

# Healing the Wounds of Trauma and Abuse

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to bring an understanding of trauma and abuse, of the different types of abuse that may occur, of their prevalence in the world and in the church, and of their effects on a life. It is critical to understand the damage of abuse in order to serve victims well. Failure to know what trauma does to humans and how to respond to victims results in doing further damage to a vulnerable human. We will look at three components of healing that are both basic and easily used across cultures: talking, tears, and time. We will also see that responding to trauma in the lives of others is participation in the life of Christ, who came in part to heal the brokenhearted.

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**S**ome years ago, I was in Ghana, speaking on violence against women and children. While there we visited Cape Coast Castle. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced through its dungeons and then the door of no return onto slave ships. There were five dungeon chambers for males. The descent into the darkness to one of those dungeons brought on claustrophobia. Two hundred men shackled and chained together stayed in that dungeon for about three months before being shipped across the Atlantic.

We stood in one of the male dungeons, listening in the darkness, when our guide said this: “Do you know what is above this dungeon?” Our heads shook. “The chapel,” he said. Directly above two hundred shackled men—some of them dead, others screaming, all of them sitting in filth—sat God

worshippers. They sang, read Scripture, prayed, and, I suppose, took up an offering for those less fortunate. The slaves could hear the service; the worshippers could sometimes hear the slaves, though there were those making them behave so as not to disturb the church. The evil, the suffering, the humiliation, and the injustice were overwhelming, and the visual parable was stunning. The people in the chapel were numb to the horrific trauma and suffering beneath them. In fact, they were actively complicit.

Under the *form* of worship in that chapel in Ghana lay the darkness of slavery, oppression, and tyranny—all things that blight and destroy humans created in the image of God. But I think you know Christianity does *not* look like being folded up with evil and worshiping on top of dungeons. Following Christ *does not* look like complicity with a system that butters our bread and fills our coffers built on the back of those created in the image of God. It does not look like praying and singing and giving money on top of screams, unspeakable suffering, filth, and death. Our guide pointed up to the church above and said, “Heaven above; hell below.” But I would argue that heaven was *not* above, for that is not what heaven does. And it is what heaven does that is the reason we serve others. Heaven leaves the chapel and goes down into the dungeon to bring those so enslaved out into light and freedom so that they in turn can go back and bring more. Heaven uses all power to bless.<sup>1</sup>

I invite you to enter the dungeon of abuse with me. We do not have to go far—it is in our homes, our schools, our military, our neighborhoods, and our churches. When I first started working with victims of abuse forty-six years ago, the church largely ignored and often actively denied the dungeon of abuse. We did not believe it really existed and were certain it never occurred in the homes represented in our pews, the lives of our parishioners, and never, never within the church itself. Sadly, it has taken the media and the courts to make it abundantly clear that sexual abuse is in all such places and has even been perpetrated or covered up by some we have held in high esteem. I am grieved that it has been the media and not the voice of God’s people that has dragged it to the light.

Like our Lord—who was anointed to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to set captives at liberty—you and I are called to leave the comfort of our chapels and enter into the devastating suffering of those who have been shattered by the evil of abuse. Jesus demonstrated in the flesh the character of God; his church is to do the

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 4–7. Parts of this article build on this earlier work.

same. When God's people worship above and separate from and untouched by dungeons, they are *not* worshiping the God of the Scriptures. There is *nothing* in the Scriptures to suggest that being indifferent, uncaring, and deaf to the cries of suffering humans is godly.

God has sown his life in you and me. In this dark and fallen world, filled with blasted and ruined humanity, he has sown his life in us and flung us out. He has, however, also made it clear that the enemy has sown seed as well, and it is growing and maturing right in there with the wheat. *It is with us*—not just out there. God has said so, and he has said it will be so until he returns. The Cape Coast dungeons were *under* the chapel. They were not a separate building and were not outside the walls of the fort. Ananias and Sapphira, Simon Magus, the man in the Corinthian church who had sex with his mother—they were part of the church. They were not out there; they were on the inside. As we consider the topic of abuse, we must be aware that it is not a problem just out there in the world—it is also among the people of God. We fail to understand and believe our Lord's teaching if we think otherwise.

## I. *Statistics*

So let us look into this dungeon of shattered, wounded, and confused humans our God so loves—some of whom attend our churches.

### 1. *Global Statistics about Abuse*

- 20% of women report being sexually abused<sup>2</sup>
- 35% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence
- 42% of those women report an injury as a result of the violence
- 38% of murders of women are committed by male partners<sup>3</sup>
- 51% of human trafficking victims globally are women
- 75% of trafficked females are girls
- 15 million adolescent girls have experienced forced sex
- 87 thousand women globally were intentionally killed in 2017
- Less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help<sup>4</sup>
- Almost 8% of men report being sexually abused as a child

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<sup>2</sup> "Child Maltreatment," *World Health Organization*, last modified September 30, 2016, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>.

<sup>3</sup> "Violence against Women," *World Health Organization*, last modified November 29, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

<sup>4</sup> "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women," *UN Women*, last modified November 2018, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>.

- 41,000 children under 15 die by homicide annually<sup>5</sup>
- Homicide is among the top three causes of death in adolescents
- 80% of both victims and perpetrators of homicide are boys<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Rates among Sexually Abused Males**

- 4 times more likely for major depression
- 3 times more likely for bulimia
- $\geq 2$  times more likely for antisocial personality disorder
- 1.5–14 times more likely to attempt suicide (does not include age range)
- 2 times more likely to use alcohol
- 5 times more likely to use drugs
- Sexually abused 6th grade boys were 12 times more likely to engage in multi-substance abuse
- Sexually and physically abused 6th grade boys were 44 times more likely to engage in multi-substance abuse.<sup>7</sup>

These numbers are staggering, and the damage to people created in the image of God is clear. Many of you are part of institutions that bear the name of our Lord Christ. When we say something is “in his name,” that should mean that it bears his character. We are called by our God to care for the afflicted, to open our mouths for the mute, to be a light in the darkness and a place of sanctuary for those around us. These abuses happen with shocking frequency in our churches and Christian organizations.<sup>8</sup> To cover up sin “for the sake of the institution” is the equivalent of hiding a cancerous lump in your body to preserve your life. Stop and think about the statistics in the context of your country, your community, and your church or institution, and you begin to grasp the prevalence of these crimes. Given the impact of abuse on an individual life, society, and the church, and the frequency of its occurrence, it is crucial that the church not be silent. Not only does God call us to speak, but he also calls his church to be a refuge and a place for hope and healing. Anything less is a failure to demonstrate his character in this world.

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<sup>5</sup> “Child Maltreatment.”

<sup>6</sup> “Violence against Children,” *World Health Organization*, last modified June 7, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>.

<sup>7</sup> William C. Holmes and Gail B. Slap, “Sexual Abuse of Boys: Definition, Prevalence, Correlates, Sequelae, and Management,” *JAMA Pediatr.* 280.21 (1998): 1855–62, doi.org/10.1001/jama.280.21.1855.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Dowen, Lise Olsen, and John Tedesco, “Abuse of Faith,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 2019.

## **II. *Three Stories***

How can we, both individually and corporately, be a sanctuary for those who have been wounded by abuse? To do so, we must first grasp what it means to be a victim. Here are three stories of abuse that will help us do that.

Picture a woman who grew up in a home where she felt loved though life was a bit chaotic, and her parents were stressed. There were many children, money was tight, and mom suffered from significant depression. The little girl was lonely. A friend invited her to come to her church. They had a great youth group, and the young pastor who ran it was energetic and warm and had a pretty wife. She loved it, so she attended weekly for months. The youth pastor was fun and taught them about God. She was hungry to know more. He paid attention to her and offered to teach her individually so she could learn more about God. He would take her to the local deli and get her a sandwich and listen to her and answer her questions. It was wonderful; she felt special; she felt like she mattered to the youth pastor—but even more to God.

Then one day, it got strange. The youth pastor started talking about how special she was and how he wanted to see more of her. He started touching her. She did not like it, but was afraid to say so, thinking maybe she just misunderstood. Eventually, one day, he drove her home and, on the way, forced her into sex. She was terrified and in pain. She was thirteen years old. She tried to tell her friend from church. The friend's mother told the pastor, but he never called her, and no one asked her questions. A woman at church said she probably should not keep coming to the church because they did not want her to damage the youth pastor's reputation. Her friend quit talking to her, even at school, so she disappeared.

She read in the paper years later that the youth pastor had been arrested—it turned out she was not the only one he had treated this way. No one came to speak with her about it. She never told her story again. Twenty years later, she sits in a pew in your church still hungry for the God she longed for at thirteen and yet terrified, certain her search will result in more hurt and denial and silence. It took tremendous courage even to cross the threshold and sit in the pew. She will hear you teach and wonder what you would say if you knew her story. She is afraid to hear what God thinks of her and yet remains hungry for his love. Will she ever hear truth about sexual abuse from the pulpit or in a class? How do you think she would feel if, as a pastor, you asked to meet with her?

What were the lessons of the church for this woman? That church is a place of worshipping God? A refuge? A sanctuary? That sheep can safely

graze inside its walls? That truth is taught and desired? That godliness is sought after, and sin is dealt with no matter where it is found? That the Good Shepherd says to let the little ones come to him without hindrance?

Here is another story. Michael went away to overnight camp at age seven. He was scared and homesick. He did not know any of the other boys. His counselor paid him special attention. It made him feel important. But then it got strange and scary. The counselor would teach the Bible study at night and then take Michael for a walk and make him do things he did not like. It kept happening every night. He tried to tell the camp nurse. She told him he must be wrong—his counselor was the son of the director and was such a nice kid; he would not do anything like that. Michael is now thirty-five, married with two children, and attending your church. He has never told his story. He is terrified others would question his sexuality—he has always feared that response. He has a significant pornography addiction that no one knows about, not even his wife. He does not understand why he cannot stop.

What does he think about men in power in the church? How safe does he feel about telling the truth? How comfortable is he in the men's ministry—especially when they talk about things like transparency? What might he believe God thinks of him? He is hurting himself and his wife, he is full of shame, and he feels like he has no place to go where he can speak truth. What will you speak in your sermons, your teachings, your small groups, that might give him hope?

Finally, Sarah and her husband attend your church. He attends faithfully and counts money from the offering. Sarah is quiet and does not say much. She assists in Sunday school classes. They have two children who are also quiet and very polite. One day Sarah comes to the pastor's office. She is obviously very nervous, cannot look him in the face or hold her hands still. She says she is afraid. He says it is okay and waits to hear what she wants to say. Eventually, she says "My husband gets angry sometimes." Over time you learn that her husband batters her until she is bruised where it cannot be seen, bites her, holds a gun to her head, and terrifies the children. You are stunned. You cannot imagine that the man who helps out at church could be such a vicious and dangerous man. What will you say? Will you encourage her to return home and treat her husband better—thus endangering her health and her life? Surely, you think, she has misunderstood. Will her safety be tossed aside so that you can keep your assumptions about this man safe instead? How does she think about God? You sing about God as a refuge. Will you be one for her? She has heard you teach about marriage. Has she ever heard anyone at church teach about abuse in marriage and how God thinks about it? What will you do to protect her and the children?

### III. *Analysis*

We need to explore the experience of abuse if we are to understand what victims such as these endure. Historically, when someone has endured a traumatic event, they have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, as our understanding of trauma has grown, we have come to realize that many people do not experience a one-time event but instead live with relentless, ongoing trauma. They are, as it were, marinating in evil. Ongoing sexual abuse, domestic violence, verbal battering, and growing up in a violent neighborhood all mean living with continuous trauma. Enduring that trauma shapes humans in grievous ways. The stressors are repetitive and chronic. They usually involve direct harm or neglect by those who should have been caregivers. How the brain works, how the body works, how the self is understood, how thoughts are organized, how the world is labeled, how emotions are named and regulated, and how relationships are understood and conducted all have their roots in the life-destroying acid of trauma.

As a result of chronic interpersonal abuse, the individual develops vigilance, constant anticipation of danger, chronic anxiety, and terror. They are never at ease. All of the person's psychological energy is bent *by necessity* toward coping, surviving rather than learning or growing. So rather than learning, imagining, experimenting and growing, they are instead learning to fear, to hide, and to self-protect. They have been betrayed by or separated from those who should be caring and nurturing and cannot find or seek assistance and safety, as there is no safe person in their world.

Many have experienced or witnessed atrocities. They bring those memories into our churches, often hidden away but very alive. Some have or will experience such things within our churches or institutions. All of these things—things we find difficult to comprehend are endured by human beings. They result in traumatized human beings. Victims live with the recurring, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne. It infects their sleep with nightmares, destroys their relationships and their capacity to work or study, torments their emotions, shatters their faith, and mutilates hope. Trauma is indeed extraordinary, not because it rarely happens but because it overwhelms normal human coping. It swallows up and destroys normal human ways of living. It does not take much thought to see what these things would do to a person who is trying to learn or manage a life.

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<sup>9</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-V* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The usual response to atrocity is to try to remove it from the mind. Those who have been traumatized want to flee the memory, and we who hear find that we want to flee also. We find it too terrible to remember and too incomprehensible to put into words, and so we choose not to believe the story. That is why we use the phrase unspeakable atrocities. The great tension is the futile attempt to forget the unspeakable—while it continues to live on and sometimes scream in the mind. That push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma, and that tension is experienced not only by individuals and families, but also by churches and schools and nations. It is experienced not only by the traumatized but also by those who bear witness to the trauma.

I know something of this tension. I have seen this push-pull in my clients who are terrified to remember and speak but who cannot forget. I have seen families, churches, institutions and yes, nations, deny both the existence of evil and trauma in their midst and its impact. I also know this tension exists in those who bear witness, for it exists in me. We see it on television or the Internet; someone tells of an atrocity, and soon after we look for ways to remove ourselves. Such stories threaten our comfort, our position, or our system. The stories are vile and messy and very disruptive. We prefer they stay in the dungeon. Traumatized people need attention and assistance, often for a long time. We are busy people doing important things. The trauma stories of our families, institutions, and organizations get buried, and geographical distance and the push of a button enable us to do the same with entire nations. Ask Rwanda.

Ongoing abuse in a life results in a broken identity. We believe that every human was knit together by God in their mother's womb. We believe that each one is created in the image of our God, no exceptions. You cannot be repeatedly abused and not have that shape your personhood. Abuse teaches people they are trash, expendable, shameful, and bad. Abuse is crushing, oppressive, and silencing. *Any abuse* does spiritual damage. It hides the love of the Father. It renders any idea of refuge impossible to hold. It shatters any thoughts of a safe shepherd, let alone one who gives his own life for the sake of his lambs.

#### **IV. *Shepherding the Traumatized***<sup>10</sup>

Our God describes a good shepherd when he says, "I will feed my flock and ... lead them to rest .... I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up

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<sup>10</sup> The following section builds on Diane Langberg, "Helping the Traumatized," *CareLeader*, September 20, 2016, <https://www.careleader.org/shepherding-traumatized/>.



the broken and strengthen the sick” (Ezek 34:15–16 NASV). As pastors and leaders, many of you are shepherds of God’s sheep. It is an eternally significant task and often fraught with difficulties. One of the crucial things necessary for doing your work well is that you must know your sheep. You cannot care for or guide those you do not know.

Given the statistics we have listed, it seems safe to conclude that all pastors have trauma victims sitting in their pews. Most of them are silent about what they have endured. Trauma has a profound spiritual impact. Trauma raises questions about who God is: his character, his faithfulness, his purposes, and his capacity to keep us. That victims struggle is evidence of faith. It is essential that we understand these struggles and not silence them or treat them as a failure of faith. When we silence victims of trauma and their questions, we do further damage and in fact become an obstacle in the work that God can and wants to do in a life battered by trauma and evil.

People who are suffering long for help and comfort. It is an open door for the church to bend down, like her Lord bent down for us, and enter into traumatized lives with help and companionship and comfort. As we do so, we will begin to see, like Israel of old, the trauma wilderness in which many dwell, the valley of trouble, becoming a door of hope (Hos 2:14–15). The church of Jesus Christ is called to bring light to dark places, love to damaged souls, and truth about who our God is—he who entered in so *that* we might know him and be like him.

## ***V. How to Enter into Traumatized Lives***

How can God’s shepherds enter into traumatized lives and lead their people to do the same?

Of first importance is an understanding of what suffering does to humans. If you know someone full of cancer or battling chronic pain, you know that suffering reduces a person. It lessens all of their capacities, not just physically but also mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. They become less themselves. That is just as true for unseen wounds as it is for physical diseases. It is true for a combat vet, a rape victim, an incest survivor, a domestic violence victim, or a survivor of war. They may look fine, but the mind and heart wounds run deep and affect them profoundly. If we attempt to enter into the life of someone who is reduced, limited, altered by their suffering, we must reduce ourselves as well. That is why we are quiet in a hospital room. For those suffering trauma, fewer words, quiet voices, and patience are vital to our entering in so we do not bring further harm. In doing so, we are following our Savior, who was made flesh, greatly reduced

from his eternal glory so as to enter in and become like us. It is, in fact, Christ-like to lower ourselves in the face of another's suffering. And then, when sufferers are slow to speak, slow to listen, or slow to change, our responses are also to be like our incarnate Savior's toward us. It is in part how those who are suffering begin to see, in the flesh, a bit of who our God truly is with his creatures when they are reduced, overwhelmed, helpless, or slow. We bring him to them by who we are with them in their worst places.

At the same time, a truth I did not see for some time became stunningly clear to me as the years went by. God is always working both sides. I am not just present to sufferers so that they can receive comfort or grow. I am there because God is exposing to me where I am unlike him so that I can run to him and have him teach me where I am wrong and what he would do in me to make me more like himself. It is a principle applicable to all of life. All God's people are called to Christ-likeness. Our failures in that area, which are many, teach lies about who he is and damage both us and those with whom we interact. Typically, in painful situations, humans react with attempts to change either the other person or their circumstances. This can be particularly true when hearing a story of overwhelming evil and suffering. We want them to get better so we can both feel better. However, God uses ministry to the traumatized to change caregivers as much as victims.

Following a traumatic experience, every human being must make the heartbreaking adjustment to a new world full of losses. People who experience trauma feel alone, helpless, humiliated, and hopeless. They turn inward, away from life, because the memories and the feelings are all that they can handle. This is not wrong; it is necessary for a while. However, eventually, if life is to go on, the person must return to the outside world. What kinds of things are needed to help people face what is inside, to remember well, and yet still be able to return to us and to life in a way that is good?

## **VI. *What Does Healing Look Like?***

Recovery involves a reversal of the experience of trauma. Trauma brings silence because victims feel like there are no words to describe what happened. Trauma brings emotional darkness and aloneness because victims feel like no one cares and no one could possibly understand. Trauma makes time stand still because victims get so lost in what happened they cannot see forward and have lost hope. Three main things must occur to reverse this experience and bring about recovery. All three must happen.

Talking is part of being human. It is how God made us. He meant for us to talk, to express ourselves, to dialogue together with him and with each

other. When someone does not talk, something is broken. There may be something physically wrong, or they may be emotionally wounded. Sometimes when people do not talk at all or do not talk about a particular event it is because the pain is so great that they cannot find the words—or they keep saying the same thing over and over again trying to find the right words and get relief.

First, talking is necessary for trauma healing, and that means the victim talks—not the helper! The helper is there to invite talking, to listen, to bear witness, and to restore dignity. What happened matters. Even though words are not enough to describe terrible things, they still must be spoken. To remain silent is to fail to honor the event, the victim, and the memory. Honoring the memory means speaking the truth about it, saying it really happened, saying it was evil, and saying that it did damage. It dishonors victims when we are silent about their experience or pretend it did not occur or was not important. It leaves them alone, afraid, and full of lies about what happened and about themselves. Talking says, “I am here. What happened was wrong. I am damaged by it. Justice is needed, and so is care for my broken heart.” At the beginning, “talking” might not be done using words. Sometimes people only moan or sigh or cry or scream. It is the beginning of giving voice to that which cannot be spoken. Many times, people need us to sit with them in silence. It is a way of joining with them so they are not alone in their experience of struggling to find words. Eventually, words will come. Trauma stories do not first come out with a beginning, middle, and end. They come out in broken pieces, disordered, and often unclear.

Trauma silences victims. It isolates them. They feel helpless. Talking is about telling the truth. It connects the survivor to another person. It restores dignity because their story matters. It gives them choice because they can decide when to speak or be silent, and victims get to choose their own words. It is the reversal of what happened during the trauma. It gives them a voice in a safe relationship where they are helped back into life. Injustice, violence, and abuse teach us lies. Such events suggest we are worthless and do not matter. Talking tells the truth and gives dignity because the story matters, as does its impact. Violence and abuse disconnect us from caring relationships. We are alone, and we are not considered. Telling the story gives a place of caring connection that helps the soul. Trauma recovery requires talking, and as the story is repeated over and over, strength to state and grasp the truth grows.

Second, trauma recovery also requires tears. Facing a new world full of losses brings grief. Many emotions are the companions of trauma: fear,

sadness, aloneness, shame, despair, anger, and grief are some of them. These are strong emotions, and they are hard to experience. These are not feelings any of us want. However, like words, they must be expressed. Feelings tell the story as much as words. Feelings express what the trauma did to the victim just like blood shows what a cut did to the skin. It is like seeing and acknowledging the physical wounds on the body after an accident. Feelings are the expression of the wounds of the heart, and they too need to be seen and heard. Feelings are part of how our hearts “talk.”

Many survivors try hard not to feel and will often say things like, “If I start crying, I will never stop.” Or, “If I feel the grief or hopelessness I will fall into a black hole and never get out.” Many will try hard not to feel anything, and often people will use alcohol or drugs to help them feel numb. They try to stay drunk or use drugs to keep the memories and feelings away. Or they go numb and just sit and stare. When people do such things, they spend their lives still controlled by the trauma because everything they are doing is about running from it. It is just as much in charge of their lives as when it was occurring.

At the same time, all of us need to remember that telling a trauma story—facing the truth and expressing the deep and painful emotions—takes tremendous courage. Most people cannot do it alone. They need connection with a caring and patient person to help them have the courage to face the truth of what happened and how it hurt them. A companion in tragedy or difficulty always helps us have courage.

Psalms 56:8 (ESV) says, “You (God) have kept count of my tossing, and put my tears in your bottle. Are they not also in your book?” This is an essential truth because often we are uncomfortable with strong emotions. Some cultures say strong feelings are not proper, religious teachings may say such feelings indicate unbelief, or family teachings may suggest we should just be strong, or that feelings are alright for women but not for men or for children but not for adults. Somehow strong emotions are seen as a sign of weakness. This verse says that the God who created us considers our pain, pays attention to it, collects our tears in a bottle, and writes them in his book because we matter, what happened matters, and our feelings about it matter to him also. He is recording our story and our tears for us. We will help others if we learn to be like him in the way we treat feelings. We honor others and help them record the story of their trauma by listening to their words and their tears. Tears require strength and courage because it means facing pain.

Dealing with trauma is often repetitious. Survivors will say the same things over and over: “How could my father do that to me?” They will be

repetitious in dealing with their emotions: “I am so angry that ....” And they will repeat their losses again and again: “I cannot believe so-and-so is dead.” Expect it and sit with it. The weight of the trauma is so great that repetition is necessary. The mind cannot imagine what happened. It cannot hold such a thought. Bearing the intensity of emotions is impossible, and so the feelings must be tried on again and again. These are attempts to bear what cannot be borne. The victim is trying to learn “how to wear” what feels frightening and brings great pain. They keep wanting to throw it off. They are struggling to integrate into life what hurts and does not fit. Be patient and then be patient some more. Telling and retelling help to reduce the size of the memory. Talking or telling the story and expressing the feelings are instruments in the hands of the survivor that they can use toward their healing. It is a way of gaining mastery over fear and helplessness; it is a choice toward life rather than death. To hear a story is to be taught, but to tell a story is to be master over it. To tell that story with all the emotions that accompany it in a way that can be heard and understood by another is to have learned how to speak truth and contain it so it does not swallow you up.

A third thing must occur for trauma recovery to begin and grow, and this third thing we have no control over. We cannot make it happen and cannot stop it from happening. It is time. Trauma recovery needs talking, tears, and time, and it must have all three. If you do not tell the story there will be no recovery. People will stay stuck in the past and controlled by the trauma—either because they use tremendous energy to keep it away or because it controls their sleep, their relationships, their feelings, their actions, and their faith. It must be spoken over and over again. Trauma recovery needs tears. Tears honor the victim and the awfulness of what occurred. Tears express buried emotions that haunt sleep and disturb life. Tears honor those who have been lost—they are worth crying over. Tears are a way of remembering. Expressing emotions, finding words for them is also a way of gaining mastery over them. In both talking and tears, the victim is staring down the trauma as one might stare down an enemy and saying, “I am alive. I will speak what is true. I will be in charge of my own story rather than having the trauma control me. I will give it the space and honor it is due. It mattered then, and it matters now.”

It takes time for these things to happen. It takes time for words to come. It takes time to listen and understand. It takes time for feelings to be expressed and understood. Recovery from anything takes time. If you fall off some steps and break a bone, it will take time for the doctor to understand what bone is broken and how to heal it. He will need to listen and explore so he understands exactly what the problem is. You will hurt. You will be in pain.

Even after the doctor does some things to help the bone reset; it will still hurt. You may want your leg to be better tomorrow. You may want the pain to be over. It will not change the pace at which time proceeds. It always goes by one minute at a time, and there is nothing you can do about it. Time is needed for recovery. It is not the same amount for each trauma survivor. Some take longer than others. There are many reasons for this. But no matter how strong someone is; no matter how hard they work to tell their story and express their feelings; it still will take time. And there are two things I can tell you about time: there is nothing we can do to make it go faster, and when we are in pain that is exactly what we want it to do!

We know from research that as time passes, trauma survivors end up carrying a smaller piece of the whole—especially if the story has been told. As life goes on around the survivor, new experiences and new relationships affect them, and they can learn new responses to their past instead of those the trauma taught them. Some of those new experiences are found in the ways you treat them when they sit with you.

## Conclusion

Here are the words of a genocide survivor in Rwanda who lived through unspeakable atrocities and trauma: “I saw only evil. I no longer believed God to be good. The church was not a sanctuary for my family; it was a cemetery. But then you came, you listened, and you heard my broken heart. And now I think I can believe that God too is listening and hears my pain and will be my sanctuary because I have gotten a taste of him through you.”

The Word was made flesh for you and me. Now you and I are called to do the same for the world. We are to flesh out the character of God for others. When you, as a shepherd of the sheep, name the unspeakable things for your people, gently call them to begin to speak the truth about their lives and the wounds they bear, then over time you can teach your people to go with you into the dark places of great suffering in your pews and around the world.

Jesus went through villages and cities, teaching, preaching, and healing. And “*seeing* the people” he was moved with compassion (cf. Matt 9:36). They were distressed, wounded, bleeding sheep. He saw what others did not see. They were fainting, fleeced by wolves, and without a shepherd’s care. In response to what he saw, he said to his disciples, “Harvest ...” (v. 37). These seem to be contradictory figures, mixed metaphors. A flock of sheep wounded and fainting and harvest. Harvest is usually about a robust, healthy, flourishing crop. Here is the profound truth about Jesus’s mission: human need, distress, and trauma constitute harvest for him and his

workers. Where the day is darkest and the need is sorest *there* the fields are white to harvest. Trauma is a significant mission field of the twenty-first century. He did not say such devastation was hopeless; he said that it was a plenteous harvest. It is a place of service for God's people, and in that place, God will use the horror and the evil of trauma to transform both victim and caregiver. In Isaiah 61:4, God speaks of rebuilding ruins, raising up what is devastated, and restoring what is desolated. Such work is healing to those who have been devastated. That work also is used by God to make his people, who are called by his name, bear his image more clearly in this world.