

*T*reasure  
IN THE ASHES

*Our Journey Home from  
the Ruins of Sexual Abuse*

Sue Nicewander  
Maria Brookins



APPROVED RESOURCE



*Shepherd Press*  
*Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania*

*Treasure in the Ashes*

© 2018 by Sue Nicewander and Maria Brookins

ISBN:

Print: 978-1-63342-139-4

ePub: 978-1-63342-140-0

Kindle: 978-1-63342-141-7

Published by Shepherd Press

P.O. Box 24

Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania 18660

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage and retrieval system—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review, without written permission from the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics shown within Scripture passages indicate emphasis added.

Typesetting by JackofallTales.com

Cover Design by Andy Heckathorne · andyheckathorne.com

First Printing, 2018

Printed in the United States of America

B 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

81NALC9NIVRI

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

eBooks: [www.shepherdpress.com/ebooks](http://www.shepherdpress.com/ebooks)

## Dear Reader,

If your hands are trembling as you hold this book, we may share similar stories; we have been torn apart and tossed aside by lies and shame because of the sexual abuse we have suffered. Picking up this book may be one of the hardest things you have ever done. We are glad you have bravely come to join us here.

We are very sorry for your suffering. Someone has taken an intimate part of you that did not belong to them. God gave us our sexuality, not only to create children, but as a special way to express his desire for pure and beautiful unity and oneness to develop within a loving marriage. This intimate expression is meant to bond and unite two souls into one.

But being sexually abused, especially as a child, can bind us to lies and confuse our God-given design and desire for affection and love. This confusion stems from being manipulated and deceived into believing that this form of “affection” (the sexual abuse we suffered) is normal and okay. Before we could even begin to understand love, we were introduced to a very advanced and complicated distortion of it.

Are you feeling the rage? We are too! Sexual abuse can cause some of the most deeply destructive damage of any human experience and usually it is thoughtlessly overlooked. Our culture (including the church) has no idea what to do with us, so it remains painfully silent regarding matters of sexual abuse. This silence can hush even the boldest of souls and keep us locked away for years. The purpose of *Treasure in the Ashes* is to break the silence; to be the voice you’ve longed to hear and to equip you to begin your own journey home.

We write to you as fellow travelers, not as experts. We have sought long and hard after a God we weren’t always sure we could trust, shed thousands (probably millions) of tears, and have found over and over again, that no matter how gut-wrenching the fight, Jesus, our gentle Healer, is always faithful and always good (Genesis 50:20; 1 Corinthians 1:9). Thank you for being courageous, and for reaching out. We welcome you to *Treasure in the Ashes*.

With sincere love,  
Sue and Maria

**Sue Nicewander**, MABC, ACBC, BCC, has been counseling since 1994. She is founder and training coordinator of Biblical Counseling Ministries, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, and serves on the Council Board of the Biblical Counseling Coalition. Sue has her MA in biblical counseling from Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and is author of *Building a Church Counseling Ministry Without Killing the Pastor* and *Help! I Feel Ashamed*, and articles in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* and *Baptist Bulletin*. Sue and her late husband Jim were married for 43 years. The Nicewander family includes two beautiful married daughters and six delightful grandchildren.

**Maria Brookins** has a BS in Biblical Studies/Counseling from Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny, Iowa. She and her husband, Corey, have been serving together in ministry since 2004. They enjoy God's gift of a full and vibrant life with four fabulous boys and two crazy dogs.

# Contents

Welcome Letter		7
<b>Part I</b>	<b>WELCOME TO THE JOURNEY</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Part II</b>	<b>WHAT'S MY STORY?</b>	<b>19</b>
1	Our Journey	21
2	Surveying the Damage	30
3	Sharing My Story	37
4	After My Story's Been Told	45
<b>Part III</b>	<b>TO TRUST OR NOT TO TRUST</b>	<b>49</b>
5	Why Trust?	50
<b>Part IV</b>	<b>WHO IS GOD?</b>	<b>65</b>
6	Our View of God	66
7	Wrestling: The Character of God in Light of Hard Questions	74
8	Where Was God?	83
9	Resting: Finding Peace in God's Justice	93
10	The Gospel: Good News	104
<b>Part V</b>	<b>WHO IS JESUS?</b>	<b>111</b>
11	Coming to the Light	112
12	Jesus Is ...	117
13	Jesus Understands Our Suffering	130
14	Jesus Is Our Savior	135

<b>Part VI</b>	<b>WHO AM I?</b>	<b>143</b>
15	What Do I Really Want?	144
16	Self-Image	152
17	Embracing Our True Identity	165
<b>PART VII</b>	<b>WHO ARE YOU?</b>	<b>187</b>
18	Laying the Groundwork	188
19	Building Healthy Relationships	203
20	Relationship Foundations	210
21	Building on the Foundation Stones in Primary Impact Relationships: <b>Our Abuser</b>	225
22	Building on the Foundation Stones in Primary Impact Relationships: <b>Family</b>	236
23	Building on the Foundation Stones in Primary Impact Relationships: <b>Friends</b>	252
<b>Part VIII</b>	<b>WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?</b>	<b>265</b>
24	Looking Ahead in the Journey	266
<b>SUPPLEMENT: TRAINING TO BE A LEADING FRIEND</b>		<b>273</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>		
A	Choosing a Biblical Church	321
B	Suggestions for Group Study	327
C	Study Notes for A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23	329
D	New Life in Christ	331
E	God's Word to Those Who Suffer	335
F	Informing Powerful Emotions With Truth	343
G	Building Relationships With Believers and Unbelievers	353
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		<b>357</b>

## Part I

# WELCOME TO THE JOURNEY

# Welcome to the Journey

*Treasure in the Ashes* has been written because we are heartbroken by the number of women and men in our churches who suffer silently. For so many of us, the silence is deafening. Our hearts' desire is that *Treasure in the Ashes* will be a voice of hope for those who suffer (whom we call *learning friends*) and a means of equipping those who want to help (whom we call *leading friends*). This study is a way for local churches and Christian friendships to become places of refuge and healing as we learn to bear one another's burdens, not just emotionally, but purposefully.

We chose the subtitle *Our Journey Home from the Ruins of Sexual Abuse* for a few very special reasons.

- **Our:** We are walking together in unity and faith as God leads us (Psalm 133, Galatians 2:20, and Titus 2). We are not alone.
- **Journey:** Life is a process of learning and growing (Psalm 23). We are pilgrims here, called to fix our eyes on Jesus as we travel through this life (Philippians 3:20).
- **Home:** Home is a beautiful place of peace and safety in the presence of our good and merciful God, where we belong now and for all eternity (John 14:1–3, 23).

*Treasure in the Ashes* has been designed with the one-another relationships of the Bible in mind because we believe that hope and healing are found with God and his people. “Bear one another’s burdens,” Galatians 6:2 states, “and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Ecclesiastes 4:9 tells us that “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up [her] companion.... And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

## Catching a Vision of Hope

The vision of *Treasure in the Ashes* is for a leading friend and a learning friend to learn to walk together to and with Jesus to examine the experience of sexual abuse, to wrestle through the hard questions and doubts we have about God, ourselves, the world, and to learn to identify lies, accept and embrace truth, and to find real and powerful hope, "... that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous Light" (1 Peter 2:9).

### A Quick Overview

We have organized this study around six pivotal questions:

- **What's My Story?** *Exploring why our story matters*
- **Who Is God?** *Pursuing God in the context of sexual abuse*
- **Who Is Jesus?** *Discovering how Jesus makes all the difference*
- **Who Am I?** *Embracing our identity from God's perspective*
- **Who Are You?** *Building and maintaining healthy relationships*
- **Where Do We Go from Here?** *Finding meaning and hope in God's story of Redemption*

Working through these questions will help us identify destructive beliefs and lies and replace them with truth. The purpose of *Treasure in the Ashes* is to provide a biblical and Christ-centered framework to lean upon as we walk with Jesus and seek to heal from the devastating effects of sexual abuse.

Throughout this book there are places to fill in answers to questions. We recommend that you record additional thoughts in a private journal.

## Format

- **Intended use** – This study can be used for individual or group use, but the heart of *Treasure in the Ashes* is to facilitate one-on-one discipleship relationships.<sup>3</sup>
- **Pace-flexible** – This book is designed to allow a healthy pace for each reader. The process should not be rushed.
- **Interaction/Discussion** – Throughout this book we have included talking points and a treasure. The talking points are meant to help the reader interact personally with the text. The treasure is a summary of the main idea of the section.
- **Voice** – We take care to include ourselves (the authors) as part of the vast group of sexual abuse victims/survivors. The word “we” refers to that group more often than it will refer to us as your authors.
- **Stories** – Along the way, we will share from our personal experiences, as well as from the fictional stories of Dylan, Shanae, and Rayna, who represent a broader experience and response to sexual abuse.

“I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the LORD, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel.” —Isaiah 45:3

## Preparing For Our Journey

If you’ve ever gone backpacking in the mountains, you will know that there is no substitute for good planning. The proper gear, a trustworthy guide, and a good map are essential for a successful trip. As we begin to face the reality of the evil we have suffered and how it has impacted us, we must be well equipped and prepared for what lies ahead.

---

<sup>3</sup>The Group Study Appendix contains suggestions for facilitating a group study using this workbook.

This journey can be complicated, so we will simplify our preparation by studying four essentials:

- Honesty
- Scripture
- Church
- Leading friends

### ***Honesty***

Did God leave me? Where was he? Did he look away? Is he evil? Why did God create us knowing we would sin? If God really loves us, then how could he allow such horror? “Why do You stand afar off O LORD?” (Psalm 10:1).

Questions like these arise from a heart desperate for understanding and peace. But feeling abandoned by God, among a host of other emotions, can evoke anger and an unwillingness to listen to him. This unrest can cause us to demand an explanation as to how and why a good and loving God could have allowed our suffering.

When Jesus arrived four days after the death of Lazarus, Martha cried out, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). She didn’t try to cover up what she really felt. She was honest. It may seem irreverent to even consider being that bold with God. But he already knows how we feel and lovingly invites us to approach him anyway (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Being respectfully honest with God positions us to be challenged, strengthened, and embraced (Gen. 32:28). As we turn to Jesus with all our heart, we will discover as Martha did, that he was there with us, but not in the way we thought was best.

### ***Scripture***

It can be difficult to trust the Bible, especially when wrestling with unanswered questions, doubt, and unbelief, but we must decide to believe that God’s Word is trustworthy, right, and sufficient. Man’s

ideas and opinions are always changing and aren't fully dependable. Scripture is our only unchanging source of truth. No matter what we think or feel, we must fight the lie that Scripture is not enough (Ephesians 6:17). "Never doubt in the dark what you know to be true in the light" (Anonymous).

"The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times" (Psalm 12:6).

"He who heeds the word wisely will find good, and whoever trusts in the LORD, happy is he" (Proverbs 16:20).

### ***Church***

The traumatic effects of sexual abuse are far-reaching, making it crucial to invite and allow wise believers in Jesus to walk with us (Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:15-16). "And I pray that you being rooted and grounded in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ ... that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19 NIV).

### ***Leading Friends***

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). God intends for us to help one another, so this study is built for a two-person team of leading friend and learning friend. The qualities of both friends contribute to progress, so the ability to interact well is important. Consider that a good leading friend is trustworthy and will demonstrate qualities of faithfulness, knowledge of God, wisdom, kindness, gentleness, and patience. Healthy relationships with godly believers can be an essential element in the healing process (Titus 2).

### ***From Maria's Journal: Establishing Boundaries and Expectations***

In my experience (Maria), I found it very difficult to know what to expect from Sue. In my deepest points of grief, I felt

like a five-year-old and wanted her to function as a caring mother. But when I was doing well, I just wanted her to be my friend. I knew that my primary expectation should be in God (Psalm 62), but when I was angry with him and struggled to believe he was good, I found my emotions and affection for my friend to be complicated and exhausting.

We will talk more in depth about navigating relationships in Parts VI and VII, but for now, remind yourself over and over again that your leading friend is a companion, not a savior. Your friend has human limits. Though she desires to help you, she may tire and be unsure of how best to help. She may disappoint you, but don't give up or push her away. She, like you, is frail and desperate for Jesus. She cannot remove your sorrow or heal your wounds, but she will share her faith with you when you have none, and she will pray! Be patient with one another and make sure to place your hope and expectation in God. This relationship can be healthy and bring healing, but only when surrendered to the hands of our great Redeemer. "My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him. He *only* is my rock and my salvation" (Psalm 62:5–6).

### ***Committing to the Journey***

*Treasure in the Ashes* is intended to be a marvelous journey of faith. But like backpacking, it may not always feel marvelous; it may feel quite brutal. Dry and suffocating valleys, treacherous storms, and heavy bags of shame, anger, and fear can make even the bravest of souls consider retreat. But God, in all his amazing love, is faithful to walk with us one step at a time. He will never take us anywhere he isn't willing to go.

Life in a fallen world can be messy and difficult, so learning to "fail and recover" is part of the process. Facing the reality of our suffering and the sins we have committed is painful but extremely necessary.

When we allow God access to the hidden places in our hearts, he carefully redeems truth for lies, hope for despair, and faith for unbelief.

Please care for your physical and spiritual needs on this pilgrimage. As you journey home, our prayer is that you will discover Jesus to be

light in your darkness, comfort in your sorrow, treasure in your loss, a friend in your loneliness, and hope in your despair. “For He Himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14).

The LORD upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look expectantly to You [the Lord], and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works. The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them. He preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy. My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever. —Psalm 145:14–21

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect [mature], establish [firmly stabilize], strengthen, and settle you.  
—1 Peter 5:10

## Part II

# WHAT'S MY STORY?

## The Cracked Pot

A water bearer in India had two large pots, one hung on each end of a pole, which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it. While the other pot was perfect, and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the mistress's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to her master's house. The perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfections, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream: "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your mistress's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in her compassion she said, "As we return to the mistress's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some.

But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my mistress's table. Without you being just the way you are, she would not have this beauty to grace her house."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Shaun Patterson, *The Little Cracked Pot* (Ontario: Big Fox Creative Technologies.com, 2013) <http://amazing-womenrock.com/the-story-of-the-cracked-pot-for-anyone-whos-not-quite-perfect> . .

# Chapter 1

## Our Journey

### *From Maria's Journal: Choosing to Forget*

In high school, after being confronted by a Christian friend for being too “needy,” I decided that I should just “forget those things which are behind” (Philippians 3:13). Having heard this verse used in this way, I thought forgetting my past was the spiritual thing to do.

For seventeen years, I tried to forget. And for several of the less stressful years, I did a fine job. But when life became overwhelming, forgetting became impossible.

If you looked at my life from the outside, you might have thought I had it all. God had blessed me with a cuter-than-Brad Pitt husband and four healthy baby boys. I am athletic, musical, and most people think I’m sweet. But my story (and maybe yours, too?) was hidden deep beneath the surface of my “she-has-it-all” life. Even with all my blessings, I ached with a deep longing for some kind of redemption. I wanted my life and my suffering to matter. As hard as I tried, forgetting my past never worked. I ended up feeling like everything I suffered was wasted.

After a miscarriage and a crushing physical diagnosis, I began to question God. I was angry. The pain from all my forgotten experiences overwhelmed me. Forgetting was no longer an option, but remembering seemed unbearable. I never wanted to share my story because I knew how “needy” I had become. I was afraid I’d begin to cry and never stop. I felt like a failure in the eyes of God.

But because God is kind, he began to teach me that the forgetting of Philippians 3 was not a command to forget the

pain in my life. God never wanted me to forget my past. He actually wanted me to choose to remember it, so he could redeem it!<sup>3</sup> But I had to be willing to break the silence.

## What Is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse has been defined as *“any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.”*<sup>4</sup>

The spectrum of sexual abuse is broad and our responses differ widely. We may not consider our suffering to be significant. On the other hand, we might be overwhelmed by the magnitude of our experiences. Either way, this truth remains: any form of sexual contact outside of marriage—wanted or unwanted—is destructive and needs to be addressed.

Unlike physical abuse, sexual abuse may leave no visible wounds, but it can cause untold damage to the soul. Children who have been abused have no idea how to handle what has happened to them, and most cannot process the trauma until well into adulthood. Dealing with the consequences of being sexually abused is a process, even after the abuse stops.

## Where to Begin?

God has been kind to give the two of us the rich experience of sharing our own journey as we have learned to walk together in friendship. We, like you, have suffered deeply because of the abuse we have experienced. You are not alone. Let’s begin our journey together by finding our voices.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

---

<sup>3</sup> See “Lord, Do I Need to Remember?” in Journal tab at [www.strugglingwell2gether.weebly.com](http://www.strugglingwell2gether.weebly.com).

<sup>4</sup> Justin S. and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Rid of My Disgrace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 28..

## Sue's Story

I was five years old when a high school boy offered to help me move a heavy bucket of sand into my sandbox. As I stood with a friend at the ledge, panting from exertion, she whispered, "My mom told me to stay away from that guy." I shrugged off her words because the pail was heavy and I wanted help. My friend ran away, and the teen easily lifted the bucket into the box. Smiling, he turned to me and suggested we walk to the garage. There he molested me. If my mother had not called me home for supper, I am certain now that he would have raped me. Then, I was clueless as to what was going on. I only knew I didn't like being touched like that.

When I went home, my mom asked what I had been doing, and I simply told her. My parents were appropriately alarmed and immediately called the police. I was asked to identify the boy from a high school yearbook, then to point him out in the hallway at school. I was not scared; it all seemed puzzling to my five-year-old mind. And then it was over. No one spoke of it again. It wasn't until many years later when I was summoned for jury duty in a rape case that I even thought of my experience in the garage.

My story is not as awful as some, so I seldom see the need to tell it. We aren't often given a window into God's reasons for what he allows. But now many years later, as a biblical counselor, I clearly see that God was preparing me to reach out with compassion to Maria and others (perhaps to you?) who suffer long in agony because of a painful past.

## Maria's Story

Childhood? What childhood? I felt like someone took mine and tossed it aside. There was a lot of love in my family but also a lot of pain. Divorce, abuse, and unbelief clouded my view of Jesus. We knew about him and some of us had even been saved, but our lives seemed so different from the people at church. It was hard to bridge the gap between life and God. He didn't seem very big.

I was three or four years old the first time I began to be sexually abused. My memories are sketchy, but I do remember being held down on a blue, damp, smelly rug, and finding it very difficult to breathe.

During many of the summers of my childhood, I was abused by a much older boy in the neighborhood. He was mean and rough, and found it entertaining to see how far he could push me or how willing I was to accept his advances. At first I liked the attention he gave to me, but eventually I became very afraid of him. I was probably about seven the first time I told my parents. They called the police twice during those years; the second time he was questioned, the abuse stopped.

My response to the abuse I suffered was not good. During my elementary years, I willingly participated in sexual exploration with kids from my neighborhood. Even our fun and innocent adventures included a game of truth or dare. By the time I was eight years old, my soul was full of shame.

But the most destructive abuse occurred during the summer before sixth grade. I met a man and his daughter while playing at the beach. We had a lot of fun together that day and became fast friends. One day, while playing at their house, he said that he had a movie for us to watch. We cuddled up on the bed and started the video, which at first seemed boring and odd. Then the content turned unexpectedly sexual and was uncomfortable to watch, but shamefully, I found it physically exciting. He offered us a special drink. I asked him what it was and he said brandy. I was eleven. He undressed in front of us and told us he'd pay us each five dollars if we would pleasure him. I remember laughing and feeling scared, but I hesitantly did what he asked. He gave us the money and when my mom asked where I got it, I told her we did some chores for him.

On another occasion, while I was spending the night with his daughter, he got into bed with us. He moved close to me and began to touch me. He started to fondle me and I became very afraid. I believe God gave me the insight to know that I was in danger. This man was preparing me for intercourse and that, I knew, was wrong. I reacted with fear and disgust and told him to stop. He did.

The morning after that incident was very uncomfortable and I told him to take me home. He yelled at me and said what had happened wasn't a big deal. When we got to my house, I ran inside and told my parents. The man spent two years in jail for his crimes against his daughter and me.

Jesus saved me when I was nine and I believe he began to do his healing and sanctifying work in my heart, but I had no clue what it meant to follow him. I continued to make horrible choices. When I was fifteen, I chose to have sex with a boy from the neighborhood. Immediately afterward, I felt deep loss, and the guilt and shame overwhelmed me. My heart was broken. I fell on my knees and begged God to help me. I began to realize that I needed Jesus to save me, not only from my sin, but also from myself. I knew I would ruin everything good he had for me if I didn't submit to him.

This turning point was good in a lot of ways. I ended up immersed in Scripture and church and eventually found myself at a Bible college. I married a pastor, and we looked forward to a promising future. I turned my back on my past and figured that God had allowed it to make me more compassionate. But I had no idea how deeply my soul had been affected by the abuses I suffered.

Because God is kind, he did not allow me to continue to live in denial. He took me deep into the valley of brokenness, and I am so very glad he did. He has begun to slowly and gently heal my heart as he teaches me about the power of the Cross and the value of deep and meaningful relationships.

Throughout my journey, I have struggled to believe that God is good and even wondered if he loved me. But he knew that I would struggle, and has given me the freedom to cry and to ask my tough questions. I am learning to trust him, even when I don't get the answers I want. He is becoming my answer, and as I rest in who he is, my "whys" become less important.

This journey can be really hard. Even today, it's hard. But the gifts I have received from the hands of God have become invaluable. I am glad that you have begun the journey too. I am praying for you, that you would see that God is truly good, and that he really does love you. A clearer view of Jesus will soften the ache in your heart and the sorrow in your soul. Seeing that our stories are part of God's grand story of redemption brings purpose and meaning to everything we have suffered.

## Our Journey Together

### *Sue*

Maria got to know me very carefully. She seemed shy and uncertain of herself, but once her story came out I realized that she was uncertain of me.

At first, we weren't sure we liked each other, being from different walks of life and different generations. She was my pastor's wife, which colored the nature of our friendship somewhat. So she proceeded slowly, sharing her experiences little by little to test how I would react, to know whether she should trust me. She was also testing her own memory, which came out in little pieces along our journey together. Emotionally she was a tinder box, very tender of heart and raw.

We met sporadically at first, until Maria realized that she could share her whole story (as much as she remembered at the time). At that point our relationship deepened and more trust was established. We began to go on walks together every week and to email almost daily, trying to understand one another better and to give Maria room to heal. As memories began to surface, she often felt out of control, with days where she couldn't stop crying. But she was finding her footing. She asked lots of hard questions and searched Scripture incessantly. We talked about her uncertainties about God, herself, her family, and the nature of her abuse. Our journey together has been challenging but oh so good for us both!

In all my years of counseling, I have met few people with the courage that Maria has exercised. She has never stopped trying, even when her struggle was at its most intense. She grappled fiercely with God's goodness in the face of her dark experiences, and struggled to shake free of her demand for an explanation. Even when all she could do was cry, she didn't give up. She pursued freedom—in Christ.

And God has rewarded her. After several months, Maria turned an important corner in her faith and began to find the freedom she had sought.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>To read more about Maria's journey to freedom, go to her website at [www.strugglingwell-together.weebly.com](http://www.strugglingwell-together.weebly.com) and look at blog post "Bleeding Grace."

Our journey has been significantly impacting me as her mentor and advocate. I'm no longer just a helper; God has truly taught us to be there for each other, to point one another to Christ. Maria's insightful spirit has prompted me to question my understanding of love and how to express it as Jesus does. I have become insatiably hungry to learn how best to help her, diving into Scripture and reading book after book.

But I have found that this journey is not one-sided. When my husband had a stroke in 2013, Maria's compassionate prayers and presence threw me desperately upon God, increasing my understanding of faith, humility, and grace from her example of patient unspeakable grief. What joy to witness the unveiling of her shy intelligence, her creative musical abilities, and the beauty of her written expressions as she has found freedom from the oppressions of her past!

As our journey continues, we are meeting more men and women who have been sexually abused. Most have suffered silently, feeling misunderstood and lost, with nowhere to turn. But the God who brought us here is fully able to rescue the abused and broken soul.

### *Maria*

I am Sue's pastor's wife. My desire, from the first time we met, was to breathe refreshment and encouragement into her life. She is a busy counselor who spends and is spent for those she counsels. I believed the best way that I could relate to her was by offering her a safe place to be herself.

God blessed us with an abundance of time to get to know each other. We grew to appreciate one another's spiritual depth and found that we shared a deep love for Jesus and each other. As time progressed, the weight of my hidden sorrow and unanswered questions began to make life painfully unmanageable. In an attempt to find help, I began to test how she would react to my doubt and questions. Time after time, she received me with grace and patience.

One night during a Bible study, with tears in her eyes, Sue asked for prayer for all women who had been sexually abused. She acknowledged

the very pain that I had been denying in my own life. She actually said, “sexual abuse.” She said it out loud.

Asking for help tore my heart deeply. I hated to be needy and never wanted to burden anyone. But I saw no other options. I could no longer deny reality. I was a broken mess. In answer to a desperate email, Sue agreed to walk with me one step at a time, however long that took. She even assured me that it would be an honor.

As Sue and I began to walk into the wreckage of my past, we found our journey to be messy and, at times, very difficult. But oh, how beautiful it has been to walk with her to the Healer. I have found the freedom to share my pain and to begin my own journey home. Our relationship continues to be a healing tool in our Redeemer’s capable hands. She will forever be etched upon my heart. I am so grateful that Jesus prepared my friend to walk with me out of my darkness into his marvelous light.

## An Invitation

Sexual abuse can leave deep and unattended wounds in our souls, leaving us feeling lost in a storm of emotion. It may seem as if no one understands the depths of your pain. Please take heart. Jesus knows, because he was wounded too, in unspeakable ways; and because he is a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, Jesus invites us to tell our stories just as he has told us his. Your story matters. In God’s plan of redemption, nothing is wasted.

Fear of vulnerability, exposure, and shame can keep us locked away for years. But making the choice to remember our story can free us to begin our journey from darkness into the healing light of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:9).

“Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Your name”  
(Psalm 142:7).

**Talking Points:** Begin with prayer and then discuss the following questions with your leading friend.

1. In what ways have you tried to forget your story?

2. What kind of redemption do you want to see in your life?
3. What would make your suffering meaningful?
4. What are some reasons you don't want to share your story?
5. What reasons do you have for wanting to share your story?

**Treasure:** My story matters. In God's plan of redemption, nothing is wasted.

He [Jesus] is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. —Isaiah 53:3–5

He [God] has sent Me [Jesus] to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound...to comfort all who mourn ... to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. —Isaiah 61:1–3