



HOPE FOR THE TRAFFICKED



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INTRODUCTION

Dear Friend,

I was born in Melbourne, Australia without arms and legs even though three sonograms had never revealed any complications. Growing up, it wasn't easy. Throughout my childhood, I struggled with depression and loneliness. I even questioned the purpose of my life and tried to take my own life when I was ten years old.

But Jesus met me in my pain and I decided to give my life to him. Since then, I've travelled to 74 countries to share my story with millions of people just like yourself, from students and young people to business professionals and even world leaders. I want to share a special message with the world based on my own story and encounter with Jesus: there is hope.

I may not know what you're struggling with today. But like I've seen in my own life, the Bible teaches us that Jesus is not only present in our pain, but that He is the answer to our heaviest struggles. Jesus says, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have **peace**. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

I'm here to tell you today that you are special, you are loved, and that God does have an amazing plan for your life. He will never leave or forsake you. And if God can use me, a man without arms and legs, to be His hands and feet, then He will certainly use any willing heart. Throughout my life I've always held onto a special verse that says: *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you **hope** and a **future**"* (Jeremiah 29:11). If we give our lives to him, he promises to give us hope and a future. Now that is amazing!

Here at NickV Ministries, we love you and we're praying for you. We're here to be your Champions and to point you back to the true Champion: Jesus. We pray that these resources will help you through whatever challenges you may be facing and bring hope for the way forward.

Thank you and God Bless,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "NickV". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Nick Vujicic and the NickV Ministries Team

SEX AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Definitions

Sex and human trafficking involve three groups of people: the pimps/traffickers, the prostitutes/victims, and the purchasers/customers. The United States Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice provide the following definitions:¹

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.

Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

Forced labor is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

*“Do not grant the wicked their desires, LORD;
do not let their plans succeed.”
(Psalm 140:8)*

What Risks Do Trafficking Victims Face?

Victims of commercial sex exploitation and trafficking are vulnerable to pain and suffering on every level: mental, emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, financial, and social.

Becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol

Being arrested, sent to prison

Being blackmailed, in debt-bondage

Being physically beaten, raped, or killed

Being verbally and emotionally abused, threatened, intimidated

Contracting a sexually transmitted disease

Getting pregnant, having a miscarriage or abortion, facing future infertility

Lacking freedom and autonomy, being starved, isolated, confined

Struggling with guilt, grief, shame

Suffering from depression, self-hatred, fear, suicidal thoughts

Suffering from intense complex post-traumatic stress, acute anxiety, distrust

Suffering psychological harm, dissociation

*“Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel.”*

(Psalm 71:4)

What Is God’s Heart on Sex and Human Trafficking?

While the world wasn’t watching, human trafficking in sex and labor became a worldwide epidemic. Today, millions of men, women, and children are caught in trafficking situations. Words fall short to capture the suffering and injustice of this horrendous reality.

Yet for all those who have experienced the trauma of human trafficking, the Lord is a refuge. God’s Word speaks of His compassionate heart for all those who have suffered as well as His strong condemnation for those who exploit and violate His image-bearers. In our pain, God draws near and offers hope and healing.

*“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

(Psalm 34:18)

God cares about your pain.

“You have seen my troubles, and you care about the anguish of my soul” (Psalm 31:7).

God is with you each day.

*“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous
right hand”* (Isaiah 41:10).

God wants you to see yourself through His eyes—as precious in His sight.

“You are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you” (Isaiah 43:4 nlt).

God wants to be your refuge.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

*“For all those who have
experienced the trauma
of human trafficking,
the Lord is a refuge”*

God can heal your wounds and give you new life.

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

God wants you to know you always have hope and a future.

“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 23:18).

God wants you to know you have purpose.

“I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me” (Psalm 57:2 nlt).

God wants you to know you have immeasurable worth as His beloved child.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

God can use counselors and compassionate people to help you heal and recover.

“In an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

God will judge and hold accountable every abuser.

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

God wants to comfort you and empower you to help others.

“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Corinthians 1:4 nlt).

God will wipe away every tear in heaven.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever” (Revelation 21:4 nlt).

Ten Biblical Truths on Sexual Abuse & Violence

God is always against the violence of evil people.

“Bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure” (Psalm 7:9).

Speaking up for victims is always right in God’s sight.

“Speak for those who cannot speak up themselves” (Proverbs 31:8).

Telling the truth can save lives.

“A truthful witness saves lives” (Proverbs 14:25).

The guilt for sexual abuse and assault is solely on the perpetrator—it’s never the victim’s fault.

“Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both” (Proverbs 17:15).

Justice is never served when the guilty go unpunished.

“Whosoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent,’ will be cursed by peoples and denounced by nations”
(Proverbs 24:24).

When victimizers aren’t quickly held accountable, others will increasingly commit wrongs.

“When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong”
(Ecclesiastes 8:11).

The Lord will avenge all injustice.

“Leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

The Lord is our refuge in times of trouble.

“The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (Psalm 9:9).

There is hope for every victim and survivor.

“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 23:18).

God stretches our capacity for compassion, using our pain to comfort others.

“As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

1. See “What is Human Trafficking?” Blue Campaign, Department of Homeland Security, <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>; “Human Trafficking,” U.S. Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking>.

VERBAL & EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Victory Over the Power of Abuse

My Personalized Plan to Rise Above Abuse

What's been *said* to you and what's been *done* to you may have left you with a broken heart, broken dreams, and broken relationships. You might feel trapped in an abusive relationship or ensnared by fear, anger, and bitterness.

The idea of finding healing and freedom may be difficult to grasp, but it is all possible with God's help. He has a plan for you to help you overcome the past, find joy in the present, and give you a bright future. Even in the darkness of abuse, He can shine a light into your life that makes it possible for you to move forward with hope.

*"You, LORD, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light."
(PSALM 18:28)*

To overcome the abuse I've experienced and become the person God created me to be, **I will** . . .

Look to the Lord

The Bible says, *"I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me"* (Psalm 77:1 ESV). Change, healing, and freedom all begin with God. Abuse can distort my view of God but I know God loves me. He is for me, and He is with me. He will help me rise above abuse because He desires to heal me and set me free. I can trust Him. Scripture says, *"The LORD is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy"* (Psalm 28:7 NLT).

- I will read God's Word and pray regularly.
- I will get involved in a local church to grow in my relationship with God.

"Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always" (1 CHRONICLES 16:11).

Process my emotions

The pain of abuse can create heavy emotions. Some emotions like hurt and anger linger, are ever-present and quick to surface. Though hidden, these emotions still affect my well-being and relationships. I often struggle to process my emotions and express them freely. But confronting these painful emotions is an important step toward healing. I will give myself time to grieve and process the pain.

- I will be honest about the pain and emotions I've felt as a result of the abuse I experienced.
- I will talk with God and trustworthy people to process my thoughts and emotions, as well as journal my experience.

"In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help" (PSALM 18:6).

Find support

Healing doesn't happen in isolation. God often uses friends, family, and counselors to comfort us and to help us heal and grow. God created us to be in loving, flourishing relationships. Therefore, it's important for me to find and develop healthy friendships and other relationships where I can be supported and loved.

- I will seek the help of a counselor, if needed, to help me heal, grow, and develop healthy relationships.
- I will develop a support system with my family, friends, and local church, as well as look into online and community resources for further support.

“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help” (ECCLESIASTES 4:9–10 NLT).

Replace lies with truth

Verbal and emotional abuse often leads to believing lies about ourselves, our value, and our purpose. We might even believe lies about how relationships should work, whether change is possible, or even lies about God. Healing occurs when we recognize the lies and walk in the truth. God's Word provides truth about me—my identity, my purpose, and my worth. I will begin to see myself through God's eyes—as a precious child of God.

- I will identify the lies I believe about myself, about others, about life, and about God.
- I will look to God's Word to replace those lies with truth.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (JOHN 8:32).

Set boundaries

Boundaries define what is permissible and what is not, separating what is in bounds and what is out of bounds. They are designed for my protection. In abusive relationships, boundaries are often crossed. They are either never established, or they are established but never maintained. To prevent further abuse, I must draw the line and establish boundaries.

- I will set healthy boundaries to protect myself and others from further abuse.
- I will enforce repercussions and maintain those boundaries when they are crossed.

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (PROVERBS 4:23).

Help others

One sign of healing and growth is that I can take the bad things that have happened to me and use them for good. The pain of abuse might make this difficult to believe, but God can use my painful experiences to help others. As the saying goes, “God can turn my misery into a ministry.”

- I will trust God to use me, even the pain of my past, to help others who have been impacted by abuse.
- I will look for opportunities to share my story, listen to others, and point people to the Lord.

“The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4).

Finding Victory over Abuse: How to Replace Lies with Truth

If you've heard constant, cruel and condemning messages from your parents, spouse, partner, boss, or anyone close to you—it's understandable you may have come to believe those messages over time. Perhaps you've come to believe that you are unworthy or unlovable, incomplete or insignificant. No matter what harsh words you've been told, abuse does not have the final word about you—God does. His Word speaks of His love for you and the life-changing identity you have in Christ.

Healing and transformation can occur when you begin to see yourself through God's eyes, believing what He says about you. Therefore, it is important to identify the lies you've been led to believe and replace them with God's truth.

*“Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth.”*

(PSALM 86:11)

Lie: “I am worthless and insignificant.”

Truth: You matter to God. You have God-given worth because God created you, and that worth can never be taken from you.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (PSALM 139:13–14).

Lie: “No one will ever accept me.”

Truth: The Lord chose you, accepts you, and will never reject you.

“I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (ISAIAH 41:9–10).

Lie: “I am unlovable.”

Truth: God loves you, and nothing can separate you from His love.

“Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ROMANS 8:38–39 NLT).

Lie: “I deserve to be abused.”

Truth: No one deserves to be abused—no one. Each person should be treated with respect as God's image-bearer.

“Show proper respect to everyone” (1 PETER 2:17).

Lie: “There is no hope for me.”

Truth: No matter how deep the pain, with God, there is always hope.

“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (PROVERBS 23:18).

Lie: “I have no control over what happens to me.”

Truth: God has given you free will, and you do have control over the choices you make and the actions you take.

“For we are each responsible for our own conduct” (GALATIANS 6:5 NLT).

Lie: “God doesn’t care about me.”

Truth: God cares deeply about you and wants you to come to Him with your burdens.

“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you” (1 PETER 5:7 NLT).

Lie: “God is disappointed in me and wants nothing to do with me.”

Truth: God has compassion for you—He is with you and desires a close relationship with you.

“The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. . . . The LORD is near to all who call on him” (PSALM 145:8–9, 18).

You may have been led to believe other lies. As an exercise, write them down and then look in God’s Word to discover a passage or a truth that can speak directly to that lie. God wants you to *“take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”* (2 Corinthians 10:5). Over time, as you replace the lies with God’s truth, you will be transformed by His Word.

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will.”
(ROMANS 12:2)*

How to Establish Boundaries in a Verbally Abusive Relationship

You can curtail verbal and emotional abuse by developing a plan to prevent yourself from being controlled. You cannot change another person, but you can change yourself so that the abusive tactics previously used on you are no longer effective and cease to ensnare you. As you determine the appropriate boundaries, realize that these boundaries are designed to guard your heart, mind, and emotions.

“My child, listen and be wise: Keep your heart on the right course.”

(PROVERBS 23:19 NLT)

1. State clearly, in a conversation or a letter, what you are willing to accept and not accept from the abuser.

- Communicate your position in a positive way. (Practice what you will say in advance.)
- Do not justify yourself. Do not be apologetic, just state the boundary:
- “I want our relationship to continue, but . . .
 - “I’m not willing to listen to your name-calling.”
 - “I’m not willing to hear your accusations about (name) any longer.”
 - “Talking negatively about the past, about you or me, or anyone else is counterproductive.”
 - “I’m not willing to be controlled by your silent treatment any longer.”
- Keep what you say short and succinct.

*“A truly wise person uses few words;
a person with understanding is even-tempered.”*

(PROVERBS 17:27 NLT)

2. Announce the consequence you will enforce if the abuser violates your requests.

- Your response should be a matter of separating yourself from the abuser.
- You cannot change the abuser’s behavior, but you can remove yourself from frequent exposure to unacceptable behavior.
- “I want to visit with you, but . . .
 - “If you call me a bad name again, I will leave for a period of time.”
 - “If you persist in making that accusation, I will immediately end our conversation.”
 - “If you give me the silent treatment, I will go and find someone else to talk with.”
- Consequences are part of God’s plan.

“A man reaps what he sows.”

(GALATIANS 6:7)

3. Enforce the consequence every single time abuse occurs.

- Do not bluff! The abuser needs to know that you are going to act consistently on your words.
- Plan on being tested multiple times.
- In your mind and heart . . .
 - Say *No* to manipulation.
 - Say *No* to pressure.
 - Say *No* to control.
- You need to show that the abusive tactics are no longer effective on you.

“Let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no.”

(JAMES 5:12 ESV)

4. Hold your ground and absolutely do not negotiate.

- Since verbal abusers do not use words fairly, negotiation will not work.
- Instead of “talking out” the problem, your abuser will seek to wear you out.
- Simply state that when the behavior stops, you look forward to a renewed relationship.
 - “I am not willing to discuss this topic any longer.”
 - “I have stated clearly what I will not accept.”
 - “When you are ready to respect my requests, let me know. I look forward to enjoying being together at that time.”
- Keep your words brief and to the point.

“Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.”

(PROVERBS 10:19)

5. Respond when your boundary is violated—never react out of instinct or out of anger.

- Expect your boundary to be violated . . . but don’t react.
- Expect your boundary to be violated again . . . and again. But don’t react.
- If you react, you will find yourself back under the control of the abuser.
- Respond by detaching yourself from the abuser and enforcing your repercussions.

“The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit.”

(ECCLESIASTES 7:8–9)

6. Ask for support from one or two wise, objective people to help you through this process.

- Include supporters as you analyze and identify the problem.
- Include supporters as you determine how to articulate your plan.
- Include supporters as you enforce the repercussions.

- Include supporters—friend, mentor, counselor—to help you through this critical period.
 - ♦ Discuss the situation with your supporters.
 - ♦ Discuss the tactics used on you.
 - ♦ Discuss the plan of action.

“In abundance of counselors there is victory.”
(PROVERBS 24:6 ESV)

7. Expect manipulative maneuvers and emotional ups and downs.

- Assume that your actions will make the abuser angry.
- Allow your abuser to react without reacting yourself.
- Do not seek to placate and appease this person—it won’t work.
- Think of this time period as comparable to having surgery. It is a painful experience, but it provides hope for healing and having a new, healthy relationship.
- Remember God is with you each step of the way.

*“For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.”*
(ISAIAH 41:13)

How to Help the Abused

Perhaps you know someone who’s been hurt by verbal and emotional abuse. You want to help but you don’t know where to start. Maybe you’ve experienced abuse and want to help others rise above the abuse in their life.

Because abuse involves pain and a range of difficult emotions, it’s important to know what to do and what not to do. Realize, the person before you may be wounded, emotionally fragile, perhaps even traumatized. The tone and tenor of your words are essential to establishing a nurturing conversation. People who have experienced abuse may ignore the severity of their situation. They may display defense mechanisms such as denying that anything is wrong, minimizing their pain, or rationalizing their abuser’s behavior.

If the abused person is open and honest about discussing the situation, realize they are displaying significant courage. Be prepared to respond with love and patience as they begin to share the secrets of their broken heart. As you seek to help others, remember that God is the source of comfort and change and you are an instrument of His comfort and love.

*“God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.
He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.
When they are troubled, we will be able to give them
the same comfort God has given us.”*
(2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4 NLT)

Don't treat the problem lightly or minimize the abuse.

Do realize that verbal and emotional abuse can leave lasting wounds and significant emotional damage.

"The tongue has the power of life and death" (PROVERBS 18:21).

Don't be quick to give simple answers, platitudes, or pat answers.

Do listen intently, ask questions, and seek to understand them.

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (JAMES 1:19).

Don't feel like you have to say something or have the right answer.

Do be present with them, and know that just your presence can be a comfort.

"They sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words" (JOB 2:13 NLT).

Don't dismiss their feelings or experience.

Do encourage them, give them compliments, and thank them for their courage to share their thoughts and emotions.

"Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them" (EPHESIANS 4:29 NLT).

Don't communicate that the abuse is in some way their fault.

Do express sympathy and compassion.

"Be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble" (1 PETER 3:8).

Don't be critical or express judgment toward them.

Do show that you love and accept them.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (ROMANS 15:7).

Don't assume they are comfortable talking about God and spiritual matters.

Do be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit, and ask if you can share God's Word with them.

"Let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" (GALATIANS 5:25 NLT).

Don't leave them to their own resources.

Do help them find support, resources, and wise counsel in their community, local church, or online to help them heal and recover.

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (PROVERBS 15:22).

Don't overextend yourself or offer to help in ways you cannot provide.

Do recognize your limits and know when you need to point them to additional help or professional counseling.

"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment" (ROMANS 12:3).

Don't forget to pray *for* them and *with* them, as they are comfortable doing so.

Do lift them up before the Lord on a regular basis.

“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (EPHESIANS 6:18).

Abuse Recovery Resources

Below is information for national hotlines to contact in a crisis. These hotlines exist to help and support you. These free and confidential services are available 24/7 to provide emotional support and helpful resources for those in difficult situations and those who are experiencing abuse of any kind. When you contact them, you will be connected with a real person who is trained to provide guidance and support. You are *not* alone.

*“So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*
(ISAIAH 41:10)

NOTE: If you are ever in imminent danger, call 911 immediately.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

- 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)
- Ayuda disponible en Español
- www.thehotline.org (Live chat available)

Crisis Text Line

- Text HOME to 741741 (United States & Canada)
- Text HOME to 85258 (United Kingdom)
- Text HOME to 50808 (Ireland)
- www.CrisisTextLine.org

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

- 988
- 1-800-799-4889 (For Deaf + Hard of Hearing)
- Ayuda disponible en Español
- 988lifeline.org (Live chat available)

Don't hesitate to call or text these hotlines if you're thinking of harming yourself. Remember, no matter what you're feeling or how bad things seem . . .

“There is surely a future hope for you.”
(PROVERBS 23:18)

SELF-WORTH

Discover Your God-Given Value

What Is God's Heart on Self-Worth?

The religious leaders of Jesus' day try to trap Him. They want to get Jesus to say something so they have grounds for arresting Him. After some flattery and compliments, they try to bait Him. *"Teacher,' they said, 'we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or shouldn't we?"* (Mark 12:14–15 NLT).

Their question is designed to place Jesus in a political and religious dilemma where, depending on His answer, He would upset the Jews or the Romans. Jesus, however, knows their malicious intent . . . *"Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, 'Why are you trying to trap me? Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you'"* (Mark 12:15 NLT).

After receiving a coin, Jesus asks, *"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"*

"Caesar's,' they replied." (Mark 12:16).

Jesus concludes, *"Well, then . . . give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God"* (Mark 12:16 NLT).

The Bible says, *"His reply completely amazed them"* (Mark 12:17 NLT). His answer ought to amaze us, too—not because He wisely evades a trap, but because of what Jesus alludes to about our worth. By asking the religious leaders about the coin, "Whose image is this?" . . . He indirectly poses a question: Caesar's image may be on the coin, but whose image is on *you*?

You are made in *God's* image. Because of that, you have infinite worth—more than any coin or currency this world can afford. You belong to God. The Creator and King of the universe not only created you in His image, but He cares for you. He crowns you with glory and honor, showing your infinite, inherent, unchangeable worth.

*"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor."*

(PSALM 8:3–5)

God wants you to see yourself through His eyes—as His image-bearer with infinite worth.

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (GENESIS 1:26-27, 31).

God wants you to see yourself through His eyes—as precious and honored in His sight.

"You are precious and honored in my sight, and . . . I love you" (ISAIAH 43:4).

God wants you to see yourself through His eyes—as His beloved child.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 JOHN 3:1).

God wants you to know that you are fully accepted in Christ—not due to your performance but due to His grace.

“He made us accepted in the Beloved” (EPHESIANS 1:6 NKJV).

God will not reject His people, His beloved possession.

“The LORD will not reject his people; he will not abandon his special possession” (PSALM 94:14 NLT).

God understands the pain of being devalued and held in low esteem.

“He [Jesus] was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (ISAIAH 53:3).

God offers healing from past pain, guilt, and shame.

“Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me” (PSALM 30:2).

God wants you to forgive those who hurt you and led you to feel worthless.

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (COLOSSIANS 3:13).

God wants you to show respect to everyone because we all bear His image.

“Show proper respect to everyone” (1 PETER 2:17).

God wants you to encourage others who have low self-worth.

“Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them” (EPHESIANS 4:29 NLT).

God wants you to look to Him and His Word to find your true worth.

“You are my refuge and my shield; your word is my source of hope” (PSALM 119:114 NLT).

“You are made in
God’s image.
Because of that,
you have
infinite worth.”

How to Get Rid of Guilt and Shame

Feelings of guilt and shame need to be correctly defined and dealt with God’s way, so that healing can happen and you can begin to walk in the freedom of God’s grace.

“God has taken away my shame.”
(GENESIS 30:23 HCSB)

Understand the Difference Between Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are not the same. Guilt focuses on your behavior, whereas shame focuses on you.

Shame is a painful emotion of disgrace caused by a strong sense of real or imagined guilt.

Shame can be a response to what was done to you, but guilt is a response to something you have done.

Shame focuses on who you *are*, but guilt focuses on what you've *done*. Shame is experienced when your guilt moves from knowing you have *done* something bad to feeling that you *are* bad.

Shame creates an inner desire to maintain rigid control over emotions and behavior while guilt creates a desire to change or justify emotions and behavior.

Shame produces inner loneliness that fosters unhealthy dependencies, but guilt produces inner longings that foster healthy repentance in relationships.

Shame steals the joy of your salvation, yet guilt confessed restores joy in salvation.

*“Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”*

(PSALM 51:12)

Understand the Difference Between True Guilt and False Guilt

False guilt can blind and deceive people from seeing the truth about the hurtful experiences they suffered. False guilt adds another unhealthy dynamic to already wounded emotions. Realize, there's a big difference between true guilt and false guilt.

True guilt is an emotional response as a result of any wrong attitude or action contrary to the perfect will of God—and refers to the fact of being at fault.

- **False guilt** is an emotional response of (1) self-blame even though no wrong has been committed, or (2) self-blame that continues after having committed a sin even though the sin is confessed, repented of, and no longer a part of a person's life.
- **False guilt** is based on self-condemning feelings of not having lived up to your own expectations or to the expectations of someone else.

True guilt leads to freedom, as it leads you to repent of sin and wrongdoing, turn to God, and receive His grace and forgiveness.

- **False guilt** keeps you in bondage to three weapons of destruction: shame, fear, and anger.
- **False guilt** is not resolved by confession because there is nothing to confess.

- **False guilt** is resolved by rejecting lies and believing truth. Revelation 12:10 says that Satan is the “*accuser of our brothers and sisters*.” He loves to burden believers with false guilt and condemnation. Some of his favorite strategies are: bringing up the past, reminding you of your failures, and making you feel unforgiven and unaccepted by God.

The next time your mind begins to replay sins committed against you for which you feel responsible (or the sins for which you have repented), realize that this taunting comes from Satan, the accuser, to discourage you. Ask yourself:

- “What am I hearing?” (Accusation)
- “What am I feeling?” (False guilt)
- “What are the facts?” (Not guilty; fully forgiven)

Use Scripture as your standard to determine true and false guilt. Memorize Romans 8:1 and turn it into a prayer: “Thank you, Father, that you don’t condemn me and don’t want me to condemn myself. These feelings of false guilt are not valid because I am accepted in Christ.”

*“There is now no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
(ROMANS 8:1)*

Overcoming Guilt and Shame

If you are experiencing true guilt, feeling bad about *what you’ve done*, confess your sins to God and receive His forgiveness.

“I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.’ And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone” (PSALM 32:5 NLT).

If you are experiencing false guilt, feeling bad *although you’ve done no wrong*, reject the false guilt and replace the lies you’ve been led to believe with the truth of God’s Word.

“Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you” (PSALM 25:5 NLT).

If you are experiencing shame, feeling bad about *who you are*, embrace God’s love for you and reflect on your identity in Christ as a beloved child of God.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 JOHN 3:1).

Guilt and shame are powerful emotions that can take time to untangle and overcome. In addition to believing the truth of God’s Word, talk with a wise friend, counselor, or pastor to help you gain victory over these feelings.

*“Where there is no counsel, the people fall;
But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”
(PROVERBS 11:14 NKJV)*

ABUSE RECOVERY

From Surviving to Thriving

What Is God's Heart on Abuse?

God is a God of love, and He created us for loving relationships. Abusive relationships run contrary to His design and His plan for healthy, flourishing relationships. To those who treat others abusively, God sees their actions, calls them to change, and will hold them accountable. The Bible says, *"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"* (Hebrews 4:13).

To those who have been mistreated, the Lord is a refuge. He extends His healing hand and even uses the pain of abuse to accomplish His good purposes.

*"You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good
to accomplish what is now being done,
the saving of many lives."
(Genesis 50:20)*

God hears the cry of the battered and abused.

"You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry" (Psalm 10:17).

God understands the pain of abuse.

"He [Jesus] was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3).

God strengthens and upholds the victim of abuse.

"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

God confirms the abuse victim's value and worth.

"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6–7).

God gives hope to victims of abuse.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

God offers healing from the pain of abuse.

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

God wants to be a refuge to the abused and help them process their emotions and experiences with Him.

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (Psalm 62:8).

God wants to transform victims’ hearts and minds with His Word.

“Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2 nlt).

God wants those who’ve been abused to establish boundaries in their life and relationships.

“Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” (Proverbs 4:23 nlt).

*“God is a God of love,
and He created us for
loving relationships.”*

God wants abuse victims to help others who have experienced abusive treatment.

“The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

God calls for abusive people to change.

“Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right” (Ezekiel 45:9).

God will one day end all abuse and pain.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever” (Revelation 21:4 nlt).

Key Verse to Memorize

Help and healing ultimately come from God. He knows your pain. He sees your grief. He is not indifferent toward you, and He does not ignore you. You can trust Him. You can place your past, present, and future in His hands.

*“You, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.”
(Psalm 10:14)*

Key Passage to Read

Stories abound in Scripture about people who were mistreated, maligned, attacked, assaulted . . . *abused*. In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah reflects on his suffering and the suffering of Israel after being attacked by an enemy nation. Jeremiah's response to the attack mirrors the response of many to harsh treatment: anger, confusion, despair, and bitterness.

Jeremiah shows us that as God's people bring their emotions to Him and look to Him in the midst of their suffering, they find hope. Your story of abuse may differ in many ways, but the same hope is available to you.

*"There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off."
(Proverbs 23:18)*

Lamentations 3:19–26 (NLT)

*"The thought of my suffering . . . is bitter beyond words.
²⁰ I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss.
²¹ Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this:
²² The faithful love of the LORD never ends!
His mercies never cease.
²³ Great is his faithfulness;
his mercies begin afresh each morning.
²⁴ I say to myself, 'The LORD is my inheritance;
therefore, I will hope in him!'
²⁵ The LORD is good to those who depend on him,
to those who search for him.
²⁶ So it is good to wait quietly
for salvation from the LORD."*

The Hope of Recovery from Abuse

Acknowledge your pain and suffering.	v. 19
Allow yourself to time to grieve.	v. 20
Dare to hope.	v. 21
Realize that God's love for you never ends.	v. 22
Rejoice in God's daily faithfulness and mercy toward you.	v. 23
Speak God's words of truth and hope to yourself.	v. 24
Keep relying on and looking to God, who is good to you.	v. 25
Know that salvation and healing come from the Lord.	v. 26

My Personalized Plan to Recover from Abuse

Healing from abuse is a process—a multi-faceted process that takes time. Although you may no longer be in an abusive situation, the effects may still impact your life and relationships. The road to recovery might seem like an uphill battle, but you can take steps toward healing and find victory with the Lord's help.

*"I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."
(Psalm 121:1–2)*

As I seek to overcome the abuse I've experienced and become the person God created me to be, I will:

Look to the Lord

Change, healing, and freedom all begin with God. He will listen to your prayers, strengthen you, and help you rise above abuse. Abuse can often distort one's view of God but remember—He loves you. He is for you, and He is with you. The Lord desires to heal you, restore you, and set you free. You can trust Him.

- I will read God's Word and pray regularly.
- I will get involved in a local church to deepen my relationship with God.

"Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always" (1 Chronicles 16:11).

Talk to someone and find support

Sadly, much abuse goes unreported. Fear and shame, as well as manipulation and control, keep many victims from discussing abuse. But you're not alone. It's important to talk with someone and find support. Talking to someone can be the first step toward healing and recovery. God can use your friends, family, and counselors to comfort you and to help you heal and grow.

- I will reach out to a trusted family member or friend that I feel safe with to discuss my experiences and pain.
- I will look into support groups in my local church and community, and I will consider talking with a counselor.

"In an abundance of counselors there is victory" (Proverbs 11:14 nasb).

Address physical issues

Whether or not the abuse you endured was physical—you may have physical issues that need to be addressed. There may be literal wounds or lingering pain that needs healing. The stress of the abuse may have led to sleeping problems, an addiction, an eating disorder, or other unhealthy behaviors that are used to cope with the abuse.

- I will talk with a medical professional about my health concerns.
- I will make it a priority to develop a healthy lifestyle of exercising, eating well, managing stress, getting rest, and avoiding harmful substances.

"For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8).

Process my emotions

The pain of abuse can create lingering, damaged emotions that are ever-present and just waiting to surface and spill out. Painful, hidden emotions like anger and hurt can still affect your well-being and relationships. You may not know how to express your emotions, or you may not have had permission to express them, but confronting your emotions is an important step toward healing. Therefore, give yourself time to grieve and process your pain.

- I will be honest about the emotions I've felt as a result of the abuse I experienced.
- I will talk with God and trustworthy individuals to help me process my thoughts and emotions.

"In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help" (Psalm 18:6).

Replace lies with truth

Abuse can lead you to believe lies about yourself, your value, and your purpose. You may have come to believe lies about certain relationships and even about God. Healing occurs when you recognize the lies and walk in the truth. God's Word provides truth about you—your identity, your purpose, and your worth. As you read His Word, you can begin to see yourself through God's eyes.

- I will identify the lies I've believed: lies about myself, about others, about life, and about God.
- I will look to God's Word to replace those lies with the truth.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Help others

One sign of healing and growth is that you can take the bad things that have happened to you and use them for good. God can use your painful experience to help others. He can turn your misery into ministry.

- I will trust God to use me, even my painful past, to help others who have been impacted by abuse.
- I will look for opportunities to share my story, listen to others, and point people to the Lord.

"The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

How to Support Survivors on the Road to Recovery

If you know someone who has been impacted by abuse, you may want to help but don't know where to start. Maybe you've experienced abuse and want to help others rise above the abuse in their own lives.

Because abuse involves pain and a range of difficult emotions, it's important to know what to do and what not to do. Realize, the person before you may be wounded, emotionally fragile, perhaps even traumatized. The tone and tenor of your words are essential to establishing a nurturing conversation. Many people who have experienced abuse may dismiss the severity of their situation. They may display defense mechanisms such as denying that anything is wrong, minimizing their pain, or rationalizing their abuser's behavior.

If the abused person is open and honest about discussing the situation, realize they are displaying significant courage. Be prepared to respond with love and patience when your wounded friend begins to share the secrets of a broken heart. As you seek to help others, remember that God is the source of comfort and change, and you are an instrument of His comfort and love. . . .

*“God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.
He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.
When they are troubled, we will be able to give them
the same comfort God has given us.”*
(2 Corinthians 1:3–4 nlt)

How to Support Survivors of Abuse

Don’t feel like you have to be an expert to help.

Do learn what you can about abuse and help them, but remember that their healing is dependent not on you but on God.

*“Let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance.”*
(Proverbs 1:5)

Don’t treat the problem lightly or minimize the abuse.

Do realize that abuse can leave lasting wounds and significant emotional damage.

*“My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction.”*
(Psalm 31:10)

Don’t be quick to give simple answers or platitudes.

Do listen intently, ask questions, and seek to understand them.

*“Everyone should be quick to listen,
slow to speak and slow to become angry.”*
(James 1:19)

Don’t rush or push for full disclosure of uncomfortable things.

Do respect boundaries, privacy, and the healing process that takes time.

“Show proper respect to everyone.”
(1 Peter 2:17)

Don’t feel like you have to say something or have the right answer.

Do be present, and know that just your presence can be a comfort.

*“They sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights.
No one said a word to Job, for they saw
that his suffering was too great for words.”*
(Job 2:13 nlt)

Don't dismiss feelings or experiences.

Do encourage, validate, and compliment the courage it takes to share painful thoughts and emotions.

*"Let everything you say be good and helpful,
so that your words will be an encouragement
to those who hear them."*

(Ephesians 4:29 nlt)

Don't communicate that abuse is in some way the victim's fault.

Do express sympathy and compassion.

*"Be sympathetic, love one another,
be compassionate and humble."*

(1 Peter 3:8)

Don't be critical or express judgment.

Do show your love and acceptance.

*"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you,
in order to bring praise to God."*

(Romans 15:7)

Don't assume someone who has been abused is comfortable talking about God and spiritual matters.

Do be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit, and ask if you can share God's Word.

"Let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives."

(Galatians 5:25 nlt)

Don't leave them to their own resources.

Do help them find support, resources, and wise counsel in their community, local church, or online to help them heal and recover.

*"Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed."*

(Proverbs 15:22)

Don't overextend yourself or offer to help in ways you cannot provide.

Do recognize your limits and know when you need to point to additional help or professional counseling.

*"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,
but rather think of yourself with sober judgment."*

(Romans 12:3)

Don't forget to pray *for* them and *with* them, as much as they are comfortable doing so.

Do lift them up before the Lord on a regular basis.

*“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions
with all kinds of prayers and requests.
With this in mind, be alert and always keep on
praying for all the Lord's people.”*

(Ephesians 6:18)

As you seek to help others, don't feel like God can't use you. He can use your pain and your past to comfort another. Almost everyone has been touched either directly or indirectly by some form of abuse. That means everyone is in a position now or will be in the future to further a survivor's journey to becoming an overcomer—to travel from merely coping to thriving, from struggling to surviving, from pain to peace, from victim to victory.

*“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

(1 Corinthians 15:57)

FORGIVENESS

Releasing You Is Freeing Me

What Is God's Heart on Forgiveness?

The thought of forgiving the person who hurt you (or your loved ones) can seem unthinkable, unfair, and unequivocally wrong. For many, the pain is just too real. However, forgiveness is at the heart of God's character. It's why Jesus came. And it's at the heart of healing, growth, and freedom.

Choosing to forgive is not about letting the other person "off the hook" or ignoring the pain and damage that's been done. It's about walking in God's grace, living in freedom, and moving forward with hope.

A good way to think about forgiveness is to imagine letting go of the offense by *releasing* your offender. When you don't forgive, it's like holding on to bitterness, holding on to the pain, and holding on to the offender. When you forgive, you release your resentment, your pain, and your offender into the hands of God.

Forgiveness is difficult, but it is possible by God's grace. His grace helps you heal from past wounds and empowers you to forgive. So when you find yourself struggling to forgive, reflect on God's grace and He will help you walk in the freedom of forgiveness.

*"Let us then approach God's throne
of grace with confidence,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace
to help us in our time of need."*

(HEBREWS 4:16)

God wants us to forgive each other because He has forgiven us.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (EPHESIANS 4:32).

God wants us to forgive others in the same way He forgives us.

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (COLOSSIANS 3:13).

God wants us to see unforgiveness as sin.

"If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them" (JAMES 4:17).

God wants us to get rid of unforgiveness and have a heart of mercy.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (MATTHEW 5:7).

God wants us to do our part to live in peace with everyone.

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (ROMANS 12:18).

God wants us to overcome evil with good.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (ROMANS 12:21).

God wants us to be ministers of reconciliation.

“God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 CORINTHIANS 5:18–19).

God wants us to forgive others so we will not become bitter.

“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (HEBREWS 12:15).

God wants us to forgive others so we will accurately reflect the character of Jesus.

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (EPHESIANS 5:1–2).

What Is Forgiveness *Not*?

Misconceptions abound when the word *forgiveness* is mentioned. Some think forgiveness is the equivalent of *excusing* sin, saying that what was wrong is now right. Yet this is not the example of forgiveness Jesus displayed. When He encountered the mob of men eager to stone a woman caught in adultery, He chose not to stone her. However, neither did He *excuse* her sin. Instead, He said, *“Go, and sin no more”* (John 8:11 KJV). To help correct any confusion about what forgiveness *is*, you need to know what forgiveness is *not*!

*“Let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance.”
(PROVERBS 1:5)*

Forgiveness is not circumventing God’s justice.

- It is allowing God to execute His justice in His time and in His way.

Forgiveness is not waiting for “time to heal all wounds.”

- It is clear that time doesn’t always heal wounds; some people will not allow healing.

Forgiveness is not letting the guilty “off the hook.”

- It is moving the guilty from your hook to God’s hook.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.

- It takes two to reconcile, but it takes only one to forgive.

Forgiveness is not excusing wrong behavior.

- It is acknowledging that wrong behavior is without excuse, while still forgiving.

Forgiveness is not explaining away the hurt.

- It is working through the hurt.

Forgiveness is not based on what is fair.

- It was not “fair” for Jesus to hang on the cross—but He did so that we could be forgiven.

Forgiveness is not being weak.

- It is being strong enough to be Christlike.

Forgiveness is not stuffing your anger.

- It is resolving your anger by releasing the offense to God.

Forgiveness is not a natural response.

- It is a supernatural response, empowered by God.

Forgiveness is not denying the hurt.

- It is feeling the hurt and releasing it to God.

Forgiveness is not being a doormat.

- It is seeing that, if this were so, Jesus would have been the greatest “doormat” of all!

Forgiveness is not conditional.

- It is unconditional, a mandate from God to everyone.

Forgiveness is not forgetting.

- It is necessary to remember before you can forgive.

Forgiveness is not a feeling.

- It is a choice—an act of the will.

Is Forgiveness the Same as Reconciliation?

No. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. *Forgiveness* focuses on the *offense*; *reconciliation* focuses on the *relationship*. Forgiveness requires no relationship. However, reconciliation requires a relationship in which two people, in agreement, are walking together toward the same goal. The Bible says . . .

“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”

(AMOS 3:3)

Forgiveness can take place with only one person.

- **Reconciliation** requires at least two people.

Forgiveness is directed one-way.

- **Reconciliation** is reciprocal, occurring two ways.

Forgiveness is a decision to release the offender.

- **Reconciliation** is the effort to rejoin the offender.

Forgiveness involves a change in thinking about the offender.

- **Reconciliation** involves a change in behavior by the offender.

Forgiveness is a free gift to the one who has broken trust.

- **Reconciliation** is a restored relationship based on restored trust.

Forgiveness is extended even if it is never, ever earned.

- **Reconciliation** is offered to the offender because it has been earned.

Forgiveness is unconditional, regardless of a lack of repentance.

- **Reconciliation** is conditional, based on repentance.

Key Verse to Memorize

*“Bear with each other and forgive one another
if any of you has a grievance against someone.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

(COLOSSIANS 3:13)

Key Passage to Read

Matthew 18:23–35

What Are the Four Stages of Forgiveness?

Have you ever noticed that the word *forgiveness* has the word *give* in it? When you choose to forgive, you give someone a gift—the gift of freedom from having to pay the penalty for offending you, the gift of dismissing the debt owed to you. Because this can be a difficult gift to give, you may need to travel through four stages of forgiveness. Realize that you are also giving yourself a gift—the gift of grudge-free living. That is true freedom.

*“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone
among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.”*

(LEVITICUS 19:18)

1. Face the Offense.

When you feel pain that is personal, unfair, and deep, you have a wound that can be healed only by forgiving the one who wounded you. First you must face the truth of what has actually been done and not hinder true healing by rationalizing or focusing on false thinking.

- **Don't minimize the offense** by thinking: "No matter how badly he treats me, it's okay."

Truth: Bad treatment is not okay. There is no excuse for bad treatment of any kind—any time.

"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (EPHESIANS 5:11).

- **Don't excuse the offender's behavior** by thinking: "He doesn't mean to hurt me. I shouldn't feel upset with him—he's a member of my family!"

Truth: No matter the age of the offender or our relationship, we need to call sin "sin." We need to face the truth instead of trying to change it. There must first be a *guilty* party in order to have someone to forgive.

"Whoever says to the guilty, 'You are innocent,' will be cursed by peoples" (PROVERBS 24:24).

- **Don't assume that quick forgiveness is full forgiveness** by thinking: "As soon as that horrendous ordeal occurred, I quickly and fully forgave him. That's what I've been taught to do."

Truth: Many well-intentioned people feel guilty if they don't extend immediate forgiveness so they "forgive" quickly. Yet they have neither faced the full impact of the offense nor grieved over what actually happened.

Rarely is the full impact of sin felt at the moment it occurs. Rather, its impact is felt at different levels over a period of time. Therefore, forgiveness needs to be extended at each of these levels.

"Quick forgiveness" over deep hurts may seem sufficient, but it may not be "full forgiveness"—not until it has been extended at each level of impact. Before complete forgiveness can be extended, you must face the truth about the gravity of the offense and its extended impact on you.

"You [God] desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place" (PSALM 51:6).

2. Feel the Offense.

We usually do not hate strangers or acquaintances; we just get angry with them when we think we've been wronged by them. But author and theologian Lewis Smedes writes, "When a person destroys what our commitment and our intimacy created, something precious is destroyed." Then anger or even hatred may be our true feeling in response to deep, unfair pain. Hatred toward an offender needs to be brought up out of the basement of our souls and dealt with. However, not all hatred is wrong. For example, God *hates* evil, and we should too.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens . . . a time to love and a time to hate" (ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 8).

Failing to feel the offense results in . . .

- **Denying your pain:** "I don't blame her for always criticizing me. She is under a lot of pressure. And besides, it doesn't hurt me."

Truth: Being mistreated by someone you love is painful. Feeling the pain must take place before healing can occur.

"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (PSALM 34:18).

- **Carrying false guilt:** "I feel guilty if I hate what was done to me. I'm never supposed to have hatred."

Truth: God hates sin. You, too, can hate sin. You are to hate the sin but not the sinner.

"To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech" (PROVERBS 8:13).

3. Forgive the Offender.

“To err is human, to forgive, divine.” This famous quote by English poet Alexander Pope is a heavenly reminder to all of us. However, the earthly reality is more like this: “To err is human, to blame it on someone else is more human!”

Oh, how much easier it is to blame than to forgive. But we are called by God to forgive! When you do forgive, genuine forgiveness draws you into the heart of God, and your life takes on the divine character of Christ.

– **Argument:** “I don’t think it is right to forgive when I don’t feel like forgiving.”

Answer: Forgiveness is not a feeling, but is rather an act of the will—a choice. Jesus established what was right when He said . . .

“When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (MARK 11:25).

– **Argument:** “I can forgive everyone else, but I don’t have the power to forgive that person.”

Answer: The issue is not your lack of power to forgive, but rather how strong God’s power is within you to forgive any sin committed against you.

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 PETER 1:3).

– **Argument:** “Forgiveness isn’t fair. She ought to pay for what she did!”

Answer: God knows how to deal with each person fairly—and He will, in His own time.

“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (ROMANS 12:19).

– **Argument:** “I have forgiven, but it doesn’t do any good. He keeps doing the same thing over and over.”

Answer: You cannot control what others do, but you can control *how you respond* to what others do. Jesus said you are to respond with forgiveness no matter the number of times wronged. The apostle Peter asked Jesus,

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (MATTHEW 18:21–22).

– **Argument:** “I cannot forgive and forget. I keep thinking about being hurt.”

Answer: When you choose to forgive, you don’t get a case of “holy amnesia.” However, after facing the hurt and confronting the offender, close off your mind to rehearsing the pain of the past. Forget about your pain by refusing to focus on your hurt.

“I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14).

4. Find Oneness—If Appropriate.

Relationships filled with resentment ultimately perish. Relationships filled with forgiveness ultimately prevail. However, reconciliation in a relationship—the restoration of oneness—is contingent on several vital factors. When these conditions are met, and when both parties are committed to *honesty* in the relationship, there is real hope that the two can be of one mind and one heart again. The Bible says . . .

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (PHILIPPIANS 2:1–2).

Note: Situations where reconciliation is *not* appropriate include: a physically abusive relationship, an adulterous affair, rape, murder, or even spiritual abuse. For *some* offenses, reconciliation may not be wise or safe. In these instances, seek God’s direction in the decisions you make beyond forgiveness by reading His Word, praying, and talking with a pastor, counselor, or trusted Christian friend about the situation and how best to proceed.

How to Truly Forgive

Have you ever said, “I was severely wronged by someone I once trusted. People tell me I should forgive, but how can I simply let my offender off the hook?” If these words have passed your lips or even crossed your mind, be assured that you are not alone. That is precisely why you need to know how to handle “the hook.”

How to Handle “The Hook”

Make a list of all the offenses caused by your offender.

Imagine a meat hook hanging around your neck and a burlap bag hanging from the hook, laying against your chest. Then imagine all the pain caused by the offenses represented as 100 pounds of rocks dropped into the burlap bag. Now you have 100 pounds of heavy rocks—rocks of resentment—hanging from the hook around your neck.

Ask yourself: “Do I really want to carry all this pain with me for the rest of my life?”

Are you willing to take the pain from the past and release it into the hands of the Lord? If so, lift up your pain and release it all to Jesus.

Visualize taking the one who hurt or offended you off of your “emotional hook” and placing that person onto God’s hook.

Remember, the Lord knows how to deal with your offender in His time and in His way. God says, “*It is mine to avenge; I will repay*” (Romans 12:19).

Finally, use the following model and pray to release your offender to God.

Prayer to Forgive Your Offender

*“Lord Jesus, thank you for caring about
how much my heart has been hurt.
You know the pain I have felt because of
(list every offense).
Right now I release all that pain into your hands.
Thank you, Lord, for dying on the cross for me
and extending your forgiveness to me.
As an act of my will, I choose to forgive (name).
Right now, I move (name) off of
my emotional hook to your hook.
I refuse all thoughts of revenge.
I trust that in your time and in your way
you will deal with (name) as you see fit.
And Lord, thank you for giving me your
power to forgive so that I can be set free.
In your precious name I pray. Amen.”*

Genuine Forgiveness

Question: “How do I know whether I have genuinely forgiven someone?”

Answer: Over time, as you go through the process of forgiveness, you may find old thoughts and feelings resurfacing. You may wonder if you’ve really forgiven your offender. It’s completely normal. Ask yourself the following questions:

- “Do I still expect my offender ‘to pay’ for the wrong done to me?”
- “Do I still have bitter feelings toward my offender?”
- “Do I still have vengeful thoughts toward my offender?”
- “Do I desire that my offender will one day come to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and experience a changed life?”
- “When is the last time I prayed for my offender?”

Remember, forgiving someone does not in any way mean that you do not want justice. It simply means that you are leaving the offense entirely in God’s hands. You are refusing to harbor hateful feelings toward your offender. Forgiveness is an ongoing process which requires that you choose to forgive every time the offense comes to mind. Likewise, you choose to pray for the offender every time the offense crosses your mind.

“Pray for those who hurt you.”

(LUKE 6:28 NLT)

HOPE

The Anchor for Your Soul

What Is God's Heart on Hope?

The world cries out for hope. From individuals and families to cities and nations, the cries for justice, for peace, for *hope* ring out around the world. We cry out for answers, for guidance, for comfort . . . to make it through one more season, to overcome one more tragedy, to persevere one more day.

But there is only one hope that will satisfy our longings and our cries, one hope that will anchor us during the storms of life—the hope of Jesus Christ.

From His first cry as a baby to His last cry on the cross, Jesus Christ came to give us hope. The Bible says of Jesus:

“In his name the nations will put their hope.”

(MATTHEW 12:21)

God is the God of hope.

“I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit” (ROMANS 15:13 NLT).

God is the only lasting hope for everyone.

“You are the hope of everyone on earth, even those who sail on distant seas” (PSALM 65:5 NLT).

God wants your hope to be in Him.

“O Lord, you alone are my hope” (PSALM 71:5 NLT).

God wants His Word and His promises to be your source of hope.

“You are my refuge and my shield; your word is my source of hope” (PSALM 119:114 NLT).

God does not want you to put your hope in people or leaders.

“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes” (PSALM 118:8–9).

God does not want your hope to be in money or wealth.

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 TIMOTHY 6:17).

“There is only one hope that will anchor us during the storms of life—the hope of Jesus Christ.”

God has a plan for your life that is filled with hope.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (JEREMIAH 29:11).

God wants you to have hope all day—every day.

“Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long” (PSALM 25:5).

God gives you hope during times of trouble and suffering.

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (PSALM 42:5).

God strengthens you with His hope.

“But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (ISAIAH 40:31).

God keeps you anchored with His hope.

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (HEBREWS 6:19).

God wants you to know that no matter what happens—there is always hope.

“There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (PROVERBS 23:18).

Key Verse to Memorize

*“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”
(JEREMIAH 29:11)*

My Personalized Plan to Stay Anchored in Hope

True hope comes from knowing Jesus Christ, resting in Him and His plan for both my todays and my tomorrows. Therefore, when unexpected sorrows and hardships come, I will remember God’s promises to me found in the Bible.

*“I am counting on the LORD; yes, I am counting on him.
I have put my hope in his word.”
(PSALM 130:5 NLT)*

As I focus on renewing my mind with God's Word and deepening my hope in Christ, **I will . . .**

Remember that true hope is anchored in God.

- I will remember that true hope is found in God, who doesn't change—not in people, who do change.
- I will remember that true hope is found in God's unchanging Word, not in shifting circumstances or cultural opinions.
- I will remember that true hope is found in God's Son, who loves me and secured my eternity through His death and resurrection.

"And so, Lord, where do I put my hope? My only hope is in you" (PSALM 39:7 NLT).

Recognize that when I feel hopeless, God calls me to trust Him.

- I will accept that in this broken world, I will inevitably face painful circumstances.
- I will accept that even believers can experience sorrow, loneliness, depression, and periods of desperation.
- I will accept that in dark times, God is with me and He desires to give me His love and hope.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (ROMANS 15:13).

Realize that there is always hope and God will help me overcome the obstacles in my life.

- I will trust that God is always with me, guarding and guiding me, fulfilling His purposes for me.
- I will trust that God is in control of the circumstances of my life, and I can learn and grow during both good and bad circumstances.
- I will trust that God can use me to be an encouragement to others who are facing their own obstacles.

"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; . . . The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever" (PSALM 138:7–8 ESV).

Rely on the Lord and others for support and help when I feel hopeless.

- I will remember that I don't have to suffer alone or in silence, and I will acknowledge my need for help.
- I will seek the support of a counselor, friend, or pastor when I feel unable to handle my situation or emotions.
- I will seek God in prayer, trusting Him to give me victory and use my trials for my good and His glory.

"Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory" (PROVERBS 11:14 NASB).

Recount my blessings, thanking God for them.

- I will thank God for all the good things in my life—for family and friends, work and play, clothes and food, rest and inspiration.
- I will do at least one thing a day that brings me joy and focuses my attention on Jesus.
- I will remember all the things God has brought me through in the past and trust Him for my future.

"Put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption" (PSALM 130:7).

Reach out to others and share the hope of Christ.

- I will pray for those in my life who do not know the Lord—that God will save them.
- I will look for opportunities to share the hope of Christ with the lost.
- I will encourage others who are suffering or facing a trial with God's truth.

"Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 THESSALONIANS 5:11).

4 POINTS OF GOD'S PLAN

Whether you're trying to make sense of your past, trying to overcome something in the present, or trying to make changes for a better future, the Lord cares about you. He loves you. No matter what challenges you or your loved ones are facing, no matter the pain or difficult feelings you may be experiencing, no matter what you've done or what's been done to you, *there is hope*. And that hope is found in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan for your life, and it begins with a personal relationship with Jesus. The most important decision you can ever make is whether you will accept His invitation. If you have never made that decision, these four simple truths can help you start your journey together with Him.

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,
‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future.’”*
(JEREMIAH 29:11)

God's Purpose for You: *Salvation*

What was God's motivation in sending Jesus Christ to earth? To express His love for you by saving you! The Bible says, *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”* (John 3:16–17).

What was Jesus' purpose in coming to earth? To forgive your sins, to empower you to have victory over sin, and to enable you to live a fulfilled life! Jesus said, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (John 10:10).

The Problem: *Sin*

What exactly is sin? Sin is living independently of God's standard—knowing what is wrong and doing it anyway—also knowing what is right and choosing not to do it. The apostle Paul said, *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway”* (Romans 7:18–19 NLT).

What is the major consequence of sin? Spiritual death, eternal separation from God. The Bible says, *“Your iniquities [sins] have separated you from your God”* (Isaiah 59:2). Scripture also says, *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23).

God's Provision for You: *The Savior*

Can anything remove the penalty for sin? Yes! Jesus died on the cross to personally pay the penalty for your sins. The Bible says, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

What is the solution to being separated from God? Belief in (entrusting your life to) Jesus Christ as the only way to God the Father. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). The Bible says, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . .”* (Acts 16:31).

Your Part: *Surrender*

Give Christ control of your life, entrusting yourself to Him. Jesus said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”* (Matthew 16:24–26).

Place your faith in (rely on) Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and reject your “good works” as a means of earning God’s approval. The Bible says, *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Has there been a time in your life when you know you’ve humbled your heart and received Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—giving Him control of your life? You can tell God that you want to surrender your life to Christ in a simple, heartfelt prayer like this:

*“God, I want a real relationship with you.
I admit that many times I’ve chosen to go my own way instead of your way.
Please forgive me for my sins.
Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins.
Come into my life to be my Lord and my Savior.
Change me from the inside out and make me
the person you created me to be.
In your holy name I pray. Amen.”*

What Can You Now Expect?

When you surrender your life to Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit who empowers you to live a life pleasing to God. The Bible says, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life . . .”* (2 Peter 1:3). Jesus assures those who believe with these words:

*“Truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me
has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”*

(JOHN 5:24)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

God gives us His Word not just for information but for transformation. The Lord wants you to “*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2). This isn’t something you do alone, but something God does in you by His Spirit.

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on the biblical truths in this resource. Take a moment to pray and ask God to settle your mind and quiet your spirit as you reflect on His truth.

“Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.”
(2 TIMOTHY 2:7)

What are two key truths, Bible verses, or “takeaways” from this resource that you found helpful—or that you simply needed to be reminded of?

In relation to these topics, what behavior(s) do you need to *begin, change, or stop* in order to help you grow into the person God created you to be?

In relation to these topics, what is the biggest obstacle you need to overcome in order to move forward?

What might your life look like a few years from now if you do *not* make changes regarding these issues? How might your life be different if you *do* make changes?

Is there anyone in your life who needs help with these topics/issues? How can you pray for them, and what is one thing you can do to encourage them?

What can you give thanks to God for today?

*“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father, who loved us
and by his grace gave us eternal comfort
and a wonderful hope,
comfort you and strengthen you
in every good thing you do and say.”
(2 THESSALONIANS 2:16–17 NLT)*

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