2–3 specific prayer requests.

SESSION 2

Broken Marriage Vows

SHARE THE STORY OF YOUR SUFFERING

Broken Marriage Vows

SHARE THE STORY OF YOUR SUFFERING

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Luke 8:43–48

⁴³ And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. ⁴⁴ She came up behind [Jesus] and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. ⁴⁵ And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!” ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.” ⁴⁷ And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

- I. Can you imagine how desperate this woman was? Physically ill for so long, out of money, and considered unclean (and thus isolated) because of her discharge of blood, she was a woman needing the touch of a compassionate Savior. Do you connect with her experience in any way?

2. Jesus stops what he was doing (going to heal a 12-year-old girl), speaks out his desire to know this woman, and meets her with kindness, healing, and mercy at her point of greatest shame and need. Have you experienced Jesus in this way? If yes, how so?

3. Sharing your marriage story this week, you may feel how this unnamed woman felt as she made her way through the crowd, hoping to get healed and then slip away unnoticed. But Jesus loved her too much to let her go that way! Write out a prayer expressing what you need from Jesus as you prepare for the story sharing time this week.

Opening Thoughts

It's important for you to share your marriage story, including the pain of the unfaithfulness you're facing. As scary as this may be for some of you, it's in being specifically known that you can be specifically encouraged, loved, and helped. Similarly, as you listen to and hold the stories of others who have suffered, it allows you an opportunity to offer comfort and compassion to them.

God's Word doesn't shy away from the ugly realities of life in a sinful world. Throughout the history of God's people as revealed in Scripture, we are invited into the reality of their lives as those who sin and are sinned against, and who suffer in a variety of ways. The Gospels are filled with stories from Jesus's life and ministry that reveal his loving pursuit of those damaged by sin, who have responded to life with their own sin and selfishness. The rest of the New Testament clearly commands relational practices for God's people that include truth-speaking, bearing each other's burdens, asking for help, and seeking the counsel and prayer of others.

This week's session invites you to take a step of faith and entrust this unwanted chapter of your life to others. David's cries for help are included in Scripture for believers from all times and in all kinds of circumstances. They provide a vocabulary for our hearts and experiences.

¹ Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.

² I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

³ He will send from heaven and save me;
he will put to shame him who tramples on me. *Selah*
God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness! (Ps. 57:1–3)

Read the words of a woman who, like you, learned painful information about her husband and had to trust others with these details of her story.

It felt like I was walking along in my life with a sense that something was really wrong. I couldn't identify it. All I knew is that I felt very oddly dislocated in my marriage and everything was really hard in our relationship.

Then, after tripping upon the unimaginable news, I was abruptly pushed off a cliff. I was falling fast and furiously out of all that I thought was true and real in my life and in 29 years of marriage. I lost the ground below my feet and I was now standing in a whole new story and set of facts about my husband and marriage that I didn't recognize. It was my new story. It was our new story. All I knew before was flipped on its head. Is this a mercy? Is this what severe and excruciating mercy is like?

I sat in a room, listening to these new facts about my husband and the life he had lived secretly; the unthinkable was paraded before me and a company of church members for the first time. I felt like we had both been undressed in front of this group of onlookers and we all gasped at the tragedy that was our marriage.

That day I “fell out” of my life as I knew it. But most surely, I knew that I was not alone. I absolutely knew that I was dying and I needed Jesus like never before. I was dying, my marriage was in flames, and I clasped onto the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus. I knew that he was clasping onto me even tighter. This is what mercy is like.

—B.E.

It's a hard story to tell but there's something very powerful about being known in a group of other wives. I remember the first week of being in Ellen's group for wives; as I sat in the circle I felt alone, distant, like no one could really understand my story. I was terrified to share what I was experiencing in my marriage. All this changed after sharing my story.

—H.R.

Story Sharing⁵

Take turns sharing your stories in about 5–10 minutes each. Your leader may choose to have a gentle timer to help you gauge the time. After you share, others will pray for you, holding your needs before God, who has invited us to “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

⁵ This session's structure is unique for the sake of sharing stories.

Reflection and Discussion:

1. What similarities did you notice in each other's stories?

2. It can be heavy to hold your own story as well as the painful experiences of others. How can you look to Jesus, the ultimate burden-bearer, this week?

Close this week's session with a time of prayer for each other.

Homework

Read and work through Session 3. *Note: This session is longer than most others in the workbook.*

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

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Matthew 26:36–46

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” ³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

- I. This passage from the Garden of Gethsemane account reveals the weariness of the disciples and the sorrowful heart of our Savior. How are you weary today?

2. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath so that believers in him never have to! As we identify with Christ in his life, death, and resurrection, we will also have opportunities to say to God, "Not my will but yours be done." How do you resonate with (or resist) Jesus's words of surrender to the Father's will?

3. Jesus will never "fall asleep," betray us, or run away from us when we suffer. Write a prayer to him that expresses your honest thoughts and feelings about the way others have responded to your suffering.

Opening Thoughts

"God, I come to you very weak and broken. Grieved over the sin of my husband that I just discovered. Shocked—feeling betrayed—angry—distrustful—sad at sin's corrupting power—very aware of my own desperate need for grace as I must confront him." I wrote these words in a journal entry when I discovered evidence on my computer's history that my husband had been visiting pornographic sites. Although I knew of his struggle prior to our marriage, I naively assumed that he was done battling pornography and that our marital bliss would provide the antidote he needed against temptation. My dreams of a happy, secure marriage in which I felt compellingly beautiful to my husband were instantly shattered that afternoon—barely more than a year into our marriage. It was made worse by the fact that just the day before I had asked him if he had been struggling lately with pornography, and he said, "No."
—S.W.

Several years ago at a Harvest USA seminar, a woman sought me out and pushed a crumpled piece of paper into my hands. She had torn a blank page from our seminar booklet and wrote down the lyrics to the hymn “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul.”⁶ She shared how the words had sustained and comforted her as she faced her husband’s sexual unfaithfulness. It was a sacred moment as a hurting, fighting-for-faith woman, longing to be known and understood in her suffering, entrusted her heart and pain to me. Read the lyrics to the hymn below.

1. Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel
2. But oh! When gloomy doubts prevail,
I fear to call Thee mine
The springs of comfort seem to fail,
And all my hopes decline
Yet gracious God, where shall I flee?
Thou art my only trust
And still my soul would cleave to Thee
Though prostrate in the dust
3. Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face,
And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace,
Be deaf when I complain?
No still the ear of sovereign grace,
Attends the mourner’s prayer
Oh may I ever find access,
To breathe my sorrows there

6 Anne Steele, “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul” (1760), *Indelible Grace Hymn Book*, accessed July 23, 2022, <http://hymnbook.igracemusic.com/hymns/dear-refuge-of-my-weary-soul>. You can listen to this hymn with an updated melody at <https://indeliblegrace.bandcamp.com/track/dear-refuge-of-my-weary-soul-feat-sandra-mccracken>.

4. Thy mercy seat is open still,
 Here let my soul retreat
 With humble hope attend Thy will,
 And wait beneath Thy feet,
 Thy mercy seat is open still,
 Here let my soul retreat
 With humble hope attend Thy will,
 And wait beneath Thy feet

This week's session addresses tough questions you've most likely asked. *How could this have happened? Why this? Why sexual sin in my marriage, Lord? Why did you allow me to marry this man? Why did you allow his secrets and deceit to remain hidden for so long; why so much devastation that could have been avoided?*

Why *does* God allow painful experiences in our lives? Perhaps you asked all the right questions when you were dating your husband and did all the right things to confirm that you wanted to marry *this* man; even more, that you wanted to spend the rest of your life faithfully living out marriage vows with him. You assumed he did too, and now you're suffering because he broke those vows.

Or maybe you felt unease in the months leading up to your wedding, yet people you trusted encouraged you to go forward: "He's a great guy! Sure, he struggles with ____ but God is bigger than that. Being married will probably rein him in!" So, you got married. But now you realize that marriage hasn't "fixed" or healed him; in fact, his inability or lack of desire to fight sin is even more evident. *Why, God? Why didn't you protect me?*

Finally, sister, maybe trusted friends and leaders urged you not to go forward in this relationship. They warned you to end it but you persisted and here you are. *God, are you punishing me? Will I bear the consequences of being naive or rebellious for the rest of my life? That's not fair! I. Want. Out.*

Most likely, your marriage situation isn't the only suffering you're wading through right now. You may have various "waves of trouble" crashing over you. Many times over the years, I've joined wives in pouring out their hearts to God in the confusion and ache of compounded trials. In addition to the sorrow of a husband's infidelity, the following have been concurrent streams of suffering and grief that women have been forced to swim in:

- Tense relationships with family who can't understand why she's willing to fight for her marriage
- Broken relationships because her husband's sin involved family members or close friends

- The death of dreams she had for her life, marriage, and future
- Financial crises due to lost jobs as fallout from his sin
- Loneliness because marriage (and perhaps motherhood) have consumed all her relational energies, or she's felt too ashamed or scared to open up to anyone about what's happening in her marriage
- Illness, injury, or chronic health issues, like contracting a sexually transmitted disease
- Her children's needs in response to daddy's sin
- Housing dilemmas if a separation is needed for a season
- The overwhelming emotional trauma that so many wives are launched into after sexual betrayal: anxiety, depression, brain fog, fatigue, fear, and anger. Wives often feel like they're *going crazy* (as we'll look at more closely in Sessions 4 and 8).

These are heavy burdens to bear—too much for any one person! We won't be helped by avoiding the suffering in our lives or by allowing it to consume and control us. God provides a third way: honestly facing it. Enabled by the Spirit's presence and love, you can “breathe your sorrows” to Jesus as you rush toward and retreat *into* him, waiting for his help.

Jesus understands your suffering. As Christ bore the eternal weight of all our sin, he also faced betrayal, abandonment, slander, public shame, and horrific physical abuse, yet persevered through his death and into resurrection. Our compassionate Savior is your steadfast companion in your suffering and he will help you persevere through it too.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

- I. Read over the words of “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul” again, and answer the following questions. This hymn expresses faith in God in the midst of sorrows, fainting hope, and grief. The writer is experiencing profound suffering alongside personal faith in God her refuge. This echoes the psalmist's words in Psalm 142 that we looked at in the introduction.
 - a. What phrases or themes in the hymn resonate with you in light of your marriage situation?

- b. Are you facing compounded suffering through other trials (besides your marriage situation) right now? List out what you're aware of.

- c. Have you experienced God's Word bringing "sweet relief" and comfort recently? Write out anything that comes to mind.

2. Suffering comes in many forms. We are *sinned against* through betrayal, abandonment, deceit, attacks, abuse, meanness, and more. We also suffer as we face life in a *broken, sin-filled world*. Things don't function according to God's created design. Relationships, desires, thoughts, bodies, vocations, dreams, the weather, the earth, authorities, people, animals (and all created things!) . . . every corner of God's creation suffers because of sin's presence. We also face the reality of *our sinful, deceitful, and idolatrous hearts*, which adds to our suffering. We all respond sinfully to being sinned against. If that wasn't enough, we have an evil enemy. We suffer because of the *devil's schemes* aimed against God's people:

¹⁰Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹²For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph. 6:10–12)

- a. What have you previously believed about why suffering exists in the world today?

- b. What have been some of the most helpful and unhelpful things said to you about the suffering you're facing in your marriage?

Learning to look for God's comfort in Christ is the theme of this session. We've briefly considered why suffering exists in the world and in our lives in specific ways. Now we want to turn our attention toward how God meets us and carries us through our suffering, how he longs to provide as you face "trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). We're going to look at the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Her circumstances don't overlap perfectly with the reasons that have brought you to this workbook, yet you'll see how, like you, she faced compounded suffering. Her responses provide a map for your heart today.

3. Read 1 Samuel 1:1–28 and answer the following questions.

- a. How is Hannah suffering and what is the source of her pain? Do you see any connections between her suffering and yours?

- b. How does Hannah turn toward the Lord in response to her suffering?

- c. How did Hannah's husband, Elkanah, "miss" her in his response to her weeping (see vv. 7–8)?

- d. Eli the priest also grievously “misses” Hannah’s true condition of pain (see vv. 12–14). He sees her, makes a judgment, and proceeds to rebuke her, probably adding to her pain and shame. Have you experienced anything similar in your process of grieving since finding out about your husband’s sin struggles?

- e. How could Elkanah and Eli (as her husband and as a spiritual leader in her life) have responded differently and brought comfort, encouragement, and Godward hope to Hannah?

- f. Let’s finish our study of Hannah by considering how she responded to Elkanah and Eli. Write what you notice and how it impacts your heart.

- g. Most importantly, we want to see how the Lord responded to Hannah’s suffering and prayers. Verse 19 contains a phrase that might be confusing: “and the LORD remembered her.” God never forgets about his beloved children; he doesn’t lose track of us and our cries for help. The ESV Study Bible notes explain: “When the Bible says that God ‘remembers’ someone or his covenant with someone, it indicates that he is about to take action for that person’s welfare” (see examples of this in Ex. 2:24; Ps. 25:6–7; 74:2).⁷

⁷ T. Desmond Alexander, study note on Genesis 8:1, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 64.

We can read stories like Hannah's and assume that when we're honest with God about our pain and desires he'll give us what we want. After all, Hannah conceived a son, to the delight of her heart. But you know from your situation right now that God doesn't always give us the desires of our hearts. More challenging still, sometimes he allows the very things we fear the most to happen. Pornography addiction, affairs, adultery with men, secretly dressing in women's clothing—things like these have disrupted your life and crushed your heart. *Lord, why haven't you remembered me? Why have you abandoned me?!*

WHO JESUS IS FOR US⁸

Sister, the Lord sees you, knows your suffering, and hears your cries. He closed Hannah's womb (1 Sam. 1:5–6) for mysterious reasons; Scripture doesn't tell us why he allowed her to suffer as she did. He has allowed your marriage to cause suffering—to be a source of excruciating pain—in your life. In the mystery of your circumstances, the Lord has remembered you *through Jesus*, your refuge and strength in your suffering.

I thought marriage would be the place where I would finally come to understand God's love for me in a deeper way through the example of my husband's love. Instead, God has chosen to teach me about his love by putting me in a place where I had to study his love so I could show it rather than receive it. I found myself running to the Lord, pouring out my pain to him about my unfaithful spouse and fellowshiping in Jesus's suffering. As I meditated on how God understood the pain of an unfaithful spouse (his people) and studied his response to their unfaithfulness, I learned about his longsuffering, pursuing love for me and saw God begin teaching me how to love my spouse with his love.

—C.C.

Jesus is your steadfast refuge and tender comforter

¹ I love you, O LORD, my strength. ² The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Ps. 18:1–2)

David wrote these words after being chased by enemies; he also suffered betrayal by people he trusted and loved. His words guide us when we're in the throes of suffering. When we forget who we are and who God is, it's easy to drown in what we're feeling rather than retreating to Jesus and telling him "each rising grief, for Thou alone can heal; Thy word can bring a sweet relief for ev'ry pain I feel."⁹ In the mystery of your suffering you can know one thing for sure: God wants you to draw more closely to him as *your* God.

⁸ This section draws heavily from my book in the *31-Day Devotionals for Life* series: Ellen Mary Dykas, *Toxic Relationships: Taking Refuge in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021).

⁹ Steele, "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul."

In the last hours before Jesus was arrested, he assured his friends with these words:

¹ Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? . . . ³ I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

Jesus is always with you, and not merely by your side but within you as your very life (see Col. 1:27; 3:3). He's the only one who is capable of sharing this kind of intimacy with you. Even on your husband's best days—when he's walking in obedience to God, faithfully loving you, sharing moments of sweet sexual intimacy with you—he cannot dwell within your heart. Christ alone is there *with you* in your broken heart and will not leave.

4. What's your response to this section? Was anything especially hopeful or hard for you? Why?

Jesus is your faithful Bridegroom forever

After I found evidence of my husband's affair, I took off my wedding ring and told my husband in anger and pain, "You left me, and God is my husband now." True, but a bit dramatic. Then, as I was working through a book for spouses facing sexual betrayal with a friend, and reading through Hosea, I realized I had something "special" in common with God: we are both betrayed spouses! Then my mind quickly went to the realization: I have also been unfaithful; not with my husband, but with God.

Throughout our eight-month separation and long, bumpy road toward marriage reconciliation, I found great comfort in picturing Christ as my Bridegroom who loves me with an everlasting, perfect love. Who comforts me when I'm down, always listens to me, and cares for me deeply. And will never betray me.

—C.J.

In the Old Testament, we learn of a beautiful theme that runs throughout Scripture: God's plan to pursue an eternal marriage relationship with his people. "And I will betroth you to me forever. I

will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD” (Hos. 2:19–20). These verses show us that “God’s desire [is] to be more than just a refuge, friend, king with servants, and even more than a father with his children. He pursues, loves and offers us eternal marriage, *with himself*.”¹⁰

The concept of being married to God may be a new one for you. God’s “spousal love is different from human marriage but no less intimate. We have an eternally secure, forever-together relationship bought for us by the blood of Jesus our Bridegroom.”¹¹

The love that Jesus offers to his people, his bride, isn’t like that of the most devoted husband. No, those “best day” experiences you’ve had with your man are *like Jesus*. What you and your husband can offer each other is but a dim reflection of the faithful, eternal, intimate love that Jesus shares with his people—with you.

For all the mystery of your marriage suffering, you can know that Jesus is longing to show himself to you in new ways as your true Bridegroom, the One who never misses you, will not seek another bride, and will never, ever deceive or abandon you. You may not feel excited about this eternal truth right now, and that’s okay. Jesus isn’t put off by the honest recognition in your heart that right now you may desire a husband’s love more than his.

5. What’s your response to this section? Was anything especially hopeful or hard for you? Why?

Jesus is your eternal true home

In John 15, Jesus beautifully explains a new type of intimacy between himself and his followers: he is the true vine (source of life) and we are his branches, created and commanded to abide (or make a home) in him and his words. A vital union with Jesus is now possible because of his Spirit sent to live in all believers.

¹⁰ Dykas, *Toxic Relationships*, 29.

¹¹ Dykas, *Toxic Relationships*, 30.

As amazing as it is to consider that God no longer dwells *near* us but *in* us, we won't experience at-homeness with God perfectly in this life. Our bruised and sinful hearts, and the fallen world around us, prevent a purely joyful, peaceful, and comfortable experience. However, when we honestly acknowledge this rather than demanding a life with no suffering, it can actually draw us closer to Christ and the joy he offers. Consider these words from C. S. Lewis:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful, for these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.¹²

Your true country, your home, is Christ. He's your safe place and gentle Shepherd, who will never tell you to "just get over it" and move on. He won't run away or awkwardly back away in silence because he doesn't know what to say to you. He is yours, his love is yours, his comfort is yours. Regardless of what you feel, think, and believe in this moment, he is drawn to you with deep compassion. As Dane Ortlund beautifully expressed,

When we can't sort out our emotions, when the longtime friend lets us down, when a family member betrays us, when we feel deeply misunderstood, when we are laughed at by the impressive—in short when the fallenness of the world closes in on us and makes us want to throw in the towel—there, right there, we have a Friend who knows exactly what such testing feels like, and sits close to us, embraces us.¹³

6. What's your response to this section? Was anything especially hopeful or hard for you? Why?

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1952), 121.

¹³ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 48.

7. Spend some extra time reflecting on these beautiful truths about Jesus. If you're wrestling to believe they're true for you, tell him. Ask Christ himself to encourage, comfort, and strengthen your faith. Write anything below that you may want to share with the group.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read and work through Session 4.

Read Matthew 12:15–21, then reflect on the following prayer and offer it to the Lord as yours (or use it as a starting point for your own prayers in response to this session).

Dear Lord Jesus, I'm greatly moved today as I ponder your compassionate heart for the broken and suffering. Surely there's no Savior like you: entering, not running from our chaos; taking, not despising our shame; shouldering, not ignoring our burdens. "Bruised reeds" and "smoldering wicks" love your appearing. Justice will be fully victorious because you have been the willing sufferer.

Hallelujah, your sufferings as our sin-bearer are over. As the Lamb of God, you offered yourself once-and-for-all upon the cross. No additional sacrifice for our sin remains to be offered. *None*. I no longer fear being judged by God for my sins. Your perfect love has driven away all fear of punishment, anxiety about Judgment Day, and uncertainty about eternity. I boast and rest in your sufferings for me, Lord Jesus, and I also shout a hearty "Hallelujah!"

But I also cry out, "Help me, Lord Jesus, help *me*." Help me go with you into the sufferings of friends and family, further into the groans of my own heart, and into the injustices and brokenness of my community. Like most, I have an aversion to pain and suffering. Like many, I'd love for the Christian life to be an antidote for all discomfort and distress. Like others, I get overwhelmed and overtaxed by the sufferings around me.

Here's my peace, my consolation, my ballast, Jesus: you're not calling us to suffer *for you*, but to suffer *with you*; and that makes *all* the difference in the world. We're called into the fellowship of *your* sufferings, not into the isolation of *our* sufferings.

You'll *never* lead us into hard places where you're not present. You'll *never* ask us to do anything all by ourselves. You'll *never* leave us or forsake us, Jesus. You *will* lead justice to victory, and in your name *all* the nations will put their hope. So very Amen I pray, in your kind and compassionate name.¹⁴

Extra homework if you're interested. Hannah's song of praise in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 comes after her surrender of Samuel back to the Lord. Read this prayer and note the qualities of God that she worships him for. Her song goes from very personal and particular to the bigger picture of God's promise to one day bring an exalted king to reign with power (vv. 9–10). Like you, Hannah didn't know how the bigger story of God's redemption would unfold, but she did trust in the God of Abraham who had promised to give salvation and redemption. What promises of God can you call to mind now to steady you in the vast sea of what is unknown and uncertain?

¹⁴ Scotty Smith, "A Prayer About the Sufferings of Jesus and the Victory of Justice," *Heavenward* (blog), The Gospel Coalition, August 8, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scotty-smith/a-prayer-about-the-sufferings-of-jesus-and-the-victory-of-justice/>. Used with permission.

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

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Psalm 56

¹ Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me;

² my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.

³ When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

⁴ In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

⁵ All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil.

⁶ They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life.

⁷ For their crime will they escape? In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!

⁸ You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?

⁹ Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me.

¹⁰ In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise,

¹¹ in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?

¹² I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.

¹³ For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

I. How do you relate to David's honest emotions in the midst of suffering?

2. Like many psalms, this one has painful suffering expressed alongside faith in God. How do David's words reflect your suffering and your faith in God?

3. Which promises from Psalm 56 give you hope today? Write a prayer to God asking for his comfort and strength as you “walk before God in the light of life.”

Opening Thoughts

Sometimes I feel like I'm going absolutely insane as I struggle to sort through the confusion and chaos, the lies and fog of my circumstances. I just want to scream at my husband, “What is the simple truth? Is anything real or is it all just a facade? Why is it that things just don't seem to add up—what are you hiding from me? Can I trust you, or would that be unwise?”

—B.J.

Loneliness and fear are recurrent feelings I experience along this journey. Ever-present and faithful are what God continues to reveal to me about himself. I can't count the times I have felt a depth of loneliness and sting of rejection that are beyond words. Dark, cold, shaming, suffocating. But in these painful moments, I have sensed a calling to behold my Father in new ways. In the quietness of his presence, he continually reminds me that his love is deeper than my feelings of pain, and wider than my most dreadful fears. He whispers that I've been rescued from darkness and purchased with the priceless blood

of Jesus so that I would never be separated from his love. As my everlasting husband, he calls me, “a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit” (Isa. 54:6), out of loneliness to experience the sweetness of his fellowship and the purity of his love. This is more satisfying than I ever thought possible. As I dwell here, my aching heart is soothed and his truth dissolves my fears.

—B.J.

Is it okay for Christian wives in your situation to express negative or uncomfortable emotions? If yes, why and how? If no, why not? Your answers to these questions are important for the journey you're on. Read the following and see which view matches up most with your understanding and experience.

View 1: It's not okay to have strong negative emotions.

We're told in the Bible to not be anxious, so it's wrong to be afraid. When we're upset, we're obviously not trusting in our good, faithful God. We just need to trust God more and resist the temptation to give in to discontentment.

View 2: Do I feel powerful emotions?! Absolutely, and I have a right to let people know it!!

Jesus wept after Lazarus died and overturned tables in the temple without one ounce of shame or hesitation. Surely we need to get out whatever we're feeling—it's actually our right! It's unhealthy to bottle it up. My husband should not only know how angry, confused, and broken I am; he needs to feel it personally whenever it rises up in my heart. Doesn't God say that as a married couple we should never hide anything from each other?

View 3: What am I feeling?! I don't know!

I don't have time to figure it out because I feel like I'm going *crazy*. It's frustrating and overwhelming to even think about how to deal with my feelings in the chaos of my marriage situation. Best to let them be somewhere in the back corner of my heart. I can't stuff them down; there's always something bubbling, stirring, boiling just beneath the surface. Easier to just leave them alone. It's too scary to crack that door open.

The Bible has a lot to say about emotions. Your emotional life may feel like sitting in the front seat of a roller coaster, and you just want to get off the ride. To use another metaphor, you feel like a vulnerable piece of driftwood thrashed about in a violent sea of circumstances, and you're desperate to land somewhere peaceful as soon as possible.

Many people are terrified of honestly facing what they are feeling, having never been given permission to be emotionally vulnerable. One of the purposes of this workbook is to help you to find words for your feelings and encourage and embolden you to honestly share your

heart, thoughts, and emotions with people you trust. However, the reality is that many wives experience what can be called emotional trauma in response to sexual betrayal. Perhaps like others, you've experienced the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).¹⁵

PTSD identifies traumas that don't seem to fade. Although many difficult events in life such as the death of a loved one don't really fade, PTSD is used to describe events that intrude into daily life by way of complex emotions rather than simple grief. You can feel numb, you avoid anything that could possibly be similar to the inciting event, you feel depressed and hopeless, or you feel restless, irritable, hyper-vigilant, anxious, and over-reactive. And you can feel all these things at once.¹⁶

A difficult aspect, to say the least, of your unwanted journey is the emotional impact it's had on you. Jesus's multifaceted and horrific suffering on the cross reminds us that he is an empathetic and compassionate companion as you step into this session.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

- I. How do you see yourself in any of the three views on emotions described above?

Let us state clearly as we get started that the Bible doesn't shy away from troubling emotions! Throughout Scripture, it's evident that feelings like anger, grief, fear, and confusion are not only human but *normal*. In the Gospels, we observe our Savior's emotional responses to the devastation that sin has brought into every corner of this world and our lives. Jesus discipled us to know that a troubling world should trouble us, that it's right to feel sad about the ways our lives are broken by sin.

Jesus wept heartfelt, angry tears when facing Lazarus's death and the grief Mary and Martha endured—even though he was about to raise Lazarus back to life. In John 2, we watch the

¹⁵ For more on betrayal trauma and PTSD, see *7 Keys to Understanding Betrayal Trauma*, Pure Desire Ministries, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://puredesire.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/7-keys-to-understanding-betrayal-trauma.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ed Welch, "PTSD and Trauma," *Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation* (blog), May 22, 2017, <https://www.ccef.org/ptsd-and-trauma/>.

premeditated, holy anger of Jesus take action, bringing upheaval and chaos in the temple courtyard. Dane Ortlund describes how Jesus feels intensely with us and on our behalf:

[Jesus] hates with righteous hatred all that plagues you. Remember that Isaiah 53 speaks of Christ bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows (v. 4). He wasn't only punished in our place, experiencing something we never will (condemnation); he also suffered with us, experiencing what we ourselves do (mistreatment). In your grief, he is grieved. In your distress, he is distressed. . . . Perhaps you have been sinned against, and the only appropriate response is anger. Be comforted that Jesus is angry alongside you. He joins you in your anger. Indeed, he is angrier than you could ever be about the wrong done to you.¹⁷

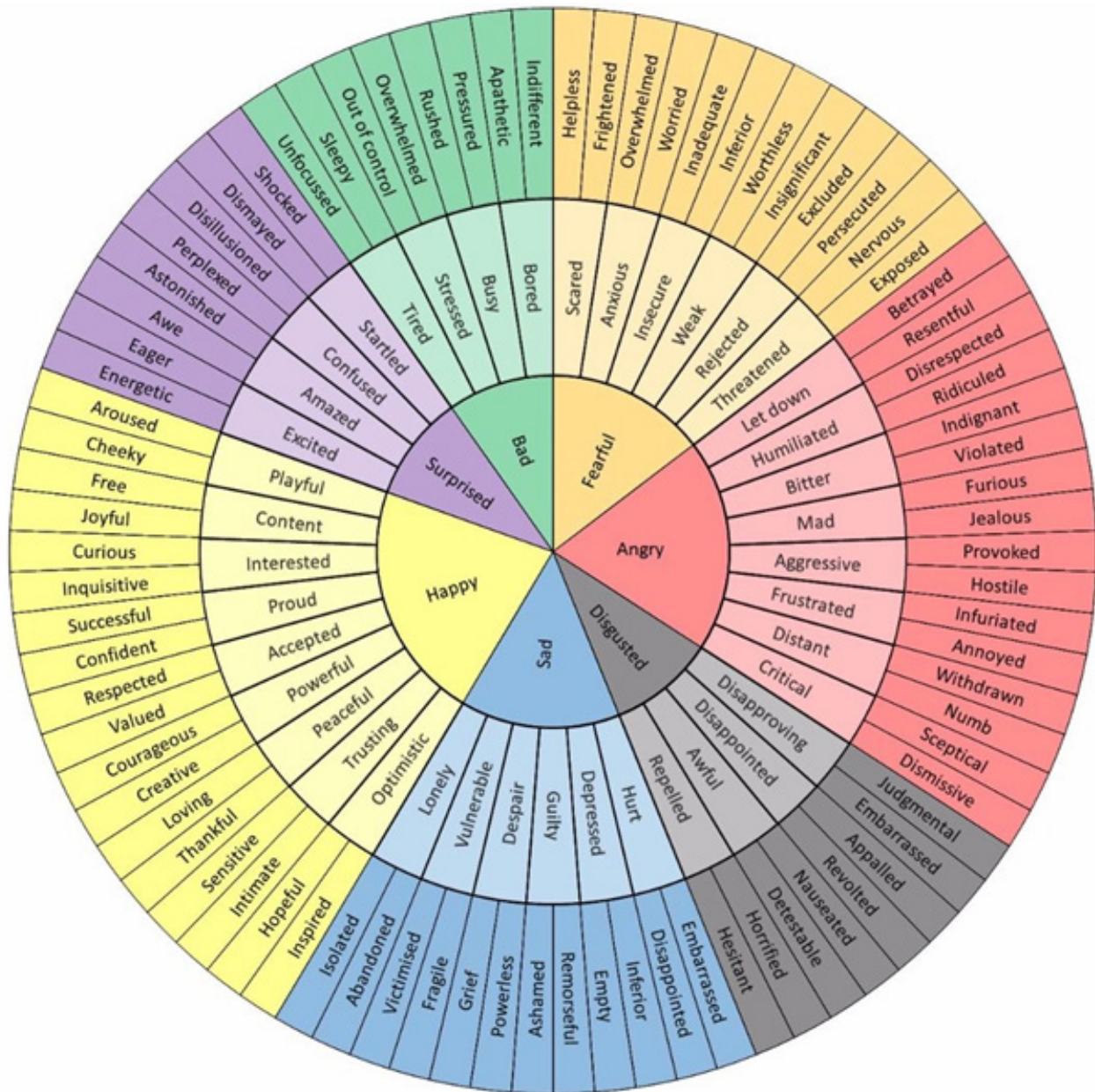
We could go on and on through the Psalms, Lamentations, Job, and other stories in God's Word. People cry out in heart-wrenching agony, question what God has done, demand that he punish the wicked, and burn with anger. We are emotional creatures because we're made in the image of our Creator. Our emotional lives reflect the way our hearts respond to the world we live in—and those responses can be godly or ungodly. Yet we have hope not only for healing and comfort, but also that we can grow in honoring God as we experience messy emotions. Why? Our Savior has gone before us as an emotional being who now lives within us by the Holy Spirit. Our feelings and emotional world can be wonderful servants and yet horrible masters. Let's consider how to grow in having our emotional world serve God's purposes in our lives (which are trustworthy) rather than being controlled by them.

EXPLORE YOUR EMOTIONS WITH JESUS

After the initial shock and discombobulation of finding out about a husband's sin, wives' emotions are usually messy and all over the place. Healing is not a linear process! Rage, grief, fear, anxiety, and more may simmer steadily near the surface of her heart, only to erupt unexpectedly when triggered. Moments, hours, or days later, she may feel completely numb to the same things that overwhelmed her earlier. The power of these emotions contribute to the sense of internal craziness that many wives experience, making it difficult to explain to others what she is feeling.

Now, what about you? How can you face and respond to your emotions both honestly and helpfully? Where is Jesus in the midst of all this and how can you bring your emotions under his care, under his loving lordship? Our path is simple, but not easy or quick: face what you're feeling, seek Jesus, and pray through your emotions. Let's look at these steps of faith.

¹⁷ Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, 111–12.



Face your emotions by honestly naming them

2. The Wheel of Emotions chart¹⁸ included above has seven core emotional experiences that bear out in more detailed ways. When considering how you feel this week, which of these are you most aware of: *bad, fearful, angry, disgusted, sad, happy, surprised*?

18 Jennie Allen, “The Wheel of Emotions,” JennieAllen.com, last accessed March 29, 2022, <https://www.jennieallen.com/blog/the-wheel-of-emotions>. Used with permission.

3. The Psalms are filled with honest expressions of troubled hearts. Read the Scriptures listed below and underline the words or phrases that connect with the strongest emotions you're grappling with currently. In the space below each passage, name the emotions expressed by the psalmist. Refer back to the Wheel of Emotions chart if you need help putting words to any other thoughts and feelings you've experienced.

¹ Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? ² In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. ³ For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. (Ps. 10:1–3)

¹⁰ The helpless are crushed, sink down, and fall by [the evil doer's] might. ¹¹ He says in his heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it." ¹² Arise, O LORD, O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted. (Ps. 10:10–12)

¹ Save, O LORD, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man. ² Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. ³ May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, ⁴ those who say, "With our tongue we will prevail, our lips are with us; who is master over us?" (Ps. 12:1–4)

¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? ² How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death, ⁴ lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. (Ps. 13:1-4)

⁶ In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. (Ps. 18:6)

¹⁷ As for me, I am poor and needy, but the LORD takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God! (Ps. 40:17)

³ My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" . . . ⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? (Ps. 42:3, 5)

¹⁵ All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face ¹⁶ at the sound of the taunter and reviler, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger. ¹⁷ All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. ¹⁸ Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way; ¹⁹ yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death. (Ps. 44:15–19)

²³ Awake! Why are you sleeping, O LORD? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! ²⁴ Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? ²⁵ For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground. ²⁶ Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love! (Ps. 44:23–26)

² Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, ³ because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me. ⁴ My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. ⁵ Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. ⁶ And I say, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; ⁷ yes, I would wander far away; ⁸ I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest. (Ps. 55:2–8)

⁴ Look to my right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul. (Ps. 142:4)

Seek Jesus at the throne of grace

A beautiful distinction that biblical faith gives us in contrast to secular psychology is that we always have Jesus in our sight. Rather than finding answers inside ourselves, we're desperate for outside rescue through our loving Savior. When overwhelmed and crushed by this life, we know we don't have what it takes to face it; indeed, our personal reserves of strength, love, faith, and wisdom run out before we get moving. The gospel invites us toward Jesus with our painful and troubling emotions. He is the One you need when sadness, anger, fear, and shame threaten to undo you.

Let's briefly revisit some lines from "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul."

Yet gracious God, where shall I flee? Thou art my only trust;
And still my soul would cleave to Thee, though prostrate in the dust.

Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face, and shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sov'reign grace be deaf when I complain?
No, still the ear of sov'reign grace attends the mourner's prayer;
O may I ever find access to breathe my sorrows there.

Thy mercy seat is open still, here let my soul retreat;
With humble hope attend Thy will, and wait beneath Thy feet.¹⁹

There's so much rich biblical truth in this hymn as we consider God's invitation to bring all of it—our groans, tears, loneliness, rage, shame, and secret fantasies for revenge—to Jesus, our loving, sovereign, and gracious Lord.

Jesus is your loving and sovereign Lord (Ps. 24:1–2; Rom. 8:28–29; Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:15–18)

God's sovereignty (his control) is a truth we must cling to, even when he allows heartbreak. Psalm 24:1–2 and Colossians 1:16 tell us that this world and all who live in it belong to God. Romans 8:28–29 states clearly that even in painful trials, somehow God is at work to make us more and more like his Son Jesus. We know that all infidelity has its origins in sinful human hearts and yet it's normal to want to understand why God let it happen. On this earth you will never know all the details of why he's allowed your marriage to suffer sexual brokenness. But as you walk by faith, this unwanted journey can bring the good of conformity to Jesus's image! All things are under his lordship, under his feet (see Eph. 1:22), and this is where you and your emotions are kept secure.

So you can approach God trusting that he created you, loves you, and will have the last word not only in your marriage, but in your pain and all the losses and fears connected to it. You can

¹⁹ Steele, "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul."

“cleave” to him, not by your power or will, but because he has made his home in you (John 14:23; Col. 1:27; 3:1–4). This is your *true* life.

4. Write any reflections you have about Jesus being your *loving* and *sovereign* Lord over your marriage and emotions.

Jesus is your gracious Lord (Matt. 11:28–30; 2 Thess. 2:16; Heb. 4:14–16)

Remember the bent-over woman we looked at in Session 1? Sister, Jesus sees you like he saw that woman. He knows—really knows and feels—what you’re facing and what you need. He beckons you to himself to hear words of love and healing. And like he does for the woman in Luke 8 with a discharge of blood—helpless, hurting, broken, shamed—Jesus welcomes you. His grace means you can come as you are to receive the comfort you need. Come and pour out your heart to him. He’s listening, weeping, caring, and staying.

5. Write any reflections you have about Jesus being your *gracious* Lord over your marriage and emotions.

Pray your emotions

The passages we read in the “Face your emotions” section model for us how to do this. We seek to put words on what we’re feeling, and go to Jesus and share our hearts honestly with him. We can pour out our hearts in our own words, either verbally or in a journal. We can take passages

of Scripture and pray them as our own. You have freedom to personalize passages as prayers, rewording them (but without changing their meaning!) and saying them to the Lord. This is one way we allow God's Word to be at home in us as Colossians 3:16 exhorts us to do.

Here's how the wife whose story was shared at the beginning of this session sought to seek Jesus with her messy web of emotions:

*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.*

This, dear sister, is one way to explain how we bring our messy emotions to Jesus and entrust them to his care. This has been a long session and there's just one more thing to do: pray! Take a few minutes (or longer) to review the session and pray in response, bringing your hurting, angry, confused, struggling, or numb heart to the Lord. He is here, interceding for you along with the Holy Spirit (see Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:26–27), and he is listening to you with love before you even speak.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read Appendix A, “Engaging Your Emotions,” and the “I Felt, I Thought, I Did Diary,” a tool to assist you in connecting the dots between your emotional world and the way you respond to circumstances. Try to engage it this week and see what you notice about how your feelings give rise to your responses.

Read and work through Session 5, which is longer than most sessions. Plan for an extra 30–45 minutes to work through it.

Choose 2–3 of the Scripture passages from this session and use them as prayer prompts this week. For example, you might choose Psalm 24 and Romans 8:28–29 and pray something like the following, making the Scripture your own.

Lord, I praise you that this earth and everyone in it, including me, my husband, and my children, belongs to you. You made us and you will not abandon us. Oh Father, help me to believe this on the days when I'm hurting, confused, and angry. I want to grow in really trusting—I mean deep down—that you are loving and good and will somehow use all of this pain, the years of deceit, for the good of making me more like Jesus. Help me, God, to desire to be more like Jesus more than just wanting my hurt to stop. But Father, I do ask you to comfort me today and give me a thankful heart for whatever you give by way of encouragement. Amen.

SESSION 5

Shame

FIND YOUR IDENTITY AND WORTH IN
JESUS ALONE

Shame

FIND YOUR IDENTITY AND WORTH IN JESUS ALONE

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Isaiah 61:1–7

¹ The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

⁵ Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;

⁶ but you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast.

⁷ Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy.

1. Jesus quotes this passage when he begins his public ministry and proclaims that he is its messianic fulfillment. Which of the promises seem furthest away from your situation? Why?

2. Which promises are dearest to your heart today? Why?

3. Through the Messiah, ruins are built up and repaired, a new priesthood is established, and abundance and joy replace shame and dishonor. These are gifts of the gospel given to believers in Jesus! Write a prayer asking God to help you believe and receive what is yours in Christ.

Opening Thoughts

Lord Jesus, why did I allow his sexual sin to have a part in our marriage? Several months after we married, I discovered an inappropriate picture of a woman on the computer. Then, within a few years, I found evidence of different websites. Eventually, I found email interactions with women and then phone calls and texts. I tried to tell myself that as long as he wasn't physically acting out that I guess I could take it. He had said over the years that he would stop, but he didn't. Eventually, it did become physical and I was in shock. How could someone I thought was grounded in the Bible—reading it on a daily basis and teaching Bible studies—be unfaithful to his wife?! I wish I had reacted differently when I first discovered that first horrible picture instead of shaming him, but I wasn't grounded in Christ like I should have been. Why did I continue to accept his sexual sin, while I became increasingly depressed and codependent?

—W.J.

As I stared back at my reflection in the mirror I thought, *You aren't what he wants. You aren't worth fighting for. He wants a female version of himself, not you!* When others would comment that I looked nice or say they enjoyed being with me, anger would fill my heart and I'd think, *Yeah? Well why doesn't my husband think so?* His words still rang in my ears: "I just wish you would get out of my life and let me enjoy my sexual desires." Day after day, year after year, the message of shame filled my ears and heart. I ached to be loved, wanted, cherished, and desired, but instead I was learning to define myself by the way my husband treated me. Unwanted.

I learned one day about the truth of letting Christ, rather than other people, be my center. My life revolved around keeping others, particularly my husband, happy. My world rose and fell on what they said, thought, wanted, or did, leaving me internally an emotional mess. As I learned to put Christ at my center I was challenged to study his love for me and counteract the negative messages communicated by my spouse's words and actions. Jesus always wanted to listen. He pursued me. He cared. While I hated the circumstances that were forcing me to meditate on Christ's love, I realized God was answering my prayer to better understand his love for me. He was forming Christ in me as I learned to turn around and live out his love toward my spouse.

—C.C.

Shame can be a vague, haunting, smothering feeling in our hearts. It may hover the way a low-grade physical ache emerges with the flu. Or it can suddenly fall over us, collapsing our hearts inward as if a heavy, water-soaked blanket was dropped on us.

Shame *hurts*. Shame *frightens*. Shame *covers*. Shame *pollutes*. Shame *shames*. The Bible connects shame and guilt yet also distinguishes between them. Guilt communicates, "I've done something wrong." Shame communicates, "Something is wrong with me." Ed Welch, a biblical counselor, makes the distinction:

Shame lives in the community, though the community can feel like a courtroom. It says, "You don't belong—you are unacceptable, unclean and disgraced" because "You are wrong, you have sinned" (guilt), *or* "Wrong has been done to you" *or* "You are associated with those who are disgraced or outcast." The shamed person feels worthless, expects rejection, and needs cleansing, fellowship [community], love, and acceptance.²⁰

Note what Welch says about shame coming not only from our own sin but also from association with those who are disgraced. Just as you've perhaps been troubled by your troubles or anxious

²⁰ Edward T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), II.

about your anxiety, maybe you've been carrying the shame of your husband's sin as your own. Your husband is guilty of sexual sin, *not you*. Regardless of how either of you (as sinners and sufferers) may have contributed to the brokenness in your marriage, your husband chose to act on desires and pursue his own sexually sinful behaviors. Yet the intimacy of the marriage covenant does closely associate you with his guilt and the shame that comes with rebellion against our holy God. Why is this and how does it happen?

MARRIAGE, SEXUAL SIN, AND SHAME

Marriage creates a powerful opportunity for a husband and wife, in covenant before God and witnesses, to enter into a oneness-of-life relationship. Traditional Christian wedding vows usually include the following components:

- Will you have this woman/man to be your wife/husband, to live together in holy marriage?
- Will you love, comfort, honor, and keep her/him in sickness and in health?
- Will you forsake all others, being faithful (relationally, mentally, sexually, emotionally, physically) to her/him as long as you both shall live?

In response to all of these questions, the man and woman both promise, "I will."

The marriage covenant is unique, in part, because it's the only God-blessed context for sharing and loving someone through sexual intimacy. The lifelong, exclusive, loving relationship provides a protected context for spouses to share themselves completely with one another. Both spouses commit to do this in dependence upon and out of love for Christ. When experienced according to God's design and intent, shared sexual love is indeed a beautiful gift that keeps on giving.

Sexual sin doesn't merely intrude into a marriage as a physical act of betrayal; it brings destruction to the very foundation. This relationship of intimate oneness was built on trust and a mutual commitment to viewing yourselves as "we" rather than "I." Wives experience covenant treason from the one man they promised to love, cherish, and faithfully honor, and from whom they were promised the same.

Sin in any relationship is serious, but since marriage is a unique covenant that represents Christ and the church, betrayal from a spouse is particularly devastating. Sexual unfaithfulness can shatter a wife's sense of identity and worth. Her husband has not only gone outside the marriage but has actually brought pollution and idolatry *into* their union. Wives feel this intensely, even when they're not the ones who pursued sexual unfaithfulness.

Sister, is shame a coat you're wearing or a tattoo on your soul you can't wash off? You may say, "Yes, but it's not my fault. . . . I didn't choose it; it was put on me!" Or maybe you're convinced you caused the sin and deserve to bear this shame until your husband gets his act together, even just a little. If that's the case, you need to hear this again: your husband's sexual betrayal came out of *his* heart, desires, and beliefs—you did not cause it!

Jesus sympathizes with the shame you may carry in response to your husband's sin and the condition of your marriage. Your Savior understands the ugliness of sin and the shame it brings; he's experienced the painful betrayal of his bride, the church. Jesus, your loving, gracious, sovereign Lord knows what it's like to experience the "dirtiness" of someone else's sin becoming his. As we journey through this session, I hope that our Savior's love for you will bring healing and cleansing, freeing you from any shame that hovers over or covers you.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

- I. Write your reflections, questions, or a prayer in response to the Opening Thoughts. As we learned in Session 4, you can name your shame, bring it to Jesus, and talk about it honestly with him.

2. The following are common shame triggers in response to sexual infidelity. Have any of these prompted you to feel shame in your marriage?
 - **Deceit:** *How could I have missed this? The marriage I thought I had with the man I thought I knew now doesn't seem to exist.*
 - **Insecurity:** *I'm not enough. Obviously I'm not sexy, beautiful, or exciting to him.*
 - **Doubt:** *Why did I marry him? Did I make a horrible mistake?*
 - **Reputation:** *What are people thinking about me? About him? About our marriage and family?*
 - **Physical and health consequences of infidelity:** *He brought his sin into our sexual relationship; now I'm dirty and sick.*

- **Choice of sin:** *What do his specific sin choices say about me? How do they “interpret” my identity and worth?*
- **Blame:** *People are saying that I somehow caused his sin; it’s my fault because of what I’ve done and not done as his wife.*

3. Read the following Scriptures and write what you learn about the source of shame and the impact it has on the psalmist. Are they disgraced and ashamed due to personal actions, or the actions of others? What solutions for shame are expressed?

- a. Psalm 25:1–5, 16–22

- b. Psalm 34:4–7

- c. Psalm 44:13–16

d. Psalm 69:1–13, 18–20

e. Write any summary thoughts you have about these passages. Did anything surprise you or give you insight into how shame has shaped your sense of identity and worth? Explain your answers.

JESUS DEALS WITH YOUR SHAME

Now let's turn to the New Testament, which explains the glorious, shame-cleansing, heart-healing ministry of Jesus. The Scripture reflection reading today describes why he came and what he uniquely does for us through his death and resurrection. As Heather Nelson explains, "In place of shame, [Jesus] gives honor, beauty, joy, comfort, justice, favor, and freedom—what our hearts long for most when shame rules our emotions, thoughts, and desires."²¹

Sister, only through faith in Jesus can you truly be free from any shame you carry, whether it's due to your own sin or sin done against you by others, including your husband. The way we access Christ's healing and cleansing from shame is by faith in him alone, believing that through him and by union with him we are forgiven of sin, cleansed from unrighteousness, and kept safe in his mercy. All this is true, even as we painfully realize that, as Nelson writes,

His human image-bearers [will fail] us in a myriad of ways, and . . . you have also failed those around you. [Faith in Jesus] is filled with hope that freedom is possible because it is promised by this trustworthy One, guaranteed by the signature of a promise signed with his own blood. . . . It is very costly for Christ, but not for us. All it costs us is the humility of admitting we cannot cover our own shame. We receive honor; he took our shame. We are lavished with grace; he was stained with our sin. We receive salvation; he experienced damnation. Because Jesus was separated from the Father, we never will have to be.

²¹ Heather D. Nelson, *Unashamed: Healing From Our Brokenness and Finding Freedom From Shame* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 31.

“Indeed, *none* who wait for you [God] shall be put to shame” (Ps. 25:3). “None” except one, Jesus Christ, who bore our sin, guilt, and shame, that we might know forgiveness, redemption, and freedom.²²

These beautiful truths are good news for you *and* your husband. You are both holy, chosen, beloved saints if your faith is placed in Jesus alone (Col. 3:12). You are both sinners who continue to wrong God, each other, and other people (1 John 1:10), and sufferers who daily experience life in a broken, sin-filled world (John 16:33). Christ alone covers the guilt and shame of your husband’s sin. In addition, the shame of his sexual betrayal that you may have absorbed or owned has been fully taken care of by Jesus.

The cross of Christ represents the greatest suffering in history, for Jesus not only suffered physically but also experienced God’s just wrath in taking upon himself the sin of the world. . . . Jesus suffered also as he took on the shame of our sin, and at the same time despised it, he hated it on our behalf. In addition, his crucifixion, performed naked and in public, and inflicting prolonged pain on the victim, was intended to cause shame as well as death.²³

Why did Jesus do this? Hebrews 12:2 tell us that he kept his eye on the “joy that was set before him”—the throne of God where he now sits, waiting for the fulfillment of God’s purposes to bring his children to himself. Believers inherit this joy and so share in it now, even as we face shame, pain, loss, disappointment, and various trials. We can follow Christ’s example to scorn or despise shame that is no longer ours to bear!

4. The way out of shame is to look outside of ourselves to Jesus, “who has been both highly honored and deeply shamed.”²⁴ By faith we are associated with Jesus’s shame and honor. Read the following passages and note what you learn about how Christ’s death and resurrection dealt with shame.

- a. 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

²² Nelson, *Unashamed*, 32–33.

²³ David W. Chapman, study note on Hebrews 12:2, *ESV Study Bible*, 2383.

²⁴ Welch, *Shame Interrupted*, 108.

b. Hebrews 2:10–13

c. Hebrews 12:1–3

d. Write any summary thoughts you have about these passages. Did anything surprise you or give you new insight into your identity and worth in Christ? Explain your answers.

THREE VIEWS OF MARRIAGE

You may be thinking, *Okay, this sounds good, and it rings true in my head as truth from God's Word. But somehow, I can't unstick myself from the shame of what my husband has done or is doing. I want to believe that Christ takes away my shame, but it's so hard.* The experience of shame many wives feel after sexual betrayal is linked to their view of marriage, so digging into this concept can help you.

There are three prominent views of marriage that I've heard Christians describe over the years. Christ and two believing spouses are in the mix of all of them; the difference lies in the place each one occupies. Look at the chart, read the descriptions of each view, and then engage the question below.



Three-Legged Stool Marriage

Wife and husband love and trust each other and are aware of the Lord's presence in their marriage. Yet they see themselves and Christ as three equal partners, each doing their 33.3 percent of the work. Marriage is effectively self-dependent or spouse-dependent rather than Christ-dependent.



Spouse-Centered Marriage

Wife or husband and their marriage matter most. They effectively attempt to find life in their spouse rather than in Jesus, so their sense of identity and value is dependent on how their spouse and marriage are going.



Christ-Centered Marriage

Wife and husband are bound together through Jesus and are aware of their daily dependence upon him to love each other. Abiding in him individually and together, they share his life between them.

View 1: The Three-Legged Stool Marriage

The Three-Legged Stool Marriage welcomes Jesus in as the third leg holding up the marriage. The problem is that he's viewed as one of three equal partners: husband, wife, and Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus is to have the supremacy, or the first place (Col. 1:17), in all things. As Lord, he rules over all (which we saw in Session 4), and because he is God and exists to glorify and love

God, he refuses to be made less than he is. One of the consequences of the Three-Legged Stool Marriage is that the couple exists more in self-dependence than God-dependence. Even though the couple may sincerely desire to love and obey Christ, their identity and worth are based primarily on their efforts rather than on him.

Implications for you

If you depend on your best efforts to be a good wife and a faithful Christian, you'll most likely become exhausted, frustrated, discouraged, or self-righteous. Wives who are glad to have Jesus involved in their marriage yet rely on themselves to love, forgive, support, and serve their husband will discover quickly that they don't have what it takes. Your husband's failure to love you through minor oversights or grave sins will tempt you to blame him for ruining the balance of the three-legged stool—you're doing your part, so why can't he do his? And what about Jesus? Seems like perhaps he hasn't held up his "leg" of the stool either. When the stool collapses, a wife is in danger of feeling ashamed that the false security she had in her marriage has been exposed as unreliable and unrealistic.

View 2: The Spouse-Centered Marriage

The Spouse-Centered Marriage displaces Jesus as central in the relationship and demands that your spouse provide what we only have in Christ: unfailing love, identity, and value. Marriage is a gift, but it was never intended to displace the Giver. John 15:1–11 describes Jesus as the true vine in whom we are to abide. It's a common temptation in most marriages to instead attempt to make your spouse the vine, the source of life. But you and your husband are branches, bound together in marriage, who abide in Jesus together. We can rest in God's gracious patience with us when we, time and time again, crave creation (including people) more than our loving Creator.

Implications for you

If you place the burden of being a Jesus replacement on your husband and your marriage, you'll be deeply disappointed and perhaps even feel lost and anchorless when he fails you. A wife who has cultivated this view toward her marriage may experience a sense of shame when God helps her realize that she has been building her identity and worth on the wrong foundation. Often, God seems to use the heartbreak of sexual betrayal to awaken a wife to her need for him. He alone is always faithful. Husbands *are* commanded to love their wives, but even on his best days your husband's love is only a shadow of the love of Christ the eternal Bridegroom.

View 3: The Christ-Centered Marriage

The Christ-Centered Marriage happens as two spouses abide in Jesus and draw from him spiritual life, identity, worth, and power to live faithful lives of love and obedience. They are still sinners and sufferers, but their life together *in* Christ bears the fruit of Christ's life in their marriage. So, what about sexual sin? Either spouse can choose to turn from Christ, effectively

turning from their spouse as well. Remember the uniqueness of the marriage covenant that we addressed a few pages back? Whether it happens once or recurs over decades, sexual sin severely damages the union a couple shares in Jesus.

Implications for you

If you can humbly say, “Yes, I’ve sought to have a Christ-centered marriage, but my husband broke our covenant,” you’ve most likely not entirely escaped the experience of shame. However, one of the tremendous blessings of the gospel is that through your union with Jesus, even if your husband steps away, you remain “in Christ.” Your identity as one eternally loved, chosen, and holy has not changed. Because you are more “in Christ” than “in your husband,” shame doesn’t define you.²⁵ Because Christ bore the wrath of your husband’s sin on the cross, you don’t have to own it. These beautiful truths of our faith don’t eliminate heartbreak, profound pain, or heavy consequences—you know and feel that already. But you, sister, can look to the Lord Jesus and know his radiance covers and heals you, and where he is, shame cannot dwell (see Ps. 34:5).

In the beginning of my marriage, even though I was a follower of Christ, I functioned as though my husband was the lord of my life. When he was happy, I could be happy. When he was upset, I was upset. Moreover, I was desperate for his love and approval. When I discovered his struggle with lust, masturbation, pornography, and fantasy, I was broken. I felt worthless and ashamed that I was not enough for him. Thankfully, others helped me to move toward the Lord in this time. At first, I simply believed that Jesus would help fix my husband and we could get on with our lives. But the Lord is too good to let his children continue to worship false idols. He desired more for me (and for my husband).

I remember reading Job 13:15: “Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him.” I felt like the Lord was allowing me to die a slow and painful death of betrayal. I wondered what it meant for me to trust the Lord in the midst of such pain and suffering. Up to this point, my hope had been primarily for my husband to love me well. God was helping me put him in the right place as Lord of my life through incredible suffering and through the unknown, as I didn’t know if my marriage would survive. He invited me to move away from demanding things from him, like assurance that my husband would change, while he called me to move toward him in faith in the middle of many unknowns. I still suffered, but I suffered toward the Lord. I still asked questions, but I asked questions to the Lord. And instead of begging God to follow me and my way, I crawled up into his lap and turned my face toward him. Faith looks like that. Trusting God in the middle of the unknown. My hope could not be in my husband. My hope is safe in Christ alone. Today, my marriage still presents many unknowns, as any marriage does, but I increasingly cling to Jesus rather than to my husband.

—H.T.

²⁵ Paul Miller’s book *J-Curve: Rising and Dying with Jesus in Everyday Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019) helped me understand our union with Jesus. We can find safety in being “in Christ” rather than trying to live “in” anyone or anything else.

5. What are your thoughts in response to this section? Do you see yourself and your marriage according to one of the above views, or a combination? Explain your answer.

6. This session's title encourages you to find your identity and worth in Jesus alone. What have you learned that can help you grow in that direction? Are there ways you seem stuck in shame? Read the testimony below and then write a prayer to Jesus asking for his help to believe what he says about you, including how your husband's sin doesn't define you.

When I realized my layers of sin (which was a process that took about a year and a half), I wrote my husband an amends letter. I felt prompted to do this by the Holy Spirit, and I don't have any regrets. I had been holding onto so much shame over the way I handled so many things regarding his sexual sin. I realized I'd wasted so many years of my life letting his sin impact my relationship with God and everyone else, in addition to allowing myself to just exist, be depressed, isolate, and not live in reality. Writing the letter was a way for me to receive God's mercy, ask him for forgiveness, and ask my husband for forgiveness. I saw my husband cry for the first time about me and our marriage. The letter helped him to feel safe with me and was the first step in drawing us closer together.

—W.J.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read and work through Session 6. This session is an invitation to rest, remember, and reflect rather than pressing forward with new material. After Session 5, this is probably a welcome change!

Read Psalm 116 and then pray from it. The psalmist thanks God for his deliverance and personal care. As you enter a time of private prayer, notice what the psalmist says about love for God in response to his listening ear (vv. 1–2). Thank God that he is gracious, righteous, and merciful (v. 5). Can you speak to your own soul, instructing it to rest in the Lord (v. 7) and to remember how God has been generous to you? Notice the various ways that God delivered the psalmist (vv. 8–9) and ask God to help you in these ways. How can you express these things in your own words?

SESSION 6

Breathe

PAUSE IN THE JOURNEY TO REST,
REMEMBER, AND REFLECT

Breathe

PAUSE IN THE JOURNEY TO REST, REMEMBER, AND REFLECT

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Matthew 11:28–30 and Psalm 23

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

I. What promises in the Scripture readings stand out to you today?

2. Notice that as our Shepherd, the Lord *makes us* lay down in green pastures. Sheep need green, grassy fields to be nurtured and still water to be able to drink; they are fearful and easily agitated creatures! Write a prayer to the Lord expressing what you need for physical rest, emotional and mental strength, and spiritual nurture.

3. Verse 6 beautifully expresses the Lord's covenantal, never-changing love for us: it chases us down, pursuing us even as we may run from or dismiss him. Ask the Lord to show you evidence of his pursuing love in your life in the past and present.

Opening Thoughts

Earlier in our journey, our marriage counselor encouraged me to find some close sisters in the church to confide in so I could receive support and care while my husband was getting help. I tried . . . but after crying with me and praying for me the night I shared my story, none of those sisters ever spoke about it to me again. The issue was dropped like a hot potato, and I was left alone with my burden . . . afraid, and ashamed to ever bring it up again. (I don't blame them. They were embarrassed and didn't know how to help me.) But the Lord saw.

Nearly a decade later, I stumbled quite by happenstance into a workshop at a counseling conference where the topic was something about how to address the needs of family members of addicts. I didn't know any drug addicts so I was prepared to just daydream the seminar away and then meet my friends in the room next door for lunch. However, the speaker, a Harvest USA staff woman, began to describe my life!

She talked about how the addict's shame and the stigma of the addiction spills over like vomit onto all the innocent members of the addict's family. The family members are forced into their own shame and into lying and hiding the true nature of their home life with the addict, either to protect the reputation of their loved one or to avoid being rejected as unclean themselves by association! She also talked about how they suffer from loneliness and isolation as a result of their loved one's addictions, which can lead to feelings of shame, fear, guilt, anger, hatred, bitterness, and—if not helped—depression and despair. . . . All this through no fault of their own! I began to weep. Suddenly it hit me . . . I was married to a Porn Addict and I was suffering! No longer was I concerned about his problem. I needed help for me!

I remained after that seminar to connect with the speaker. I crumpled that day, but the Lord gathered me up and placed me into the arms of his servants who were equipped to help me. God specifically led me to that room, at that time, to hear those words . . . because he cares about me!

—B.B.

Sessions 1–5 have asked you to participate in a lot of hard work. Heart work is rarely easy, but when engaged in humbly with the Lord's help it's supremely worth it. Why? God has promised to complete the work he started in us (Phil. 1:6), which includes healing our hearts, growing us into spiritual maturity, and granting us wisdom. These tremendous gifts of faith are the fruit of growing in our relationship with God as we abide in Jesus and his Word (see John 15:1–5). Truly, apart from Jesus we cannot find healing, lasting comfort, or the courage and strength we need for life.

As B.B. wrote above, suffering has the power to isolate our energies as our thoughts, feelings, and physical selves become consumed with bearing up under crises. You may have been told by others that your priority right now is to focus everything you have on your husband's process of overcoming sin. Perhaps this is what you're telling yourself. You're exhausted and seeking to trust God as you sacrifice yourself so that your husband's sin struggle can be starved out. I know, you want to do whatever you can to contribute to his repentance, to help move your marriage forward. You struggle not to complain that there isn't time or energy for anything else.

Sister, yes, God does want you to invest in your husband's journey. The marriage vows you made testify to the high calling to love, serve, and help him sacrificially as a way to glorify Christ. However, God does not mandate that you neglect the nourishment your heart and mind need or the rest you must have for the road in front of you. Working out our salvation (Phil. 2:12) happens in tandem with the compassionate care of our gentle Shepherd who knows we also need green pastures to lie down in.

God knows we are finite, weak, dependent beings who must be refreshed regularly. He loves us so much he's given us the gift of Sabbath rest! We're commanded to take intentional time to abstain from the work required in this world and to trust him enough to sleep, pause, and play as we remember our good Father who cares for us more than anything else in creation. Session 6 is an invitation for you to pull into a rest stop. You can put aside your desire for progress and trust God to get you to his destination at the right time, in his way. He's carrying you, dear one, through each chapter of this book and each step of your journey. So let's pause, breathe in deeply, and receive his care.

IDEAS TO HELP YOU REMEMBER, REFLECT, AND REST

The following ideas and questions are yours to choose to do or not do. Truly, this week's session is meant to help you rest in ways that are helpful *to you*. Read over what follows as suggestions and choose what seems to be most helpful and doable. When you come together as a group, your leader will invite you to share what you chose to engage with and how it affected you.

- I. **Prayers for rest.** Read one or both of the following prayers, then pray them and journal any thoughts in response.

A Prayer for Enjoying the Sabbath Rest of the Gospel²⁶

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest. Heb. 4:1–3

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest. Heb. 4:9–11

Heavenly Father, [today] I rejoice in the magnificent paradox these Scriptures present: We're to strive to enter your rest. What a glorious irony—work hard to rest well, stay restless till we rest fully, work hard to cease working.

²⁶ Scotty Smith, "A Prayer for Enjoying the Sabbath Rest of the Gospel," *Heavenward*, May 25, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scotty-smith/a-prayer-for-enjoying-the-sabbath-rest-of-the-gospel/>. Used with permission.

Yet no real surprise, because the gospel contradicts the fundamental way I've been trained to approach every sphere of life—athletics, education, finances, career, and reputation.

"You deserve it, go earn it." "God helps those who help themselves." "You'll always get what's coming to you, so go get it." "You can do anything you set your mind to do." These mantras were drilled into me since I was a child, and they've failed me ever since.

But (hallelujah), because the gospel is true, I didn't get what's coming to me, Father. You gave that to Jesus at the cross. And in exchange, you've given me what I never could've deserved or earned: complete forgiveness, the righteousness of Jesus, and your permanent favor resting on me.

There's no greater rest than to know you are at peace with us—to be certain that you are resting and rejoicing over us in love. Our never-ending calling, now, is to hear and believe this gospel; and to respond accordingly. We now obey you because you love us—not to get you to love us, and O, the difference that makes. Hallelujah, many times over!

What a most liberating vocation you've given us. We serve you, not to get anything more, but simply more of you—to glorify you and enjoy you forever. O glorious Sabbath rest! So very Amen I pray, in your holy and grace-full name.

A Prayer for Remembering, Resting and Rejoicing in God's Prayers for Us²⁷

Therefore he (Jesus) is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf. Heb. 7:25 (NIV)

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Rom. 8:26 (ESV)

My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend. Job 16:20–21 (NIV)

Heavenly Father, as we think about the multiple ways you love and care for your children, few things create a deeper sigh of relief, sense of peace, and smile of joy than knowing the whole Trinity is praying for us.

Father, nothing, or no one, can sabotage your sovereignty, warp your will, divert your decrees for us, and your world. We don't have to get your attention, make a case, or convince you of anything. Your mercy and might are always fully engaged with us. We don't have to gussy up, buck up, or ramp up our spirituality when we come before you. As children with a loving Father, and real people with real tears, we come.

²⁷ Scotty Smith, "Remembering, Resting, and Rejoicing in God's Prayers for Us," *Heavenward*, August 26, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scotty-smith/remembering-resting-and-rejoicing-in-gods-prayers-for-us/>. Used with permission.

Lord Jesus, because you live forever to pray for us, we abandon ourselves to you. . . . We'd pray for ourselves what you pray for us, if we knew what you knew. Your hands aren't tied; your knowledge is perfect; your love is constant. Hallelujah!

And Holy Spirit, thank you for your nonstop praying inside of us, especially in the seasons when we don't know what to pray, or even have little desire to pray. As we cry out to God—with words of desperation or joy, or in the silence of our sadness and confusion, reshape our prayers as we wing them heavenward. Your groans trump our words.

Blessed and loving Triune God, thank you for being a God of constant care, measureless kindness, and unrelenting advocacy. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus' mercy-full and grace-full name.

- a. Your thoughts and reflections.

- b. Express to the Lord your desire for rest, or your fears and resistance toward slowing down. Ask your gentle Shepherd to help you lie down and to thirst for the refreshing living water of his presence and Word.

2. **Redemptive remembering.** In passages such as Psalm 63:5–7, 77:11–12, 105:5, and 143:5, God’s people are called to remember the Lord and his works of grace, salvation, help, and healing. Our ability to remember, to have memories, reflects our loving God who never forgets us! He knows we’re quick to forget as daily life preoccupies our minds. You’ve been working through many topics, memories, and experiences over the course of this workbook’s journey. Take some time now to slowly remember, asking for the Lord’s help to consider how he’s been showing himself to you. For example, you might be learning that the Lord

- is a comfort to you,
- is an ever-present Savior in the midst of trials,
- can use your suffering for good
- can help you understand your heart and the variety of emotions you have experienced.

3. **Purposeful review.** Take some time to review the reflective Scripture readings from Sessions 1–5.

- a. Did any of the passages resonate with you in a specific way? Perhaps some initially seemed bland or disconnected from your heart, but now you hear the words differently. Why is that?

- b. What other Scriptures have helped you, steadying your heart and thoughts? Are there other passages in God’s Word that have brought comfort to your pain?

4. **Purposeful physical rest *and* play.** It's amazing how God has created us uniquely, with different capacities and needs. What helps you feel physically energized? What brings emotional calm and peace in ways that help you draw closer to Christ? Here are a few examples that might help you:

- Go for a walk or run.
- Take a nap (or two or three).
- Visit somewhere that is refreshing to you like a park, coffee shop, ice cream shop, museum, flower garden, beach, mountain, lake, or even the nearest department store—but with no children along for the ride!
- Get a haircut, pedicure, manicure, or massage.
- Go watch a movie or attend a concert or athletic event.

- a. Review your ideas for self-care from Session I and note if you've been neglecting anything that would be wise to re-engage this week.

- b. What are two things you can do in the next few weeks by yourself or with a friend or your husband? These are not “fluff” activities—God cares about your physical and emotional well-being!

5. **Prayer and worship.** Your final invitation for this week is to have some focused prayer time, concentrating on yourself and your God. Maybe you're thinking, *Whoa . . . isn't this becoming a little too much about me?! I've planned something fun already. Surely it's now time to focus on my marriage, my husband's accountability needs, my children, and my other responsibilities.*

My experience over the years in walking with hurting wives has been that while, yes, preoccupation on “me, me, me” can and does happen, more often than not the most vital

exhortation for wives is that their hearts matter! Your husband's repentance, the healing of your marriage, your counseling appointments and finances and kid's needs are all worthy of your prayers. Yet God loves you and wants to pour out love, comfort, encouragement, and wisdom on you. Here are some prompts to get you started if you need help praying for yourself.

- a. What is troubling you today that you want to bring to Jesus?

- b. What emotions are especially difficult this week? If you need help, refer to the Wheel of Emotions on page 48. Nothing is too much for the Lord to handle! He loves you and wants to hear from you, regardless of how well you can articulate or name your feelings.

- c. For what can you thank and praise God? You may want to go back to Psalm 23 and Psalm 116 for ideas if you need help.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read and work through Session 7.

Read and pray the following prayer for yourself and the women in your group.

A Prayer for Sleep²⁸

Thou hast promised thy beloved sleep;
Give me restoring rest needful for
tomorrow's toil;
If dreams be mine,
let them not be tinged with evil.
Let thy Spirit make my time of repose
a blessed temple of his holy presence.
May my frequent lying down make me familiar
with death,
the bed I approach remind me of the grave,
the eyes I now close picture to me their
final closing.
Keep me always ready, waiting for admittance
to thy presence.
Weaken my attachment to earthly things.
May I hold life loosely in my hand,
knowing that I receive it on condition
of its surrender;
As pain and suffering betoken transitory health,
may I not shrink from a death that introduces me
to the freshness of eternal youth.
I retire this night in full assurance of one day
awaking with thee.
All glory for this precious hope,
for the gospel of grace,
for thine unspeakable gift of Jesus,
for the fellowship of the Trinity.
Withhold not thy mercies in the night season;
thy hand never wearies,
thy power needs no repose,
thine eye never sleeps.

²⁸ Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 298–99. Used with permission.

Help me when I helpless lie,
when my conscience accuses me of sin,
when my mind is harassed by foreboding
thoughts,
when my eyes are held awake by personal
anxieties.

Show thyself to me as the God of all grace,
love and power; thou hast a balm for every wound,
a solace for all anguish,
a remedy for every pain,
a peace for all disquietude.

Permit me to commit myself to thee
awake or asleep.

SESSION 7

How Could You?!

LEARN HOW SIN PATTERNS DEVELOP

How Could You?!

LEARN HOW SIN PATTERNS DEVELOP

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Jeremiah 17:5–10

⁵ Thus says the LORD:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man
and makes flesh his strength,
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

⁶ He is like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see any good come.
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?

¹⁰ “I the LORD search the heart
and test the mind,
to give every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of his deeds.”

1. Jeremiah's words were written in the context of God calling out the sin of his people. Note the two kinds of people described and anything that stands out to you.

2. God describes the human heart as deceitful, desperately sick, and difficult to understand. What do you want to say to God about the ways you've seen these heart conditions exposed in your husband? Have you seen these same qualities in your own heart?

3. Listen for the promises given for those who trust in the Lord. If you want, write a prayer to God asking for his help to believe these things.

Opening Thoughts

It has taken years, but little by little I'm better able to understand my husband's broken, abused past and how he's been both a sinner and a sufferer. We are so different in our reactions to pain and suffering. I reach out. He withdraws. I try to get close. He isolates. I realized one day that just like a wounded, abused animal would lash out at the one who was trying to genuinely help him, so my spouse could not distinguish between someone who would hurt him and someone who was committed to his good. Deepening my understanding of his past helped grow my compassion for him and my patience with this slow journey toward healing and change.

—C.C.

Many Christians enter into marriage without a biblical foundation for sex and sexuality. Premarital counseling may have addressed the importance of waiting until marriage to enjoy sexual intimacy, what to expect on the wedding night, and some of the differences between women and men when it comes to sex. Sadly, however, the heart behind sexual intimacy in marriage, as well as the beautiful reality that it's a signpost pointing beyond itself to Christ's relationship with his people, is often missing.

If you've been told that you just need to accept that pornography and lust are "what all men (including Christians) struggle with," I'm so sorry. If you've been counseled and perhaps mandated to fulfill your husband's sexual desires however, whenever, and wherever he deems best (regardless of how you feel), I'm heartbroken and angry on your behalf! This is not right, nor is it Christlike, biblical, or loving.²⁹

The Bible is clear that all of us are sinners in need of Jesus as Savior and Lord. But why do we sin in the specific ways we do? Have you struggled trying to understand why your husband is addicted to pornography or why deceit seems more natural to him than telling you the truth? Perhaps your husband's temptations lie in the realms of homosexuality or fantasies about being a woman. Why those struggles and not others? There is mystery in why our hearts lean in certain sinful directions, yet the Scriptures plainly identify the origin of all sin as the corrupt, idolatrous, sinful, and broken human heart.

The Bible describes people as sinners, sufferers, and saints.³⁰ We have all sinned against God and suffer in various ways due to sin's impact on the world. Believers in Christ, identified as saints

²⁹ If this topic is uncomfortable and unfamiliar to you, I encourage you to consider reading David White, *God, You and Sex: A Profound Mystery* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019). David White served with Harvest USA for 19 years.

³⁰ I'm indebted to Mike Emlet for these descriptions, which are true for every believer in Christ as explained in his excellent book *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021).

and beloved children who make up the people of God (see Eph. 1:15–23; 5:1–2), are enabled by the Spirit to resist and overcome sin. Yet we continue to give way to temptation and to pursue sin during this earthly life. This may not provide much comfort for you regarding your husband’s sexual sin, but understanding what Scripture teaches about these things is important. That’s what we’ll cover in this session.

Harvest USA developed the Tree Model to help explain a biblical view of why and how our patterns of behavior, including sinful ones, develop in our lives. It considers temptation and sin holistically:

Instead of believing that outward behavior is the main problem, the Scriptures tell us that all human activity comes from a person’s heart, the epicenter where one’s intellect, will, decision-making, emotions, and faith all converge. In Matthew 15:18–19, Jesus said this about the central place of the human heart: “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” Mapping our hearts onto a tree originates from Jesus’ words in Luke 6:43–45: “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Our goal with the Tree Model is to better understand ourselves, our sin, and how the gospel changes us.³¹

This model can give you wisdom to start piecing together the answers to your questions. *Why pornography, and why that kind of porn? Why did he pursue her and have an affair? How can he be attracted to men and at the same time say he loves me? How come I’m not enough as a woman who loves him and wants to be intimate with him?! I thought he loved Jesus. . . . I mean, he teaches Bible study every week; how could he have such a double life? What’s so difficult about turning away from things that are disgusting to me and offensive to God?*

Getting answers to these questions won’t take away all the pain, but it can help you. When we understand life through the truth of God’s Word, it steadies us with the hope that he alone can bring the transformation your husband needs—and the healing you need as well.

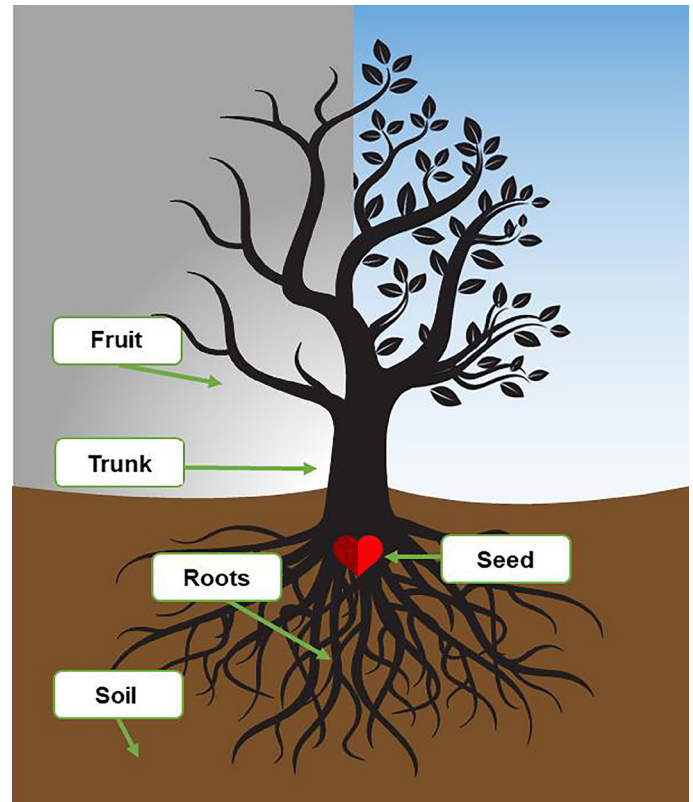
³¹ Mark Sanders and Jim Weidenhaar, *New Hope in Christ: Bringing Gospel Identity to Bear On Your Story* (Dresher, PA: Harvest USA, 2021), 5. This is our curriculum written for men like your husband who need help pursuing repentance from sexual sin. It can be downloaded for free at <https://harvestusa.org/discovery>.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

THE HARVEST USA TREE MODEL³²

My husband and I went to lots of counselors and tried so many things so that he could overcome his sexual addiction. He went to all kinds of support groups. While these were all helpful in one way or another, it wasn't until we started understanding the Tree Model that things really began to click and, more importantly, that my husband began to finally change and find freedom from his sin. It has been hopeful and healing for both of us to begin to understand the nature of our sinful human heart.

—A.K.



As mentioned earlier, the Tree Model unpacks a biblical view of how our behavioral patterns develop, either manifesting as good fruit through obedience and trust of God or bad fruit through disobedience. The following sections will explain the different components of the tree applied to how sexual sin (and any sin) develops. Let's begin with the most important aspect: the human heart, or the seed of the tree.

The Seed

When we address sins connected to sexuality and gender—or any sin, for that matter—we often start with behavior: what we should or shouldn't do, what we have been doing, what we can't seem to stop doing. Taking our cue from Jesus, we want to start with our hearts in this study. In our Tree Model, we begin at the tree's source of life: the seed, which represents our hearts. The heart, biblically speaking, is the core of who we are, the place of our truest commitments.

As Christians, our understanding of human nature should take into account our fall into sin through Adam and Eve. Since the transgression of our first parents, our hearts are not good, nor are they neutral; they are corrupted and sinful. The broadest category we use to describe the sinful inclination of our hearts is "autonomy." We desire self-rule rather than being ruled by the authority and care of God.

³² Harvest USA Tree Model © Harvest USA, 2022.

- I. Based on what you just read, how would you describe your husband's current heart condition? How is he seeking Christ in faith and dependence; how is his heart cold or resistant to submitting to Jesus?

The Soil

The soil is our life circumstances—the context in which the seed, or heart, grows and develops. The parents to whom we were born, our families, and our peers are all part of the soil. It's all the things those people do (or don't do) to or for us. It's our social and economic situation. It's everything that happens to us, good or bad. We are praised, abused, affirmed, attacked, protected, wounded. We experience trauma and suffering or we live in shelter and safety. Our bodies are healthy or unhealthy. Our brains are impacted for good through godly habits or for evil through habitual sinful patterns. Finally, as we learned in Session 3, we also live in a fallen world in which the enemy of our souls devises schemes against us to influence us away from faith and obedience to Christ.

We want to take seriously the influence of the soil on the growth of the tree. In trying to understand why you do or think a certain way, it is helpful to look honestly at the experiences that have shaped you. On the other hand, we must remember that the soil of the tree is *influential* but not *determinative*. The influence of experiences can be profound, but our fallen hearts are always interacting with the soil, interpreting and responding to both positive and negative experiences.

These are difficult truths to take in, especially if your husband has pursued sexual sin habitually and perhaps isn't willing or able to share sexual intimacy with you. However, even the brain can be retrained, rewired, and transformed through obedience to God and diligent steps to participate in God's redemption—his renewal of your husband from head to toe, and from his heart and outward to his behaviors.

2. What do you know about the significant influences in your husband's life from childhood until now? What suffering has he faced? What did he experience with peers, dating, and family relationships that seem to have influenced him for good or bad?

3. What questions do you have about your husband's childhood, teen years, singleness, or past sexual activity? Would you be willing to ask him about these things? If you're not ready for that step, could you begin to pray about it?

The Roots

The root system in the Tree Model represents one of the ways our hearts are always interacting with our circumstances: our desires. We were created to receive certain blessings and gifts from the gracious hand of our Creator. Security, significance, glory, affirmation, love, purpose, and control were given to us as image-bearers of God who ruled over creation. Our varied relationships were intended to be conduits of love, affirmation, affection, and intimacy as we "became fruitful and multiplied," according to God's blessing.

We still want all these blessings that were given or promised to us, but two things are now different. First, our sinful hearts want them on our own terms and we resist receiving God's blessings in his way, in his timing, according to his authority and design. Second, we don't live in Eden anymore! All the circumstances of our lives (the soil) are also tainted by sin, so our desires in any realm of life will be thwarted often, including good desires. People don't love us the

way we long for or the way we're created to be loved. Bosses and careers can't give us the soul-deep affirmation we desire. The good desires for safety, flourishing, and joy are disappointed frequently in a world where creation itself has not one inch untouched by the brokenness of sin. Our desires, or roots of the tree, are influenced daily through the world and circumstances in which we live. No one ever gets what they want all the time and we respond with our behaviors to attempt to control unmet desires and the pain that goes with them. Sexual sin, like all sin, is motivated by certain desires that we allow to control us.

4. At this point, what would you say are the desires that seem to rule your husband's heart (comfort, control, affirmation, respect, significance, etc.)? What is it that he wants the most? What does he most want to avoid?

The Trunk

Our hearts (the seed) interact with our context (soil) via desires (roots) and we begin to form patterns of thoughts and beliefs. We call these patterns the trunk because they continue to grow until they're strong and fixed. The trunk refers to our functional worldviews, our unspoken and largely unconscious set of beliefs and assumptions about God, the world around us, ourselves, and other people, which form the basis for our daily lives. These are not the doctrinal affirmations you would likely recite if asked to describe what you officially believe. Instead, this set of beliefs is reflected in the way you actually live. It's challenging to understand and admit these beliefs, but it's also essential to understanding your sin patterns and how to address them with the gospel. These beliefs form the framework through which our hearts' idolatrous desires are brought to fruition: we act, we sin, and the tree produces fruit.

5. What have you learned so far about your husband's *true* beliefs about God, family, himself, you, marriage, and sex?

6. How would you describe what your husband believes about stress, comfort, control, and personal significance?

The Fruit

Finally, we reach the fruit. It can be good or bad, Spirit-produced or self-produced. Our behavior is but a symptom of how the tree is functioning. If our heart is not changed by faith in Christ, then there's no way for the tree, or the whole person (soul and body), to walk in faith and growth that honors God.

You may have learned that your husband's sexual sin is attached to other sins such as unbelief, self-deception, lying, narcissism, manipulation, anger, or control. Any enslaving sin (addiction) requires other behaviors to support its existence; usually our sinful pursuits need "energy" and affirmation from other sins. We can all relate to this when we honestly assess our personal sinful pursuits. Compulsive spending, addictive eating, and alcoholism don't develop overnight or in isolation from other sins such as pride, selfishness, hiding, pain avoidance, and unbelief.

CHRIST CAN TRANSFORM EVERY TREE

One of the basic truths that shapes our understanding of the Tree Model is that no tree is unchangeable. God's redemption is sufficient for every part of who we are. When you hope in Christ, he renews your heart, and your entire tree is renewed over time as you engage in his process of transformation. The Bible promises us a new heart (Ezek. 36:26–27) and describes our new life as being “in Christ” (Rom. 8:1), “hidden with Christ” (Col. 3:3), and—using a tree metaphor—“grafted in” the tree of salvation (Rom. 11:17). There's a sense in which the new heart and new life that Christ gives are the beginning of an entirely new tree, but we need to recognize that even a redeemed seed, or heart, lives and grows alongside and in conflict with the old, fallen tree. In the gospel, our true and eternal identity is in Christ, but we still battle with the patterns and baggage of our old ways. In other words, Jesus does truly save and change us, but change occurs in the context of real life, with its conflicting desires and worldviews.

So when we work on our own lives or help someone like your husband with his, God is interested in our fruit—what we do and how we live. But to grow as believers, we must first deal with our hearts and address what continues to influence us. What the Bible describes as “putting on” and “putting off” (Eph. 4:22–23) needs to be applied not merely at the level of behavior, or fruit, but at every part of the tree.

Let's put all this together by applying it to a man named John. Read Appendix B at the back of the workbook then come back and answer the following questions.

7. To the degree that you're able to, write down what it might look like if your husband was to seek Christ's help and healing and engage the process of repentance and transformation with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind and strength (see Mark 12:30).
 - a. What would a Christ-transformed heart look like in his life?

- b. How would God take the influences which have unhelpfully shaped your husband and use them for his good to make him more like Jesus (see Rom. 8:28–29)?

c. What desires would increasingly control him?

d. How would his belief system grow more in alignment with God's truth?

e. Besides increasing freedom from sexual sin, what other godly fruit would you want to see bear out in his life?

You can now take what you wrote above and use it as guide to pray for your husband, from his heart (seed) up to his behaviors and choices (fruit). It might be helpful for you to choose Scriptures to tag on to each area. For example, you might pray Romans 12:1–2 and 1 Corinthians 2:16 for his beliefs and thought life: ask that he would willingly submit himself as a “living sacrifice . . . to God,” that his mind would be become more and more like the “mind of Christ” so that he would be transformed in accordance with the perfect will of God. If you need help finding verses, talk to your group leader and the other women in the group. You’re on the journey together!

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Can you commit to pray regularly for your husband's tree to be transformed? If you don't feel ready to do this, that's okay. God knows where you're at in this journey and will carry you along at his pace.

Read and work through Session 8. Our next session will guide you in taking what you've learned about the Tree Model and applying it to yourself.

SESSION 8

Your Tree

ASSESS HOW YOU ARE RESPONDING

Your Tree

ASSESS HOW YOU ARE RESPONDING

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Hebrews 12:1–3

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

1. You may have heard before that the Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint. You'll need the same mindset for the journey in front of you. How does this passage speak to you at this point in your marriage?

2. There are so many things that compete for the focus of our hearts, our “eyes of faith.” Is there anything you need to lay aside today?

3. “Consider him.” This may seem impossible, frustrating, or comforting to you today. Write a prayer expressing your honest feelings and thoughts to God.

Opening Thoughts

Shortly after our separation, I heard the words to a beautiful worship song, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, on me,” and I thought, *That’s a pretty song, but it’s for people like my husband, not me.* A few months later, while reading the Word, I came across a story I’d read a hundred times before. There were two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, praying in the temple. The Pharisee’s prayer was “Thank you, God, that I’m not like this tax collector.” But the tax collector’s prayer was one of true repentance: “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” Ouch! The Holy Spirit immediately put my proud heart in its place. For the first time I realized I was that Pharisee! Even if my only sin was thinking that I was better than my husband (and of course it is not), I was so guilty! I realized that Jesus came down harder on the Pharisees than anyone else, and my heart was just as proud as theirs!

—R.S.

When I married my husband I knew I had been codependent, but I didn’t really understand what that meant, nor had I spent much time doing the necessary work. I was a brand new believer when we married and I quickly made my husband my god. After discovery of my husband’s sexual sin, it took some time for me to examine my own heart and realize all the ways I had abandoned God, and really abandoned my marriage by abandoning God. I was so quick to point out all of my husband’s wrongs from the moment we married, but rarely recognized my own sins or lack of fruit of the Spirit. I realized I had been a hypocrite. As I leaned on God and reestablished a relationship with him, asking the Holy Spirit to show me my sin, I realized I had much less fruit of the Spirit than my own cheating husband. I eventually became grateful for my husband’s sexual sin and relieved to recognize and repent of my endless sins.

—W.J.

Last week we explored a biblical view of how sin develops and how Christ alone can change our tree to produce godliness. This week we want to take those same principles and apply them to your heart, actions, beliefs, and desires as a wife.

Scripture locates our heart as the origin of all our actions and thoughts. Ruled by self and sin, our hearts produce the rotten fruits of bitterness, rage, self-righteousness, self-loathing, and more. Ruled by Christ's loving and holy presence, our hearts are transformed so that more and more the fruits of the Spirit are evident in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal. 5:22–23). Understanding these pivotal truths can help you know why you're responding the way you are to your husband's sin and set you on a path toward personal transformation.

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!³³

³³ 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

Read Jeremiah 17:5–10 and Galatians 5:13–26 and answer the following questions.

1. In 1–2 paragraphs, how would you describe your life as a Christian? In what ways do you see yourself in the two Bible passages above?

2. Read these words from wives and answer the questions that follow.

As the months crept by after the discovery of my husband's ongoing struggle with pornography, I found myself slowly growing cold and numb. 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.

—B.J.

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.

—R.S.

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 he 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, 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 toward 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!

—B.B.

- a. What good fruit do you notice in these women’s responses?

- b. What bad fruit do you notice?

PERSONAL TREE EXERCISE

This week's session guides you to understand your tree in view of three phases of your life. First, you'll take time to consider the parts of your tree before you married your husband; second, you'll look at it after marriage; finally, you'll examine your tree in view of your life after you found out about your husband's sexual sin.

Wives who have worked through this exercise have said that while it was difficult and uncomfortable, it was helpful to them. It may seem frustrating and unfair to you: "Why should I have to look at my stuff when he's the one that blew our marriage up?!" Or, you may find this exercise hopeful and encouraging: "I'm mad and scared, yet I know I need help to understand why I'm responding the way I am.

Some of it makes sense, yet some of it has felt like craziness." Regardless, this session can help and encourage you.

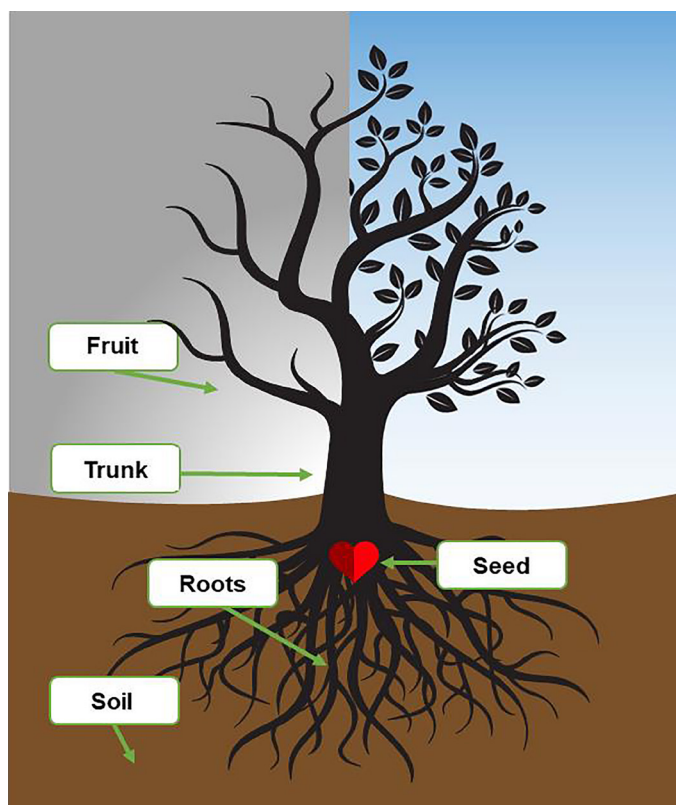
Remember what we discussed in Session 3 about suffering: God is at work behind the scenes. Rest assured, his main aim isn't *only* your husband's repentance process. You matter to him and he is pursuing your heart for healing and restoration! You can pray like David and honestly offer these words to God, trusting him to answer:

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

²⁴And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:23–24)

Before you go on to the next section, please read Appendix C which gives you an example of a wife's tree. This will help you get ready to engage some personal tree work!



3. Fill in the chart below to the best of your ability, but don't feel the need to add every possible detail. Pray and ask God to lead you as you remember and consider your journey. You might want to fill these out over three different time slots, giving yourself time to reflect and pray. If you have a trusted friend who has known you before and after you got married, it could be helpful to enlist their feedback as well, though you may feel vulnerable doing this. Remember that it's in being specifically known that we can be specifically *encouraged and helped!*

	PART I Life before marriage	PART II Married yet unaware of husband's sexual sin*	PART III After revelations of sin
SEED (heart) <i>Were you a Christian? How serious about your faith were you? How much of a priority was it, and is it, for you to know, love, and obey Jesus?</i>			
SOIL (shaping influences) <i>What events and circumstances of your life have shaped and are shaping you? Consider both blessings and sufferings.</i>			
ROOTS (controlling desires) <i>What did/do you want most of all?</i>			
TRUNK (functional beliefs) <i>What did/do you believe about God, yourself, men, marriage, sex, and life in general?</i>			
FRUIT (behaviors) <i>How did/do you display the fruit of the Spirit? What sin struggles did/do you have?</i>			

*If you knew about his sexual sin when you married, then combine Parts II and III.

4. What is the Lord showing you as the result of completing this exercise? Were you surprised by any differences or similarities in your tree across the various phases of your life?

5. Did you gain any insights about your responses to your husband (your fruit)? Were you able to connect any dots between your behavior and other parts of the tree? Are there any soil influences that have shaped your beliefs about your husband and how you are responding to his sexual sin?

6. Finally, take some time to envision your Christ-transformed tree.

- a. What would a Christ-transformed heart look like in your life?

- b. How could God strengthen and grow you through your experiences of suffering (painful soil influences), both past and present?

- c. What desires would increasingly control you?

- d. How would your belief system grow more in alignment with God's truth?

- e. What different kinds of fruit would you like to see bearing out of your heart? How would your behaviors and responses change?

Well done, sister! This hasn't been an easy session. It's difficult (yet so important) for us to honestly look at ourselves to discern what is and isn't lined up with God's best for our lives. You didn't cause your husband's sexual sin, but it has profoundly impacted you. Because you (like all spouses) entered marriage with your history of experiences, fulfilled desires as well as unmet ones, faith or unbelief, heart issues, and good and bad fruit, it's vital to understand the full context into which your suffering has landed.

Close group time in prayer, sharing any words of thanks you can offer to God for his work in your life, as well as any cries for help you may want to bring before him.

Homework

Read and work through Session 9.

Consider reading and praying the following prayer, “The Spirit’s Work,”³⁴ over the next week:

O GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT,

Thou who dost proceed from the Father
and the Son,
have mercy on me.

When thou didst first hover over chaos,
order came to birth,
beauty robed the world, fruitfulness sprang forth.

Move, I pray thee, upon my disordered heart;

Take away the infirmities of unruly desires
and hateful lusts;

Lift the mists and darkness of unbelief;

Brighten my soul with the pure light of truth;

Make it fragrant as the garden of paradise,
rich with every goodly fruit,
beautiful with heavenly grace,
radiant with rays of divine light.

Fulfil in me the glory of thy divine offices;

Be my comforter, light, guide, sanctifier;

Take of the things of Christ and show them
to my soul;

Through thee may I daily learn more of his love,
grace, compassion, faithfulness, beauty;

Lead me to the cross and show me his wounds,
the hateful nature of evil, the power of Satan;

May I there see my sins as
the nails that transfixed him,
the cords that bound him,
the thorns that tore him,
the sword that pierced him.

³⁴ Bennett, *Valley of Vision*, 56–57. Used with permission.

Help me to find in his death the reality
and immensity of his love.

Open for me the wondrous volumes of truth
in his, "It is finished."

Increase my faith in the clear knowledge of
atonement achieved, expiation completed,
satisfaction made, guilt done away,
my debt paid, my sins forgiven,
my person redeemed, my soul saved,
hell vanquished, heaven opened,
eternity made mine.

O Holy Spirit, deepen in me these saving lessons.

Write them upon my heart, that my walk be
sin-loathing, sin-fleeing, Christ-loving;

And suffer no devil's device to beguile
or deceive me.

SESSION 9

Forgiveness

UNDERSTAND WHAT IT INVOLVES

Forgiveness

UNDERSTAND WHAT IT INVOLVES

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Matthew 14:22–33

²²Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

²⁸And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

- I. This amazing story shows the fear of the disciples, even though they’d observed many of Jesus’s miracles before. How do you relate to their fear?

2. What encourages, comforts, or challenges you about this story?

3. Forgiving your husband may seem impossible, if not terrifying, to you. Like the disciples in a storm-tossed boat, it may seem difficult to recognize Jesus and his power as you contemplate this difficult topic. You may think you're being asked to walk on water. Write a prayer telling God how you feel as you begin this session.

Opening Thoughts

I had been taught that God expected me to immediately forgive whenever I was wronged. God graciously brought wise counselors into my life that helped me to better understand Jesus's heart toward me. I came to understand that God can not only handle my emotions but he actually wants me to pour them all out to him, just the way they are. Not all cleaned up and put together. No, he wants to hear everything that's going on inside my mind and heart!

I've found much relief coming to Jesus as my Judge, laying out my case before him, and then handing over to him the judgment of those who have hurt me. I can rest knowing that whether in this life or the next, God has promised to make all things right. I'm then free to forgive because Jesus, the Judge of all the earth, will do right.

—C.C.

It's been five years since learning of my husband's lifelong addiction to pornography and it's been a wearisome and cyclical journey of tears, anger, shame, bitterness, and self-doubt. But at the same time, and through the faithfulness of God, it has been one of healing and growth. I'm not the same woman I was before this journey began and for that I give thanks to God. Yet there remains a lack of trust which plagues the restoration of our marriage relationship. I struggle with blaming myself for my inability or maybe even unwillingness to allow myself to be "exposed" and vulnerable, both physically and emotionally, with someone I can't trust. I know within the grip of this addiction there may be times when he backslides and I've pleaded with him to be open when these times occur, knowing his honesty will lend itself greatly to the restoration of trust, but he continues to hide them from me as well as from his accountability partner. Why can't he understand? My heart is fragile and has been crushed each time I allow myself to believe trust has been rebuilt. He's not protecting my heart but leaving me to guard it myself. My deepest desire is to trust him again completely, wholeheartedly, and without reservation, and so we continue the journey, one step at a time, one day at a time, trusting in the One who is able to completely heal us both.

—S.B.

Notice from the title that this session aims to help you to *understand* a crucial component of the Christian life and, thus, your current marriage circumstances: forgiveness. I want to assure you I'm not going to rush you, as you may be thinking, *I'm not ready to even think about forgiving him!* This session will not ask you to forgive your husband *now*; nor will it imply that trusting your husband should or can happen immediately after you forgive him.

As important as forgiveness is, God alone can move in your heart to bring you to the place where you're willing and able to give it. He sees you, knows your circumstances, and stands with you: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Ps. 32:8). Forgiveness is a step of faith that all Christians are called to take when we are wronged. However, forgiveness *does not* equal a reconciled relationship.

God has raised his crucified Son from the dead, saved us from spiritual death, and transformed our identity from sin-slaves to loved, forgiven, treasured, chosen, and holy daughters. The ultimate offer of forgiveness and eternal reconciliation has happened for those who are in Christ. If he can do these things, surely he is able to gently shepherd us in the way we need to go when storms of sin, betrayal, pain, and confusion crash over us. Let's take one step at a time to understand what forgiveness involves and what this means for you.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

1. What have you believed or been told about forgiveness in regards to your marriage situation? How does your understanding reflect or differ from the following explanation?

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.³⁵

2. Let's look at some Bible passages that lay out a foundation of biblical forgiveness. You may also benefit from reading Appendix E, "More Thoughts On Biblical Forgiveness." Read the following and write underneath what you learn about forgiveness.

- a. Psalm 103:1–5

- b. Matthew 6:9–15

³⁵ Leslie Vernick, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 174.

c. Luke 23:32–35

d. Romans 12:19–21

e. Ephesians 1:3–10; 4:31–5:2

f. Colossians 1:13–14; 3:12–14

g. Write any new insights you gained from looking at these passages.

Forgiveness is costly! We remember and celebrate this each Easter, calling to mind Christ's sacrificial death for us: sinners, enemies, people who were lost and without hope in this world.

According to the Bible, forgiveness is extending undeserved grace to wrongdoers, which includes absorbing their debts against us. We read in the Scriptures, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13 NIV). God calls Christians to the highest standard of forgiveness imaginable: *his* standard!³⁶

³⁶ Hayley Satrom, *Forgiveness: Reflecting God's Mercy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 10.

The passages above are a small sampling of a common thread throughout Scripture's redemptive story: a loving Savior pursuing sinful and spiritually adulterous people because he wanted to share an eternal relationship with us. Jesus taught his disciples that the new way of faith he instituted would involve imitating his costly forgiveness of us in our relationships with each other. Even though it's counterintuitive to our self-righteous and self-protective tendencies (not to mention our desire for revenge), when we forgive those who sin against us *we're* set free. Bitterness and angry pain no longer have the power to harden our hearts.

UNPACKING FORGIVENESS AS YOU CONSIDER YOUR MARRIAGE SITUATION

Bible teacher and former pastor Tim Keller preached a powerful and practical sermon about forgiveness, unpacking three key ideas that provide a roadmap for any relationship broken by sin.³⁷ Take your time working through the content below, which is specifically applied to forgiving a husband who has been sexually unfaithful. If you have time, you may want to listen to his sermon, but this is not expected.

Identify with the wrongdoer

Forgiveness is difficult for so many reasons, including the need to die to self as we identify with Christ in his suffering (1 Pet. 4:12–13). Your husband has gravely wronged you and it's so much easier—and humanly natural—to make his sexual unfaithfulness the biggest thing that defines him, and glaring proof that you're in a radically different category as a person. *Don't hear what I'm not saying, sister*: this in no way minimizes the tragedy you're facing. But the Bible says we're all weak, prone to temptation, and desperate for his rescuing grace because of ongoing sin in our lives. Your husband's unfaithfulness and the sins that accompany it—lies, deceit, pride, idolatry of self—are ugly and dark. They're also redeemable, forgivable, and changeable *only* through Christ's lavish mercy and the Spirit's power to enable radical obedience. Isn't this what you need too, at the end of the day? "Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners."³⁸

³⁷ This section's main points rely heavily on a sermon from Tim Keller about forgiveness. Timothy Keller, "Forgiveness," July 9, 2021, *Gospel in Life*, podcast, <https://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/forgiveness-1625595675/>.

³⁸ Judith M. Gundry Volf and Miroslav Volf, *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging* (Trinity Press International, 1997). Quoted by Tim Keller in a sermon: Timothy Keller, "Forgiveness," *Gospel in Life*.

3. Have you been able to see any connections or similarities between your husband and yourself in regards to sin and your need for Christ's gracious love?

Inwardly pay your husband's debt

I know this is painful and perhaps infuriating to you. How could God ask you to pay for the wreckage your husband's sin has caused? His wrongdoing may have devastated your family, your heart, and perhaps your health, finances, reputation, and relationships with others. It seems so unfair and, on a human level, it is. Yet the "unfairness" of the gospel of Jesus recalibrates our hearts when we're trapped by thoughts of vengeance. As a Christ-follower united to him, you are called to extend costly forgiveness to your husband. Make no mistake, however, regardless of what you may have been told: this is a radical step of faith in which Jesus compassionately and mercifully is your steadfast companion. He knows the weight of what you're being asked to do.

What does it mean to "inwardly" pay the debt? First, we need to remember that this is supernatural, Spirit-empowered faith in action! Second, it involves facing the full scope of your husband's sin and the impact it's had on you. You effectively take the ugliness of his sin and the pain it has caused to Christ's cross, releasing your husband and his sin to Jesus. Even if you've not received a full disclosure of his sexual history up to the present (and other sins attached to it, such as deceit or hidden finances), you can still move through this process based on what you know now.³⁹ You are following in the steps of Jesus, who took on our sin and paid our debt so that we are forgiven.

Below are four commitments which provide a summary of what forgiveness includes.⁴⁰ Before you read them, it's important to emphasize that this is not a "jump to the recipe" kind of process! Have you ever looked at a cooking or baking recipe online? Most of these webpages include advertisements and the authors are beholden to embellish their recipes with long-winded,

³⁹ See Appendix D for an explanation of what a "full disclosure" entails and why it's a crucial step for the hope for restoration in any marriage.

⁴⁰ Points 1–3 are adapted from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, updated edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 207.

detailed explanations of each ingredient, or her personal feelings (!) about the recipe, or waxing eloquent about how delicious the outcome will be. All this is meant to somehow entice the reader to stay on the page and notice the ads. However, rather than reading through all the explanations, I always click, “jump to the recipe.” I don’t have time or interest to read the other information.

Painful and costly decisions like extending forgiveness can entice us to want to just “jump to the recipe”—in other words, to be given the step-by-step process so we can be done with it. However, sister, forgiveness can’t be walked through by merely following a short list of steps. Our hearts, emotions, and beliefs converge when we’re wronged and Jesus our Shepherd understands this. With that caveat, let’s look at four commitments of forgiveness. In the space below each one, write out any questions or thoughts you have in response.

1. **I will seek to not dwell on this.** With God’s help and the power of the Holy Spirit, I will choose to think on what is good, holy, and redemptive about my husband. I won’t rehearse his sins over and over (Phil. 4:4–8), and when I realize I’m doing so, I will cry out to God for help (Ps. 57:1–3).

2. **I will not weaponize my husband’s sin against him.** With God’s help, I won’t use my husband’s sin as a tool of power, manipulation, or revenge to harm him (James 3:13–18). With God’s help I also won’t avoid, deny, or stay silent about the effects of my husband’s sin on me.

3. **I will not talk sinfully to others about my husband's sin.** I will trust God, asking for his help and proactively seeking to guard my mouth from speaking in ways that demean or slander my husband. With God's help I'll seek out friends and wise counsel that will allow me to be honest about my situation and how I'm feeling and to receive the encouragement, comfort, and guidance I need (Ps. 39:1; Eph. 4:29; Heb. 10:23–25).

4. **I will depend on God to give me humility and courage to live out this forgiveness.** Enabled by the Holy Spirit, I will humbly and actively fight against any intrusions that will damage or erode what God is doing in him or me to rebuild marital trust, intimacy, and respect (Gal. 5:13–18). If necessary, I will courageously allow the consequences of ongoing sin and unrepentance to unfold. I understand this is not taking my forgiveness back but rather is an agreement with God to take sin, broken trust, and my well-being seriously.

Notice that forgiveness is *not* a one-time event that eliminates all pain, doubts, or temptation and sin in your heart toward your husband. It's a decision you make and then act on for the duration of your life; you'll continue to need God's grace, power, and strength to live out forgiveness. It also doesn't mean there aren't ongoing—perhaps lifelong—consequences of his sin, that your marriage has been restored, or that trust has been rebuilt. No, all those promises can be made alongside serious consequences (which we'll talk about in the next section). Forgiveness does not equal restoration or reconciliation, but it is a necessary step you'll need to take if your marriage *is* to be restored through the rebuilding of trust.

As mentioned earlier in this session, does this seem like you're being asked to walk on water? Rest assured that extending forgiveness after traumatic betrayal is not natural, but *supernatural*. To choose to be a conduit of God's gracious love in your circumstances is nothing short of a miracle. To decide to overcome evil with the good of the gospel, rather than being overcome by it, is a costly and beautiful way we identify with Jesus (see Rom. 12:21). Your marriage becomes an opportunity to depend on God to meet your real needs—which he does with himself!

4. What are your thoughts in response to the above? Where would you place yourself on the following spectrum? Explain your answers as best you can.

Can't imagine
myself ever being
ready to forgive



I've forgiven my
husband for what
he has disclosed to
me, and the pain it
has caused, and I'm
walking forward

Overcome evil with good

I believe that I have forgiven my husband, as the Bible calls us to forgive. In order to heal and move on, one has to forgive. I believe this is a process, though, so I wouldn't be surprised if I have to continue to work on this from time to time. It's been less than two years since the discovery of his sin—and several months ago he pursued sexual sin again—and I continue to learn that rebuilding trust is a work in progress, and probably will be for some time.

—W.J.

This idea expands on the biblical command to “not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). What might it involve to seek the well-being of your husband as you extend forgiveness to him? The list below is not exhaustive but will provide some ideas for you.

- Live out the commitments listed earlier as a way to promote Christ's glory in your husband's presence. By faith and in utter dependence upon God, you refuse to turn from your decision to forgive your husband and entrust him into the hands of God.

- Pray for him! You can pray for the transformation of his “tree”; for godly sorrow if he hasn’t exhibited this yet; for men to meet him with brotherly love, care, and truth-speaking; for a teachable and humble heart; for courage to face the depths of his heart’s fears, pain, sin, and confusion; for a new Christ-centered love to grow in his heart toward you and your family; for a growing appetite for God’s Word; for his sinful lusts to be put to death; and more.
- Seek to love the Lord with all of your being (your heart, mouth, and mind), so you can grow in loving your husband with your words, thoughts, and acts of kindness.
- Courageously allow the consequences of sin to unfold. Your husband (and perhaps others) might have told you that if you really loved and forgave him you shouldn’t impose consequences for his sin. But Leslie Vernick writes about the importance of boundaries and consequences:

The intent of [consequences] is not to be reactionary or punitive. Establishing consequences should be a well thought-out, prayed-out course of action based on specific wrongdoing. Consequences should be constructed in order to communicate to our spouse: *This kind of behavior or action is not acceptable, and I will not continue to act as if it does not matter if you do this.*⁴¹

Before you enact consequences, seek input from someone who is spiritually mature and understands the dynamics at play in sexual betrayal within marriage. Some possible consequences are sexual abstinence for a season, financial boundaries, limiting access to the internet and various forms of technology, or separation when sinful, destructive behaviors continue to be engaged in. Drastic action is necessary when any of the following are occurring: serial adultery, domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse, or addictions that severely impact your or your children’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being.⁴² Consequences communicate to the offender that their actions are serious and require grave reactions. Sometimes the pain of consequences can be a jolt to someone, waking them up to the seriousness of the situation.

⁴¹ Vernick, *How to Act Right*, 177.

⁴² Such action could include seeking immediate support from trusted church leaders, professional counselors, and possibly legal authorities.

5. How have you sought to overcome evil with good in your marriage situation?

WHAT ABOUT REBUILDING TRUST?

We've already made it clear that restoration and rebuilding trust are not the same as forgiveness, and they *never happen simultaneously*. Forgiveness is offered and then lived out over time.

Rebuilding trust is a process that requires both spouses to commit to active, sacrificial love for the duration of their marriage. They honor God and each other by walking faithfully and proving they're trustworthy. Some ways a husband can demonstrate trustworthiness include the following:

- Acknowledge his sin and seek Christ's help to overcome it, no matter what it will cost or how inconvenient it may be.
- Humbly ask others for help and cultivate relationships with mature Christian men to encourage and hold him accountable in his faith and obedience to Christ.
- Grow to understand more how his sin has impacted his wife and how he can love and proactively help her through her healing process.
- Patiently accept that rebuilding trust with his wife will take time and will require his ongoing repentance and a trajectory of increased dependence upon Christ.
- Humility, humility, humility. Most of the time you'll benefit from having someone to help you sort out the process of rebuilding trust: a pastor, counselor, or individual or couple you both trust and are willing to invite into your situation. After your trust has been broken so grievously, it can be complicated and confusing to discern on your own what you should expect. God is your counselor and he knows that restoration and rebuilding trust cannot be rushed, just as your husband's process of growth in Christ won't be quick or easy. This journey is long and most of the time it'll seem too slow. Continue to trust the most trustworthy One in your life as you press forward in your journey.

Appendix F, “Rebuilding Trust,” may benefit you as you contemplate this part of your journey, whether you’re in the midst of it now or holding out hope that God will bring your marriage to this point.

Close group time in prayer for each other based on the themes in this session and other needs you have.

Homework

Read and work through Session 10, our final session!

Consider going back to the Scripture reflection from Matthew 14. Review it and pray to the Lord about the process of forgiveness and restoration of trust.

Take some time to review Sessions 1–9, and come to the final meeting with highlights of what you’ve learned and how God has been at work in your heart.

SESSION 10

Hope

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

Hope

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

Scripture Reflection and Prayer: Mark 16:1–8

¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

- I. Can you envision Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome coming to the tomb, expecting their biggest problem to be finding someone to move the large stone between them and Jesus? How can you relate to this perception of their circumstances?

2. The angel reminds the women of what Jesus said and assures them that his words are trustworthy: “Just as he told you.” What promises of God do you need to remember in the days ahead?

3. We know from the other Gospel accounts and the book of Acts that these women did not stay afraid; they followed Jesus faithfully and courageously through the power of Christ’s Spirit within them. Write a prayer expressing to God what you need as you look toward to an unknown future.

Opening Thoughts

I have learned to trust God more through this process, a lot more. . . . I don’t think that I knew how to trust him prior. This gives me much-needed hope. I may not trust my husband yet, but I do trust God. My identity isn’t in my husband, but in Christ, and this gives me much peace and hope. I pray for obedience and authenticity every day. If I continue to try to please God, then I can grow so that whatever my husband chooses to do doesn’t have to make or break my day. I will be okay. I can’t control him, but only myself, and I choose to walk with the Lord and try to live as humbly and obediently as possible. If I can achieve this then I will have peace, no matter what happens.

I also realized my desire to please my husband at all costs was not what God wanted. God wants me to please him! This was such an awakening for me. I wasn't raised in a Christian home and didn't have Christian role models, but thought that by pleasing my husband and avoiding conflict I was pleasing God, but I wasn't. It just made me more and more codependent, angry, and bitter. Now I realize I have to detach with love and take any negative feelings I have to the cross before going to my husband, and the Holy Spirit will help me to disclose my negative feelings to my husband in a more godly way, in a kinder and more loving way, with a softer tone of voice and with better body language (no eye rolling or arms crossed).

—W.J.

I used to think hope was some kind of cautious optimism that Christians are supposed to have. Now I'm learning that hope is knowing and trusting that God's promises are true and that my hope is based on his trustworthiness rather than my optimism. I'm finding myself attracted to the idea of finding hope in God rather than in changed circumstances.

—W.C.

We've covered a lot of ground in this workbook and you've almost made it to the finish line! The end of this workbook is not, of course, the end of your journey. But I sincerely hope, as I wrote in the introduction, that you've been helped to take steps forward in personal healing, growth, and transformation.

So, now what? How should you proceed in view of the many questions that most likely remain in your mind, the unhealed places in your heart, and the uncertainty of what the future holds? Your husband may or may not be repentant; he may or may not be in a season of overcoming temptation. Your marriage may be on the healing path or it may feel stuck, broken, and even irreparable.

The wisdom you need and the hope that can carry you forward is accessed one way: committing to be centered in God and the truth of his Word. Do you believe this, sister, or does it seem simplistic and overly spiritual in the ground zero of your marriage situation? The truth is that our relationship with Christ is our only steadfast anchor in this life, and he is your hope for whatever lies ahead for you and your marriage. Vernick writes,

God created us for eternity and for a deep abiding fellowship with him. There is an ache in our soul that only God can fill. God designed our heart to worship; therefore, we will center our heart in those things or persons we deem most worthy of our love, attention, energy, and resources. To worship something is to value it above anything. . . . Whether we are intentional or not, we all center ourselves in what we worship. Our center defines us. It reveals who we are and what we live for. . . . Our center is where we go to find peace, happiness and refuge. It is what we anchor ourselves to in the midst of the storm. It becomes the rock, the belief we stand on, the hope we cling to.⁴³

43 Vernick, *How to Act Right*, 89.

You've seen that your husband and your marriage can't be your source of life or unfailing refuge. There's no easy way to say it: a spouse-centered marriage is bound to disappoint and cave under the pressures of life. All Christians need to learn the liberating (but often excruciating) truth that we're created to enjoy God's gifts but to be centered in him alone. We get to enjoy a deeply intimate and loving relationship with him through Jesus. Your marriage has been broken, but not every part of your life is broken. Christ remains your refuge, home, and steadfast companion, who will never break his promise to stay by your side, faithful to his Word.

Your marriage, even on its best days, remains a gift for this life. Hope grows as we look to the end of our story, when this earthly life is over and we're with Christ in heaven. The only place and time without betrayal, grief, loneliness, tears, fear, and broken relationships. Hope can and will grow as you cultivate a Christ-centered, faith-fueled realism for your future. This is our focus as we close out the journey of this workbook.

Questions for Study, Application, and Discussion

I. What fears do you have for the future?

2. Read the following quote and then write any new insights you gain about biblical hope.

The word “hope” in ordinary English vocabulary is generally distinguished from certainty. We would say, “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I hope it happens.” When you read the word “hope” in the Bible (like in 1 Peter 1:13—“set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ”), hope is not wishful thinking. It’s not “I don’t know if it’s going to happen, but I hope it happens.” That’s absolutely not what is meant by Christian hope. Christian hope is when God has promised that something is going to happen and you put your trust in that promise. Christian hope is a confidence that something will come to pass because God has promised it will come to pass.⁴⁴

3. Read the following passages and note what they say about the hope we can have while we navigate life on this earth.

a. Psalm 42

b. Psalm 119:49–50, 114

⁴⁴ John Piper, “What Is So Important About Christian Hope?” *Ask Pastor John*, podcast, March 7, 2008, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-so-important-about-christian-hope>.

c. Psalm 130:5–8

d. Romans 5:1–5; 15:13

e. 1 Peter 1:3–9, 13–15

4. We have a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Think about this! The worst blow this life can give to us, the death of our bodies, is actually the gateway into our final home with the Lord in heaven. Believing this truth transforms the way we experience painful suffering and griefs. The trials of this life will perish and fade one day, but our inheritance in Christ will not.

Write out a personal summary and application about hope based on what you learned from the passages above. How can you fight for (cultivate or seek after) hope as you honestly face your fears of the future as well as the current state of your marriage?

BE CENTERED ON JESUS

5. Our hope must be Christ-centered and anchored in the promises of God’s Word. Most of us have probably heard that taught, but we’re all tempted to be centered on other things that we desire or expect will make us feel good. We can be *self-centered*, giving way to the “you do you” mentality and living for ourselves at the expense of others. Or, instead of really loving people with Christ-centered motivation, we subtly cultivate an *others-centered* lifestyle that revolves around gaining the approval, affection, and appreciation of other people. But people can’t give us a true sense of worth or identity, only God can!

The Bible also has much to say about the object of our hope. It reminds us that, when it comes to hope, there are only two places to look. You can look to created things to satisfy the longings of your heart, or you can look to the Creator. It really is true that when it comes to fundamental, human hope, each of us looks either horizontally or vertically. The Bible warns us that if our hope disappoints us, it’s because our hope rests on the wrong object. There is only one place to look for hope that is secure, no matter what.

[Scripture] confronts us with the radical, life-reshaping truth that ultimately true, lasting, and secure hope is a person—the Lord Almighty. Hope—the kind that transforms your life, gives rest to your heart, and ignites new ways of living—is attached to him. Scripture repeatedly invites us, commands us, and implores us to hope in the Lord, and it gives us reason after reason to do so.⁴⁵

- a. What has God been teaching you about the benefits of keeping Christ central in your life, rather than yourself, your husband, or your marriage?

- b. What are practical ways you can fight to keep Christ central in your heart? What practices can you cultivate that will keep God’s Word in your heart and thoughts?

⁴⁵ Paul Tripp, “Every Other Hope Will Disappoint,” *Desiring God*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/every-other-hope-will-disappoint>.

FAITH-FUELED REALISM

6. We looked at Hebrews 12 earlier but let's consider it again. Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb. 12:1–3, NIV)

- a. To fight for Christ-centered, faith-fueled *realism*, it's crucial that you grow in your knowledge not only of God's promises but also of what distracts or hijacks your faith and dependence upon him. What distracts you from Jesus and from consistent study of and reflection upon God's Word? Be as specific as you can.

- b. What are one or two steps you can take in the coming week to throw these hindrances off?

Consider what Paul Tripp says about right expectations:

Scripture speaks to our expectations. It promises us that, when we hope in the Lord, we will not be disappointed. No, God won't submit to our time expectations, and he won't always deliver what we hope for in the way we expect, but he will always care for those who trust in him. He will give us everything he has promised us, and he will generously provide what is best for us. So, we wait with patient expectation, knowing that our hope is firm when we hope in the Lord. . . . God is not working to deliver to you your personal definition of happiness. If you're on that agenda page, you are going to be disappointed with God, and you are going to wonder if he loves you. God is after something better: your holiness—that is, the final completion of his redemptive work in you, which includes deep and abiding happiness in him.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Tripp, "Every Other Hope Will Disappoint."

What are faith-fueled, realistic expectations for your future, including your marriage? In many ways, Sessions 1–9 have laid out a map for you. Consider what you’ve learned about yourself, Christ’s promises for us (including that we will face trials in this life), marriage in this lifetime, and the way we change from the inside out (tree transformation). Based on God’s Word, what expectations can you have for the journey in front of you? What desires—which may be distinct from expectations—do you have for your future? For example, you may desire that your husband would grow into a place of deep emotional intimacy with you, or that the two of you would grow together so profoundly that you’d be able to minister to other couples. You pray and work toward these desires to the degree you can. However, you can expect God to faithfully keep “chasing” your husband down (see Ps. 23:6), to consistently be at work in him as he submits to the Lord. You can count on God to accomplish all his purposes for you (Ps. 138:8). As you submit to Jesus, he will lead you in the good works that have been fashioned for you (Eph. 2:10). You may have desires that are dependent on your husband’s walk of faith, yet expectations drawn from God’s Word are sure because he is faithful!

c. So, what are faith-fueled expectations you can count on for the future?

7. Finally, take some time to do a quick scan over the previous sessions. What stands out to you? What insights have you gained about the way you view your situation? What steps of faith is God calling you to take next in your journey? Consider two or three specific prayer needs you can share with your group.

Closing thoughts and prayer time as a group

One of the goals of this workbook is to help you find comfort in Christ. Read the following words from a historic creed of Christianity that express rich hope in God's comfort.

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.⁴⁷

We can have true comfort and stilled, quieted souls in the face of an uncertain future because of the certainty we have in Christ of eternal life. Our faithful Savior assures of his presence now and of an eternity in front of us that will have no tears, grief, or pain but will rather be abounding with purest joy restored. This, my sisters, is our steadfast hope.

In Session 3 we reflected on a hymn from the 1800s that is rich with biblical hope. Now, let's look at another hymn that provides comfort for our hearts presently and for the unknown future in front of us. Christ draws near to us in life and death with his presence, and that will never, ever change! Spend as much time as you need reflecting on the words of this song.

Be Still My Soul⁴⁸

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in ev'ry change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; your best, your heav'nly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul; your God will undertake
to guide the future as he has the past;
your hope, your confidence, let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.

⁴⁷ "What Is Your Only Comfort in Life and in Death?" from the Heidelberg Catechism, found online at <https://heidelbergblog.net/2021/01/what-is-your-only-comfort-in-life-and-in-death/>, accessed July 27, 2021.

⁴⁸ Catharina A. von Schlegel, "Be Still My Soul," trans. Jane L. Borthwick, *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 689.

Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he lived below.

Be still, my soul; when dearest friends depart
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then you will better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrows and your fears.
Be still, my soul; your Jesus can repay
from his own fullness all he takes away.

Be still, my soul; the hour is hast'ning on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still my soul; when change and tears are past,
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Sister, you have a future hope and his name is Jesus. For this reason you can have hope now, in the midst of your marriage situation. Seek him first and center your life around him, even as you go to counseling, take care of your children, wait on the Lord to answer prayers, and grieve the losses that may not be redeemed in this life. Christ assures his followers of our glorious future with him in heaven, enjoying the wedding feast of the Bridegroom and his bride the church. Remember this truth, and speak it over the fears and pain that remain in your heart. Because you are his, you can look out at the uncertain future of your remaining earthly days with realism; it won't be easy, but you won't be alone. The scars you carry may last for your lifetime, but they will be healed eventually. Now and forever you have a steadfast anchor in this life: Jesus the Lord to whom you belong—body and soul in life and in death—your Savior forevermore.

Take some time to pray for each other as you finish this workbook and the journey you've been on together.

APPENDIX A

Engaging Your Emotions

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Engaging Your Emotions

What does growth look like in our emotional lives? I hope you've clearly understood that it doesn't mean having it all together or never feeling hard things. You might gauge growth by how you've learned to face what you're feeling more quickly and to be honest with yourself, God, and trusted people. Another aspect of growth will be seen in turning toward Jesus more and more as your first choice, rather than turning to a friend or a sinful escape like excessive food, alcohol, social media, or shopping. None of these things are bad in and of themselves, but they can be pursued for bad reasons such as wanting to numb our pain. Be gentle with yourself as you self-assess. Remember your Lord is loving and gracious, not harsh or impatient, as you take steps toward him.

You know exactly why you feel certain emotions because of their connection to the profound betrayal of trust you've experienced. However, you've probably had other emotions wash over you all of a sudden—deep sadness, boiling anger, heavy shame, or paralyzing fear. It feels like it comes out of nowhere, but it *is* coming from somewhere. As mentioned in Session 4, many wives who face sexual betrayal exhibit symptoms of PTSD. You may need to meet with a trained counselor, a pastor, or another spiritual leader to help you address the layers of trauma you're facing.

A simple tool you may benefit from is the “I Felt, I Thought, I Did Diary.” It's a way to chart out various moments when you're aware of strong emotions emerging (or erupting!) in your heart. Charting out the progression of how you felt, what you thought, and how you responded can help you make connections between the three. Sometimes we're first aware of a thought and then the feeling that rises up because of it, so don't worry about which comes first. Awareness will help you to pray more specifically for yourself and to grow in wisdom to know how those emotions may get triggered. And keep in mind: there are no wrong answers, only real-deal issues to bring to Jesus at the throne of grace!

I Felt, I Thought, I Did Diary

Sample Diary

DATE

1/12/2022

WHAT HAPPENED?

What prompted the feeling (memory, interaction, dream, etc.)

John was late coming home again and hadn't texted me to tell me.

I FELT

What emotions are you aware of?

Freaked out! I was so angry.

I THOUGHT

What ideas came into your mind about yourself, your husband, your marriage, or the trigger event?

He's a jerk who only thinks about himself. I'm a fool to stay in this marriage when it's just the same thing over and over.

I DID

How did you respond? Did you turn to the Lord or somewhere else? Is this a pattern in your life that started before marriage? Before you knew about your husband's sin?

I let him have it and then stormed out of the house and went to the gym.

JESUS

Who is Jesus for you and what can he provide in this situation?

The only one I can trust.

WORD

What verses can you meditate on and pray about related to this situation in the coming week?

Psalm 142

DATE

1/13/2022

WHAT HAPPENED?

What prompted the feeling (memory, interaction, dream, etc.)

When I got home from the gym last night, John met me at the door. He apologized for not letting me know he'd be late. He'd forgotten to tell me that he had to stop at the pharmacy to pick up some meds.

I FELT

What emotions are you aware of?

Humbled but still angry and upset.
Sad that I'm triggered so easily.

I THOUGHT

What ideas came into your mind about yourself, your husband, your marriage, or the trigger event?

I'm weary of this journey...the triggers, pain, and fears. I just want it to be over. But I did remember this morning that John told me last week he needed to go by the pharmacy this week.

I DID

How did you respond? Did you turn to the Lord or somewhere else? Is this a pattern in your life that started before marriage? Before you knew about your husband's sin?

Just cried. I'm scared I'll never get out of this trigger/fear loop.

JESUS

Who is Jesus for you and what can he provide in this situation?

Need you to comfort me, Lord.

WORD

What verses can you meditate on and pray about related to this situation in the coming week?

Psalm 147:3

I Felt, I Thought, I Did Diary

DATE

WHAT HAPPENED?

What prompted the feeling (memory, interaction, dream, etc.)

I FELT

What emotions are you aware of?

I THOUGHT

What ideas came into your mind about yourself, your husband, your marriage, or the trigger event?

I DID

How did you respond? Did you turn to the Lord or somewhere else? Is this a pattern in your life that started before marriage? Before you knew about your husband's sin?

JESUS

Who is Jesus for you and what can he provide in this situation?

WORD

What verses can you meditate on and pray about related to this situation in the coming week?

DATE

WHAT HAPPENED?

What prompted the feeling (memory, interaction, dream, etc.)

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What emotions are you aware of?

I THOUGHT

What ideas came into your mind about yourself, your husband, your marriage, or the trigger event?

I DID

How did you respond? Did you turn to the Lord or somewhere else? Is this a pattern in your life that started before marriage? Before you knew about your husband's sin?

JESUS

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WORD

What verses can you meditate on and pray about related to this situation in the coming week?

APPENDIX B

Example of the Harvest USA Tree Model Applied to a Husband

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Example of the Harvest USA Tree Model Applied to a Husband

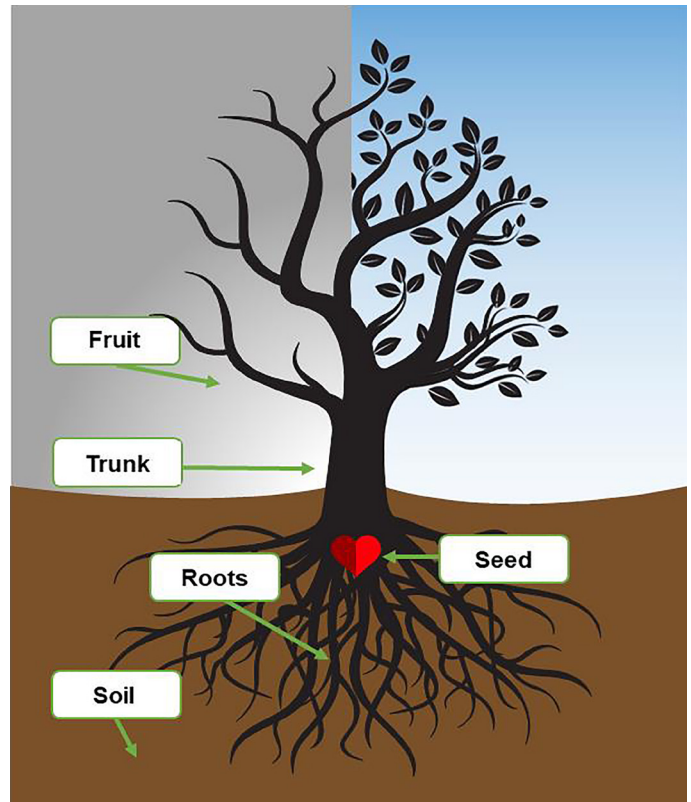
Introduction to John⁴⁹

To help us understand the various parts of the Tree Model, let's consider someone we'll call John. John is a husband and father in his early 30s. He has been struggling with pornography since he was about 10. Recently, his sin escalated to adultery with a prostitute. He is devastated, and his marriage and family are in danger of falling apart. He's come to your group for help because he has hit rock bottom. However, he feels little hope. He has tried to stop several times in the past, but, after a short season of resolve and self-discipline, his secret habits have always crept back and he has only fallen deeper into sin.

JOHN'S SOIL

John was born into a nominally Christian home but doesn't remember his family going to church when he was young. He's the oldest of six siblings. He remembers his dad as aloof and irresponsible. When he was nine, his father left his mother, and John never saw him again. His mom was overwhelmed and descended into alcoholism. John, as the oldest boy, fell into a leadership role in the family.

John was a physically attractive young man and proved mentally capable as well. He quickly became accustomed to calling the shots without being accountable to anyone—and receiving praise for the results. In his teens, he started his first business, which thrived and was followed by other successful ventures. Earlier this year, before his sin escalated, John began having sharp disagreements with his wife about schooling decisions for their children. She wanted to continue homeschooling, while he had his eye on a prestigious prep school. The kids themselves seem to be taking his wife's side.



⁴⁹ This Appendix is adapted from a Harvest USA resource for men: Sanders and Weidenaar, *New Hope in Christ*, 5–10. Available for free download at <https://harvestusa.org/discovery/>.

JOHN'S ROOTS

Typical heart desires understandably become quite important to someone with John's soil. He received a lot of affirmation from others; he could become addicted to that affirmation. He fell into a position of power at a very young age; this too can be intoxicating. His heart holds both of those desires, but his biggest desire is control, which stems from fear. He's terrified that everything around him will collapse into chaos and failure. People think he is a string of successes, but John fears he's always on the edge of disaster. He compulsively controls everything and everyone near him to keep failure from happening.

JOHN'S TRUNK

John has come to Christ and brings his family to church regularly. If you ask him what he believes, he can parrot some of the doctrinal statements he learned in membership class. Functionally, though, he has come to believe that the only things standing between stability and disastrous failure are his own efforts and decisions. It all depends on him. He believes that other people are threats—threats to his control and threats to feeling like a valuable human being.

When other people might try to tamper with his control or withhold their praise, the best he can do is maintain control so they won't burst his fragile, self-made sense of security and success.

John says he believes in God's sovereignty, but, in real life, God seems irrelevant to his challenges and decisions. He believes he's not accountable to anyone and that discussing his sin with others would ensure the personal disaster he fears.

Now his sin begins to make more sense. His wife, Ellie, represented one of his biggest personal successes. Ellie's affirming presence made John feel good about himself, but now she has begun pushing back on the schooling decision, which he unconsciously clings to as a measurement of his worldly success. He is losing control. Pornography and fantasy have always offered a safe world for him, a world in which he had total control, where he was worshiped without risk of failure. It's a world which reliably offered ever-increasing pleasure with almost no effort or work on his part.

Summary of John's Tree

SEED (HEART)

- John was born with a corrupt, dead heart, but now, through Spirit-wrought faith and union with Christ, he has a new heart that is alive to God.
- John's heart is new, but he still wrestles with remaining corruption and indwelling sin at the heart level.

SOIL (STRONG SHAPING INFLUENCES)

- John is the oldest of six siblings.
- His dad was aloof, irresponsible, and left the family forever when John was nine.
- His mom responded by turning to alcohol.
- John took a leadership role in the family at a young age.
- As a young man, he was physically attractive and smart.
- He became used to living autonomously, and he was even praised for his ability to be a self-made man.
- From his teenage years onward, he always succeeded in business ventures.
- His wife wants to homeschool their kids, but he wants them to go to a prep school. His children agree with his wife.

ROOTS (CONTROLLING DESIRES)

- John desires affirmation. He also got it as a kid, and his intention to send his kids to a prestigious prep school reveals his desire to be affirmed through his children's success.
- He desires power, something that has been an intoxicating experience.
- His fear of his world collapsing drives him to desire control above all else. The devastation of his father's abandonment and mother's alcoholism led him to compulsively seek to control everything in his life as a means of protection.

TRUNK (TRUE BELIEFS AND WORLDVIEW)

- "If I'm not in control, my world is going to fall apart."
- "Other people are threats to my control and my sense of value."
- "God is basically irrelevant to the challenges and decisions I face."
- "I don't need to be accountable to anyone."
- "Confessing my sins would ensure my doom."
- "My wife proves that I am a success."
- "Pornography and fantasy are the best way for me to feel safe, in control, and affirmed."

FRUIT (BEHAVIOR)

- John took responsibility for his family as a young child when his parents neglected them.
- He argues with his wife about their children's schooling.
- John regularly turns to pornography.
- He committed adultery with a prostitute.
- He is seeking help to repent of his sin.

APPENDIX C

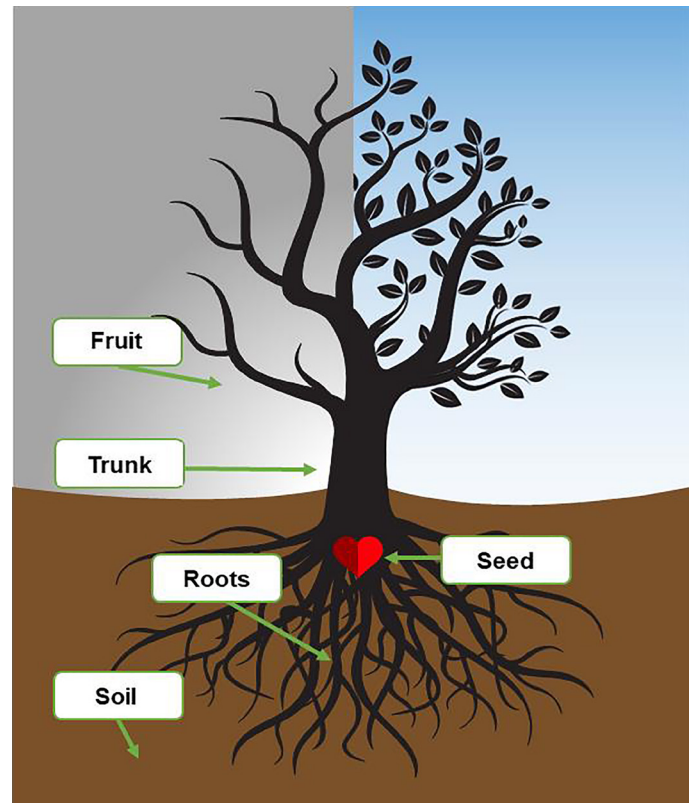
The Tree Model Applied to a Wife

APPENDIX C

The Tree Model Applied to a Wife

Introduction to John's wife Ellie

Ellie is 33 and has been married to John for 10 years. They started dating in college. He was her first love and he's the only man she's ever shared sexual intimacy with. Ellie was exposed to erotica books (sexually explicit) in high school when friends sent her online links, and from ages 16 to 18 she also created sexual fantasies in her mind. When she came to faith in Christ, she opened up to her mentor about this sin struggle and with regular encouragement, accountability, and practical help, she overcame this temptation and has been free of it since age 20. She told John about this when they began moving toward engagement and he shared, "I've looked at porn a few times too but it's never really been a struggle." The two of them never spoke about sexual issues again. She was devastated when she discovered John's internet history on his smartphone, and traumatized when she clicked on several porn sites that he frequented. When he confessed to his adultery with a prostitute, she doubled over, vomited, and began to weep. She's terrified that the gynecological issues that started recently are the result of a sexually transmitted disease. Ellie is scared and ashamed, and she feels completely disoriented with life.



ELLIE'S SOIL

Ellie grew up in a stable, non-religious family. She had everything she needed materially, yet close to zero emotional connection or affection with her parents or two brothers. They got along and lived conflict-free, superficial lives. Throughout her adolescence and teen years she longed to have a family of her own that would be characterized by relational closeness and spiritual depth: the very things John promised he would build with her. Ellie emphasized to John that more than wealth and having all the "shiny" things of life, she wanted real intimacy.

Ellie dated a few guys in high school but, she says, “No guy ever really pursued my heart until John.” John was the first guy to treat her with respect and to promise he would always love and honor her. When she was 17, she was pursued by an older girl and they began a brief secret relationship. Ellie felt a strong emotional connection with the girl, but when pressured to become sexually involved, Ellie got scared and ended it.

Ellie’s life isn’t perfect but she hasn’t faced anything she’d consider a serious trial. Life has flowed along fairly smoothly. Since becoming a Christian, she’s heard lots of teaching about the gift of marriage. Her pastor in college often mentioned that while marriage wasn’t more valuable than singleness, it was the life station through which God “completes” his people. He said that when a woman found a “good Christian man,” she had encountered one of the most significant gifts of the Christian life. John seemed to be that gift—or so she thought at age 21.

ELLIE’S ROOTS

Typical heart desires understandably become quite important to someone with Ellie’s soil. She longs for emotional intimacy and affection. In the early years of her marriage, she confided to friends that her sex life with John was “okay” but that snuggling with him and long talks into the night were her greatest joys. She never dared to tell John this but went along with sex whenever he wanted it. It became the primary way for her to feel that John still loved and wanted her.

Ellie’s affluent but relationally distanced upbringing cultivated a desire for simplicity in her. She’s thankful for their large home and grateful for how hard John has worked to get his businesses off the ground, but she carries a lot of resentment toward his addiction to busyness and always buying whatever is bigger and better.

ELLIE’S TRUNK

Ellie came into marriage expecting it to provide emotional intimacy, a 24/7 best friend, and a deeper walk with God (since marriage was “God’s best gift for any woman,” as her pastor had taught so often). She believed John without a question when he told her that he hadn’t struggled with pornography after they met and that he’d never cheat on her. She assumed (until John’s sin came out) that sexual sin wasn’t something that Christians struggle with, at least not in any kind of ongoing way.

Ellie has consistently read Scripture and sought out relationships with Christian women who would spur her on to love Jesus and to be a godly wife and mother. Though it was unconscious until John’s sin was exposed, she believed the Christian life would generally have a trajectory of greater joy, peace, and freedom from pain. She mapped this same belief onto her marriage. She assumed before they married that they’d have their differences now and then, but horrible

conflict? Mutual resentment? Sexual betrayal? No way! She didn't have a category for how those realities could be present in a Christian marriage. Her attitude was essentially, *If I submit to God and to John's spiritual leadership, and if John desires to love me as Christ loves his people, then shouldn't all be well?*

Summary of Ellie's Tree

SEED (HEART)

- Ellie was born with a corrupt, dead heart, but now, through Spirit-wrought faith and union with Christ, she has a new heart that is alive to God.
- Ellie's heart is new in Christ, and she deeply loves God, yet her faith in him has become rattled because he first allowed her to marry John and then let John keep his sin hidden for so long.

SOIL (STRONG SHAPING INFLUENCES)

- Ellie grew up in an affluent, stable family that co-existed comfortably with little relational connection.
- Ellie's first exposure to Christianity was in college through her roommate; her early faith was shaped significantly by the church she attended from age 18–22.
- John lied to Ellie about the nature of his pornography struggle and deceived her about his relationship with God. Ellie entered marriage assuming that John's heart was fully committed to Jesus and to honesty with her.
- Guys have generally been nice to her, but John was the first man she felt emotionally and sexually attracted to.
- She was taught consistently that Christian marriage, as God's gift, would meet all her emotional needs.
- Her years in pricey private schools taught her to disdain affluence for the sake of prestige or reputation.

ROOTS (CONTROLLING DESIRES)

- Ellie desires emotional intimacy and quality time with John and with her children.
- She longs to be John's #1 and to feel like she's the most beautiful, precious thing in his life.
- Ellie strongly craves comfort, simplicity, and a stress-free life.

TRUNK (TRUE BELIEFS AND WORLDVIEW)

- “I deserve a happy and fulfilling marriage. That’s what God wants all his children to experience, so of course I should have one too!”
- “John is a forthright, committed, and faithful husband. Men who cheat on their wives can’t be true Christians, right?!”
- “Marriage will complete me and meet all my needs.”
- “My husband is supposed to give me identity, purpose, and meaning in this life; if he fails, I’m worthless.”
- “Emotional pain is to be avoided at all costs.”

FRUIT (BEHAVIOR)

- Ellie is scared and disoriented with how she feels and thinks about her marriage.
- She has shut down with John and finds herself paralyzed when he brings up their marriage situation.
- She refuses to consider a private school option for the kids.
- She reached out to two women in her Bible study to ask for prayer about “some tough things I’m facing in my marriage,” though she didn’t share specifics.

APPENDIX D

Full Disclosure

WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT'S NECESSARY

APPENDIX D

Full Disclosure: What It Is and Why It's Necessary

What is a full disclosure about sexual unfaithfulness?

A full disclosure refers to the complete admission of a spouse's sexual history and the deception used to cover it up, including intentional lies, withholding of information, and manipulation of details to create a false narrative. This does *not* mean sharing every detail or facts that will imprint images in a spouse's mind (like thoughts, feelings, or sensations experienced during a particular sexual experience). A full disclosure allows two spouses to know the truth about their marriage situation and how the marriage vows were broken.

Disclosure is often referred to as a process rather than a one-time event, though that process begins with an initial full confession of sin, with no hiding or withholding of information. As new realizations come to the surface of the offending spouse's conscience, those facts are also brought into the light.

When and how should a full disclosure take place?

Ideally, a couple shares their sexual history with each other before engagement, in a conversation with appropriate boundaries.⁵⁰ Sadly, this doesn't always happen, and new sexual sin may be pursued after the wedding.

Here are several guiding principles about when and how to conduct a full disclosure conversation. Because of the intended audience of this workbook, I'll refer to the husband as the one who's been unfaithful (though of course it can happen the other way around).

- I. *An initial, planned, and prepared* for time for a husband to share the entire landscape of his sexual sin should take place as soon as possible. This requires:
 - The husband writing his confession out and ideally having it reviewed by a trustworthy friend, mentor, spiritual leader, or counselor. A review process ensures both that the husband is being honest and that he's not sharing details which may be unnecessarily traumatizing for his wife.

⁵⁰ For more on this topic, see a minibook I wrote: Ellen Dykas, *Your Dating Relationship and Your Sexual Past: How Much to Share* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019), available at <https://harvest-usa.myshopify.com/collections/minibooks/products/your-dating-relationship-and-your-sexual-past-how-much-to-share-minibook>.

- The wife having one or two trustworthy people who are available and equipped to support her after she hears the disclosure.
 - If desired, the husband and wife to each have one other person present for the initial full disclosure for the sake of accountability, care, and prayer. Some wives experience a comforting relief when they hear the full disclosure, as it answers painful, scary questions they may have had for years or decades. Many, however, will have their sense of reality rocked as an avalanche of lies and deception is revealed. The husband and marriage they thought they had don't actually exist. Having compassionate helpers to witness the disclosure is a tangible way that the body of Christ can bear each other's burdens.
 - The goal of confessing the full scope of the husband's sin and the deception involved. This is a key step of humble repentance on his part. Eventually, the wife will be called to forgive him, and without knowing how he has betrayed their marriage vows she can't do that wisely.
2. *The initial full disclosure is not a "one and done" event but a doorway into ongoing transparency and confession.* The idea here is *not* for a husband to choose (out of fear, pride, or control) to reveal only select pieces of his sin and allow the rest to trickle out slowly over time. The wounding, trust-destroying, heartbreaking impact of this approach on wives can't be overstated: "Marriages that are destroyed by [sexual sin] usually die 'the death of a thousand confessions.' . . . You are training [your wife] to mistrust and you will be tempted to use her mistrust as a reason to under-disclose in the future."⁵¹

Let's be clear that "ongoing confession" does not refer to rehearsing sins of the past or a husband needing to keep confessing and asking for forgiveness for what has already been confessed and forgiven! A humble-hearted husband will recognize that his wife may be triggered by remembering his past sins (especially by a return to these sins in the present). The Christ-centered response when this happens is to listen and seek to comfort her. However, to state it one more time: ongoing confession refers to honesty regarding sexual sin in the present.

If a couple commits to walking forward into a process of restoration, forgiveness, and rebuilding of trust, it will be necessary for them to learn how to navigate ongoing transparency, accountability, and confession of sin. This is one of the reasons why it's vital to have helpers walking alongside both the husband and the wife so that both are cared for and known.

⁵¹ Brad Hambrick, "5 Horrible Ways to Tell Your Wife About Your Porn Addiction," *Covenant Eyes* (blog), July 31, 2019, <https://www.covenanteyes.com/2016/02/23/5-horrible-ways-tell-wife-porn-addiction/>.

The path in front of this couple will require wisdom and humility. The majority of couples experience their spouse being on a different place in the timetable of healing, trust restoration, and forgiveness. Wives are often hurried along and expected to be in the same place as their husband emotionally, spiritually, sexually, and mentally. Once again, the devastation and shame this brings to a wife can't be overstated. Sadly, eager helpers can focus only on the husband's need to repent and grow, and in the process miss the pain of his wife. *Both* spouses need to be considered equally for true healing and restoration to happen!

Why are a full disclosure and ongoing confession important?

- God's Word commands it! Consider these passages about the call of the gospel to be people of integrity, to speak truthfully and not deceive, to humbly confess our sins and walk in the light, and to love others selflessly: Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; 1 John 1:5–10.
- God's design for marriage is the joining of two people in lifelong, oneness-of-life relationship centered on Jesus and fueled by the Holy Spirit. Spouses are called to know and love one another fully, which includes bearing each other's burdens of temptation and sin. To refuse *to be known* or to refuse *to know* erodes the marriage covenant, displacing dependency on Christ with self-preservation, which never leads to a loving relationship.
- Husbands and wives who treat full disclosure as a doorway into greater honesty with each other and dependency upon Jesus open themselves up for a new marriage based on God's mercy and full knowledge of each other—maybe for the first time in their relationship! They can experience a marriage “restart” with Christ now at the center, as they grow in mutually submitting to him and each other. This can bear out in trust-based intimacy that is spiritual, emotional, and physical.

APPENDIX E

**More Thoughts on
Biblical Forgiveness**

APPENDIX E

More Thoughts on Biblical Forgiveness

Throughout this workbook, we've looked at how our relationship with Christ is more than a good religious idea we adhere to, and more than doing the right things. *Christianity* is a relationship of eternal intimacy with God through Jesus Christ, secured for us by Jesus's costly sacrifice on the cross. He paid the debt of our sin, taking it on himself through death. All this—the gospel of grace through Jesus—is ours if we respond by faith and trust God's Word to be true.

Forgiveness and trust weave together to form the basis for our salvation. To the glory of God, we have access through his forgiveness to his holy presence. How do we receive this amazing gift? We receive it by faith, trusting that, as God's Word says, we are indeed desperate, lost, blind, and rebellious sinners with one hope: Jesus. The fruit of these supernatural realities working together in our souls and lives is what the Bible calls repentance. We repent initially unto salvation and then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we grow into a lifestyle of repentance for our sanctification. As Greg Gilbert explains,

Repenting of sin doesn't necessarily mean that you stop sinning—certainly not altogether, and often not in particular areas either. Christians are still fallen sinners even after God gives us new spiritual life, and we will continue to struggle with sin until we are glorified with Jesus (see, e.g., Gal. 5:17; 1 John 2:1). But even if repentance doesn't mean an immediate end to our sinning, it does mean that we will no longer live at peace with our sin. We will declare mortal war against it and dedicate ourselves to resisting it by God's power on every front in our lives. . . . Repentance is more fundamentally a matter of the heart's attitude toward sin than it is a mere change of behavior. Do we hate sin and war against it, or do we cherish it and defend it?⁵²

Forgiveness, trust, and repentance are not necessary only for our salvation but also for our "trees" to be transformed into Christlikeness (also known as our sanctification). Your marriage will only survive and flourish in a Christ-honoring way if your husband fully engages the holy war against sin (a lifestyle of faith and repentance), and then if you both commit to rebuild trust through fresh dedication to your marriage vows. Such commitment can only occur if costly forgiveness has happened. None of this is natural, and neither of you have it in you to take these "walking on the water" steps of faith. Yet, the miraculous gospel phrase "but God" interrupts

52 Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 81.

and disrupts! Your God and Father, the Savior Jesus, and the indwelling Spirit can do what we'd never dream possible. Consider God's miraculous work in these Bible passages:

²⁹And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰*But God raised him from the dead,* ³¹and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. (Acts 13:29–31)

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. *But God, being rich in mercy,* because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:1–10)

So much more could be shared about forgiveness. Let's close with two final ideas. First, forgiveness, as has already been mentioned, is a high calling from God for his people; at times it seems utterly impossible. Hayley Satrom writes,

Forgiveness is a part of what it means to pick up our cross and follow Jesus (see Matt. 16:24–25). There is nothing easy about that. To forgive the debts of those who sin against us requires nothing less than the miraculous Spirit of God working within us, transforming us to become more like Christ. We cannot forgive with our own strength.⁵³

Which leads to our second thought: God does not expect you to forgive in your own power, sister! He knows you cannot do it and this is why it's necessary for you to cry out to your Savior as you consider forgiving your husband today and in the future, when he'll fail you in one way or another.

God is at work in your painful, unwanted journey and he will prove himself faithful to you in the process of extending forgiveness. He is faithful and compassionate and he will surely do it. (See 1 Thess. 5:23–24; Heb. 4:14–16.)

⁵³ Satrom, *Forgiveness*, 11.

APPENDIX F

Rebuilding Trust

APPENDIX F

Rebuilding Trust

Rebuilding trust is a beautiful fruit of the gospel as husbands and wives turn together toward Christ and each other with humility, selfless love, and a commitment to sticking with this long process. Remember the only one who is 100 percent trustworthy is the Lord. Scripture calls us to trust only in him with all of our hearts (see Prov. 3:5–6). We should love and trust people, believing the best in them, yet place our ultimate trust in God.

Wives will need courage, faith, wisdom, and humility for this process. Courage because opening herself up makes her vulnerable to be hurt again and to face the possibility of her husband pursuing sexual sin again. True repentance doesn't eliminate her husband's sin nature, but it puts him on a trajectory of growth in resisting temptation and hating his sin more than he loves it. She'll need faith and wisdom to depend fully on the Lord, who is completely trustworthy. He'll counsel her as she walks forward not only in trust-building with her husband, but also in the transformation of her own "tree." Humility is crucial for both husband and wife, but for her, it involves submitting to the Lord's care for her over and over and opening herself up to the input of others. Asking for help can be uniquely hard when it comes from broken marriage dynamics. But the Lord has come for this brokenness and he's passionately committed to bringing wholeness and healing as his people submit to him.

What Helps Build Trust

For a Christ-centered couple, actions that build trust are those that promote Christ's glory, show love for the other, and communicate, *I want to do whatever it takes to be trustworthy*. Wives need to learn how to promote a trust-building dynamic with their husbands in regards to what helps him to confess sin to her, what promotes grace in his life, and what emboldens and energizes him for the battle. Reasonable and wise trust-building actions for a husband might include:

- He's willing to have accountability and filters on all his devices, or possibly to get rid of his devices altogether.
- He's committed to having two or three men in his life whom he will open up to and ask for help. He's willing for his wife to have access to these men to check in on those accountability relationships.
- He's willing to talk and pray about sexual intimacy with a commitment to listen so as to learn his wife's desires.

- He will cut off communication with any person with whom he's been emotionally and/or sexually unfaithful.
- He has agreed to listen to his wife when she's hurting, triggered, or afraid because of something he says or does. He's willing to learn what this experience has been like for his wife and to humbly do whatever it takes for her heart to heal.

True Repentance Builds Trust

Below I've included an excerpt from an article that illustrates what ungodly sorrow (disingenuous repentance) might sound like in a husband.⁵⁴ These words and behaviors tend to miss a wife's heart and erode trust.

"I know I'm not perfect. I've never pretended to be someone I'm not."

This confuses genuineness with righteousness, authenticity with holiness. By this standard, someone could be consistently hurtful, and we would still be to blame for their sin because we chose to be in relationship with them. But we would also be condemned as "unforgiving" for ending the relationship.

"You are bringing up stuff from the past."

This phrase communicates, "We can only talk about events, not patterns of behaviors."

Often this impasse is reached when the individual repenting is unwilling to see that the event (for instance, intoxication or belligerence) in question was part of a larger pattern (i.e., addiction or abusive speech). If there is a pattern of behavior and this pattern goes unacknowledged, then the other person is, in effect, demanding that we respond to every instance as the first occurrence.

"You know I am not the kind of person who would do that. . . . That is not what I meant."

This phrase communicates, "Your experience of me is not an accurate depiction of reality. My self-perception and intentions are truer than your experience."

These phrases leave the person repenting in charge of defining the event for which forgiveness is being sought. The intent or self-perception of the sinner is being imposed as a limit on the pain of the one sinned against. The result is that the offended person has less voice in describing their pain. The offending person remains in charge of the narrative.

⁵⁴ Brad Hambrick, "Forgiveness and Manipulative Repentance," *BradHambrick.com*, April 30, 2020, <http://bradhambrick.com/forgiveness15/>.

“I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me?”

This phrase communicates, “If anything more than my words (i.e., “I’m sorry”) are required in response to my actions, then you are being unforgiving, mean, weak, or hyper-emotional.”

Also, this response often implies that an apology should be met with an immediate sense of trust and equanimity in the relationship. Any lingering sense of mistrust by the offended person is then labeled as an unreasonable and ungodly form of punishment.

“There are a lot of people/couples who have it much worse than you/we do.”

This phrase communicates, “You should feel bad for complaining when the situation was not as bad as it could have been.”

This equates “could have been worse” with “not bad enough to mention.” It also portrays suffering as a competitive sport in which only those who suffer the worst merit sympathy for their hardship. This phrase often comes towards the end of an unhealthy repentance conversation.

Expressing Yourself

It can be hard to find the right words to express your emotions around the complicated process of building trust. Here are some common fears and hopes that wives in your situation express. They can help you to put words to what you’re feeling.

FEARS

- I’ve trusted before and he just broke it again. How can I be sure my heart won’t be crushed again by deceit and sin?
- I’m just so tired. I’m scared of moving down this path and discovering I’m too exhausted to continue.
- The years of his sin have been horrible but at least it’s become familiar to me. A restored marriage? Trust and open communication? A sex life that is . . . enjoyable? I just don’t have categories for these things and I’m scared of the unfamiliar terrain.

HOPES

- I know God is able to do what seems impossible in my mind. My hope is in him.
- They seem like baby steps to me, but the steps my husband is taking are in the right direction. I'm hopeful that he will keep moving forward with Christ's help and that our marriage might actually be different over the long haul.
- So many people have believed in our marriage when we haven't been able to. The hope of trustworthy friends is helping me see that God is at work. I can sense the changes in my own heart with a growing desire to love my husband.



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- Helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles
- Providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches

We are a donor-supported ministry, so the churches and individuals who partner with us make it possible for us to produce resources like *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey: Wives Finding Comfort After Sexual Betrayal* and provide direct ministry to individuals and families, free of charge.

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