

Healing from Past Abuse

If you are reading this chapter because you know that you were abused in the past, then you are a fortunate person. Fortunate, because you know you were harmed and know you need healing. Many are reading this for someone else and may miss the personal message and the healing God is offering them. Everyone, open your ears. God's supreme desire is for your life's foundation to be an intimate, safe and loving home atmosphere much like he created for Adam and Eve. Childhood should be free of “the knowledge of evil” and full of the “knowledge of good.” But, for many of us, that simply was not the case.

Our parents and others in our lives were sinners: in fact, all of us are sinners, too (Romans 3:23). God acknowledges that people will sin—but he does not like it. It does not minimize the harm done, especially when it has an affect on children.

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin." (Luke 17:1-2)

Fifteen out of every 1,000 children were substantiated as victims of child abuse according to surveys taken in thirty-five states by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 1997. The same survey concluded that 90% of all people who inflict abuse as adults were abused as children. These numbers have more than doubled over the last decade. Rescuing the harmed children begins with acknowledging that the problem exists very close to all of us. Silence and denial of the awful truth distorts God's reality (Romans 1:18) and warps the foundation on which healthy physical, emotional, spiritual and relational development is built. Little hearts wounded by childhood neglect, physical abuse, emotional maltreatment and especially sexual exploitation cannot be healed by merely “growing up.” Their hurt can only be overcome by acknowledging the painful wounds and allowing love to heal them.

God created us with the longing to be connected, loved, accepted and valued. That need fuels our souls' search for God, the pure source of love (1 John 4:16). When these needs are met—we thrive. When these needs are neglected or harshly crushed, especially in childhood, we begin to hate our very desires for love and intimate relationships. We may lose trust in those who are supposed to represent safe love, including God. To survive as children we reason that these desires for connection must be silenced and denied. What we need is love, but what we get is pain or sexual exploitation. What we need is acceptance, but what we get is rejection. What we need is to be valued, but we feel is disgusting and discarded.

A neglected baby will eventually quit crying for food and comfort—he or she becomes dull and eventually dies if needs are not met. Pure-hearted children begin to dull their genuine-love-senses to protect themselves from repeated harm. They begin to feel powerless, betrayed and eventually apathetic. As a result, their lives are full of poor judgment, self-loathing and distrust in relationships. Their whole perspective on God's incredible love (Psalm 103) gets warped. Abuse, especially sexual abuse, is a heart-crushing, soul-deadening leprosy. As Dan Allender says in his book *The Wounded Heart*,

Consider the damage done to the soul when the abuse is fused with the legitimate longings of the heart. The flower of deep longing for love is somehow hideously intertwined with the weed of abuse.¹

Jesus Cures And Heals

What is the cure? Obviously we must first protect the innocence of our children. But we also need to help the adults who suffered as children. The repercussions of past harm will continue to have a stronghold on their adult thinking, relating and belief patterns unless they are confronted and helped to change. They can change these patterns with God's help and with godly relationships.

Dr. Henry Cloud, the author of *Changes that Heal*, writes

Sometimes people are told just to "change their thinking." But this is no easy task because we're talking about something deeper than thinking. We're talking about convictions, which are held in the heart. We form our view of relationships long before we have the capacity to reason with our minds. They are carved into our hearts....No real and deep change occurs outside of relationship and trust, for that is the place where the heart lives. People often say, "I know that in my head, not in my heart." For the heart to know it, the heart must return to the vulnerable place where the rules were first written on it. Through this sort of vulnerability, it can learn new rules. It is imperative for us to be in a safe relationship to recognize our distorted thinking and to change it.²

I made a goal to fight through the fear barriers that kept me from building deep, loving relationships. God took me on an unexpected journey into my own childhood. I was aware that I had barriers, but I was not aware that I had the typical symptoms of childhood sexual harm (low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, lack of depth and trust in relationships, inability to accept love and motivation based on guilt and shame). I knew that I had experienced a few incidents of sexual exploits at a very young age, but I convinced myself that it was normal and minimal. Just to prove it to myself, I took a few minutes to recount incidences where I remembered feeling sexual shame and powerlessness. I re-counted twenty-seven incidences before the age of twelve. That was not minimal! I was an innocent victim in some and a willing participant in others.

Yes, I had the "hellion" scared out of me at twelve, and I responded by jumping onto a strict religious path out of fear of exposure and of being misunderstood (Colossians 2:20). I had not learned how to communicate the confusion and shame to my parents, so I felt alone and scared. But then I saw a way out: get baptized and be good from now on. The arrangements for my baptism were made with no Bible study, no understanding, no confession of sin and no repentance.

My shame and pain was now compounded with a fear-based concept of God. Haunting guilt stayed with me for many years until I learned methods of deadening the pain. The methods I used to survive, yet deaden the pain, were to stay at a comfortable distance from people—friendly and humorous to avoid any possibility of getting hurt again. I deadened my heart and soul with "good girl" and Pharisee-type obedience rather than the freedom of grace and mercy. Other women with past childhood trauma might turn to rebellion and anger or the extremes of a party-girl life to survive (2 Timothy 3:1-5). The routes we choose stem from childish survival

¹ Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress, 1995), 67.

² Henry McCloud, *Changes That Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future*

techniques and reasoning. The search to go deeper in my relationships exposed a deadening leprosy that needed to be removed from my heart.

Imagine having leprosy since childhood. Try to empathize with someone who has a daily reality of constant isolation, rejection and abuse. Leprosy is a progressive deadening of nerve-ending sensations. There is no awareness of pain or the caresses of a loved one because lepers literally feel nothing. At first, life without pain sounds wonderful—but without nerve sensation, we are at risk for greater harm from a burning fire, crushing blows or even a tiny infected pinprick. Beneath the numbness lies a heart longing to be touched and regenerated.

Go to the Mountain of God's Truth

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (Matthew 8:1-4)

The leprous man had learned to cover up his leprosy enough to slip into the crowd and hear Jesus teach. He had probably just heard the lessons that Jesus taught on the mountainside (the "Sermon on the Mount"). These heart-healing words shed new light on God and life as God intended it to be. These new teachings bothered and challenged him. The man's heart was painfully stirred as he thought of his lack of loving relationships. It may have been painful but the man finally felt *something*!

To begin the healing process we must get a clear picture of God's intent for family, home, relationships, love, etc. Since we live in our "dysfunction," we see it as our normal reality, and anything else may feel a little weird or even frightening. It takes going to the mountain of truth again and again to confront the numbness in our hearts—then God can begin to recreate and redesign his reality deep inside our hearts (Ephesians 4:17-32).

Get on Your Knees

The man with leprosy realized that his condition was bad. Just following the good teachings could not cure him or keep the leprosy hidden forever. He needed God's powerful healing. Perhaps he struggled a bit with the risk and implications of his openness, but he did not let self-loathing and fear stop him. He humbly knelt before Jesus. While others were repulsed at the sight of him, Jesus saw the man's deepest heart-need and touched him!

The journey involves bringing our wounded heart before God, a heart that is full of rage, overwhelmed with doubt, bloodied but unbroken, rebellious, stained, and lonely. It does not seem possible that anyone can handle, let alone embrace, our wounded and sinful heart. But the path involves the risk of putting into words the condition of our inner being and placing those words before God for His response. The Lord has promised He will not put out the smoldering flax or break the broken reed (Isaiah 42:3). But promises have been made before by a supposedly trustworthy person, and we swore the betrayal was the last we would ever allow our soul to experience. The obstacle to life is the conviction that God will damage us and destroy us. The problem is that the path does involve His hurting us, but only in order to heal us.³

³ Allender, 18

In spite of my fear-based religious pride, God allowed my husband, Roger, and me to see God's truths lived out in the lives of our young campus minister, Kip McKean, and his new bride, Elena. Roger connected with the truth more quickly than I did. My childhood baptism had not cured the sin that separated me from God because it was based on fear, not knowledge (Isaiah 59:1-2). Even my religious experiences in college were futile attempts to sew old patches on my bandages and coverings. It took time for me to see that my heart reeked of religious pride, shame and fear of exposure. This resulted in lack of trust, people-pleasing and faithlessness. Roger was frustrated and baffled by my distrust and unresponsiveness to his love. The slightest correction by anyone was met with my emotional outbursts. I became a fearful, over-protective mother. During all this, I minimized the damage I was doing.

However, as my old fear-based foundation was crumbling, I appealed to God to heal my rotting soul. With faith in the power of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, I was baptized at age forty (Romans 6:1-10). The spiritual leprosy of my soul was forgiven and cured through the healing touch of Jesus' sacrificial love. Jesus literally took on the abuse I had suffered. He endured public shame, humiliation, rejection and pain—the very things I ran from—to heal me (Isaiah 53). My revengeful heart was stunned and quieted by the fact that Jesus also took punishment on himself that my abusers and I both deserved.

Go Get Help

I always thought it strange that Jesus sent the leper away with a strong warning not to tell others about his healing but to go to the priest, taking the appropriate steps that would be a testimony of God's miracle. No doubt it was hard for the man to resist sharing about his cure (Mark 1:45). Why did Jesus give him that advice? I believe that one reason was concern for the man. Much of the damage done to a person from an abusive past is not from the actual pain inflicted, but from the absence of care and healing to the wounded heart (i.e., neglecting the wounded heart of a child). Perhaps the man needed the attention and care of one who could realign his reality from being a leper to being a whole and healthy part of the family of God. (Through a lengthy process, detailed in Leviticus 13 and 14, the priests painstakingly introduced cured lepers to their new lives while giving them time and the right environment to accept the cure.) This leper no longer had to wear torn clothing, leave his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face, cry “Unclean! Unclean!” and live alone (Leviticus 13:45). He no longer had to think, act or live like a rejected leper. Left alone and isolated from this vital connection with God and man, the person would continue to think, feel and respond like a leper. When dealing with your past abuse you also will need to allow your heart to heal.

Healing The Wounded Heart

1. Get in Touch with Your Old Patterns

Learning to be fully alive with physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness can also be one of the most painful parts of the healing process. One disciple compared this process to a deep gash in her leg that was left untreated for days because her parents did not want to be bothered. By the time she was taken to the doctor two days later, the wound had begun to heal making it impossible to close the gaping wound without painfully tearing it open again. She still wears the obvious scar.

For you it may mean feeling some pain for the first time or feeling old emotional pains that you spent your life running away from or fighting. Even saying, "I was sexually abused" is painful. Other feelings that seem like life-threatening enemies are guilt, shame, powerlessness, contempt and betrayal. Do you confuse others by the distorted ways you suppress these "dreaded" feelings? Trust and love are also perceived as painful because those "emotional muscles" have not been used consistently. We can learn to feel love again, but we will do it by first getting in touch with our "own subtle patterns of seeking life and comfort apart from dependence on God."⁴ Only God can meet these needs perfectly (2 Peter 1:3; Psalms 142). We have failed miserably using our self-preserving, sinful, unloving methods of survival, and we will either move forward or reject God's love, returning to the gruesome but familiar isolation of our leper colony.

2. Communicate Honestly

I am so grateful for God's beautiful plan for giving us the kingdom. Here we can heal and learn to live in our new reality and to re-connect with people within the security of a godly, loving environment. This is a vital part of every disciple's life but especially for those of us whose childhood was imprinted with a warped perspective of God and relationships. We can learn to trust others to love and care for us, but it takes time, patience, practice and courage. Verses like Ephesians 4:15, John 8:32 and Ephesians 4:29-32 have become my constant guides. I realize that I often misunderstand others and they often misunderstand me. It is my responsibility to communicate with love and assume that another disciple also wants to communicate with love.

For example, I shared with my husband about a time, as an adult, that I ran and hid from my discipler. I was feeling ugly and too ashamed to be seen. As I related the story, Roger frowned, shook his head and sighed. I immediately stopped talking. In my mind I was thinking, "He is disgusted with me and thinks I am bad for doing that. Okay maybe, but, Marcia, you decided to speak the truth." Then I got the courage to say, "What were you thinking when I was relating that story to you?" Roger shared, "I was feeling sad that you had to go through your life feeling like that." I shared with him how I had interpreted his non-verbal communication. We were both surprised and relieved that seeking and speaking the truth gave us the opportunity to mutually understand one another. God wants us to know the freedom of communicating with an unguarded heart both our joys and our sufferings (Hebrews 2:10, 5: 8-9).

Jesus lovingly died on the cross for our cure, and the healing process must begin with honesty and humility. An older mature disciple often has the skills to help you discern and deal with relationship problems, using truth from the Bible. It is vital to be able to talk openly to someone who will listen and hear as you verbalize your hurts. However, it may take more investigation or professional counseling to deal with serious past abuse. If that is the advice given by mature Christians, please heed it. It should not be taken lightly. These hurts and the patterns they bring do not automatically disappear at baptism. Just as the leper needed help to acclimate to living a cured life, we surely do too.

3. Love Boldly

Once we have become disciples and Jesus has forgiven us of our sins, we have a responsibility to share the good news with others (Matthew 28:18-20). This is the step that we

⁴ Allender, 193

hear most about after becoming disciples. But we also need to take the step to help others work through their pasts and do some healing, as we have done. Few people come into the kingdom with healthy pasts...Satan sees to that. Therefore, it is vital for each of us to get rid of any barriers to our being spiritually, relationally and emotionally healthy. Our healing process should not be a self-focused process that continues year after year. Because of our love for God and our gratitude for his healing us, we seek to connect with others. We seek to become a safe place to help heal the wounded hearts of other children of God. To honestly and boldly forgive others, including the abuser, becomes the desire of a heart healed by God.



This subject deserves deeper attention than we are able to give in one chapter. Prayerfully, from this study you have discovered hope. Check your own reality foundations against God's foundation. If you experience pain and conflict in your relationships, have the courage to doubt your own distorted "truths," and accept God's genuine truths. Go to Jesus for the cure for your sins. Then get help in your healing. Vow to keep your heart exposed and cleaned out with the help of God and his loving family. You are no longer a leper and you are no longer alone!

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