

when it's trauma

A Biblical Guide to
Understanding Trauma
and Walking Faithfully
with Sufferers

D A R B Y A . S T R I C K L A N D


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El trauma: cómo atender a los sobrevivientes

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The stories in this book are compilations. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To the precious saints who have shared their stories with me

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INTRODUCTION

I HAVE WRITTEN THIS BOOK for anyone who desires to come alongside someone who has been deeply wounded, whether by a devastating event or by another person. Maybe a tragedy has struck a family at your church, and you fear saying or doing something that would cause them more pain. Maybe someone in your life has received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, and you want to know whether Scripture speaks to something like that. Maybe you're concerned because a friend reacted with intense fear when you came up behind them to say hi or to give them a hug. Maybe you're a church leader, counselor, or layperson who simply wants to be prepared to help.

This book was born out of years I've spent sitting with people whose lives have been shaped by profound suffering. Some were harmed by other people, most grievously by those who were called to love them. Others faced medical crises, suffered tragic accidents, or endured circumstances that shattered their sense of safety. Some questioned where God had been in it all.

Initially, I struggled to help them because I myself felt overwhelmed by their suffering. Their stories drove me deep into Scripture as I searched its pages for hope and refuge for them, clarity for myself, and words that could express their experiences. I soon saw that Scripture does speak of trauma, time and again, without minimizing it. Not only that, but it addresses trauma's wounds and offers solace to those who suffer from them. From the psalmist's lament "I am in distress; my eye is wasted

from grief” (Ps. 31:9) to Tamar’s cries after she was sexually violated (see 2 Sam.13:19–20), Scripture itself gives voice to the human reactions we now associate with trauma.

More than that, Scripture also reveals a God who steps into the brokenness caused by terrible suffering. He does not turn away from the wounded; he draws near. He listens, he sustains, and he restores. During his people’s darkest moments, he is not absent—he is *present* to offer them mercy, healing, and hope. Our Lord Jesus tells us that he is not a distant observer of pain but the Good Shepherd who intimately knows his sheep (see John 10:14). For trauma survivors, this is not a sentimental image. It is a lifeline.

Although it can be easy for us to view trauma solely as a clinical diagnosis or a modern psychological concept, the experience is ancient. To be traumatized is to feel exposed, unseen, disoriented. Trauma fractures trust: our trust in others, in ourselves, even in God. But Jesus says, “I know my own and my own know me . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep.” He does not recoil from the wounds we carry. Nor is he like the hired hand who runs when danger comes. He stays. He defends the flock. He gathers the scattered. He carries the wounded close to his heart (see Isa. 40:11). He knows what it is to be struck, to be abandoned, to cry out and feel forsaken. And because he does, he can meet his sheep in their deepest pain—not with platitudes but with presence.

And he invites us to join him (see Luke 4:18–19).

Every Sunday, victims of terrible crises and betrayals sit in our pews . . . unnoticed, unheard, and often profoundly alone. They smile, nod, and participate in church life, yet they carry deep and lasting wounds. Their trauma is more than a painful experience in the past; it is an enduring presence in their lives. We have the opportunity to respond to such trauma in our midst with understanding—to meet it with compassion, truth, and the hope of Christ. In fact, his body, the church—a refuge for the weary, a place of healing for the broken—is called to do so.

Doing so is not easy. When we encounter tremendous suffering, we do not always know what to do or say. We need more than good intentions. And the truth is that *we* don’t possess the power to take away other people’s pain. However, if we are willing to be present with victims of trauma and to suffer alongside them, we will see that God works in

remarkable ways to comfort and heal them. This is the deep conviction that lies behind this book.

A Map for the Journey Ahead

This book consists of three parts.

- *Part 1: Foundations of Care.* We begin not with strategies but with presence. With listening. With seeing. In part 1, we explore how we can be wise companions to people who are walking through deep suffering—and how Jesus himself draws near to the broken-hearted.
- *Part 2: Wounds of Trauma.* Here we will next delve into specific wounds caused by trauma. Each chapter of part 2 follows a similar structure by defining and describing one of those wounds, showing how Scripture portrays it, overviewing its impacts on a sufferer, and then explaining how a helper can provide support. Some suggestions will be most practical for formal counseling relationships, while others may be useful in any context. Each chapter also includes discovery questions you can ask a sufferer to learn more about their experience.
- *Part 3: Hope of Restoration.* We end by exploring the slow, sacred journey of restoration after trauma, drawing from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to cast a hopeful vision of how sufferers can rebuild amid the rubble. Healing from trauma is rarely linear—it weaves grief with worship and progress with resistance—and so it requires the steady presence of Christ and his people.

Before part 1, I've included a section called "The Terrain of Trauma." This section describes trauma as a kind of exile—a hidden landscape in which worship feels foreign, safety seems elusive, and sufferers long to be seen. If we are to offer hope to victims, we must first understand these fundamentals of trauma.

The appendices at the back of the book provide practical tools to be used for reflection, church engagement, and theological clarity. These can

guide both sufferers and helpers as they navigate the prolonged aftermath of trauma. These resources are designed to deepen your understanding, foster wise care for sufferers, and anchor every step you take in the hope of Christ.

Cautions

Wisdom urges us to understand the heart and story of each person we encounter (see Prov. 4:7). Wisdom also requires us to be aware of the impacts trauma causes and to respond to them with gentleness, patience, and discernment. Before conversing with someone whom you think may have experienced trauma, keep the following cautions in mind:

- Trauma survivors often feel pressured to explain what has happened to them, but asking them to reveal their stories too soon can lead to additional harm. Prioritize helping individuals feel secure rather than extracting details.
- Victims of trauma may appear reserved, overly apologetic, easily startled, or hesitant to trust others. These responses are generally more defensive than personal. Take your time, and be thoughtful about the kinds of tone, touch, and language you use with them. Regularly seek their permission before doing things such as offering physical contact, broaching sensitive topics, inviting emotional processing, or making decisions that affect them, and be ready to clarify and rephrase statements or questions as necessary.
- Theological truths are best understood within an environment of profound trust and safety. Trauma victims must feel that you recognize their suffering before they can embrace your hope. Don't rush to spiritual encouragement. Rather, seek to first acknowledge the depth of their pain.

This book will delve into each of these cautions in greater detail so that you'll be prepared to provide victims with wise, patient, and Christ-centered care.

Up from the Valley

On the very mountain where God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac before then providing him with a substitute sacrifice, he would one day establish Jerusalem, his chosen city and the dwelling place of his temple. No matter what direction his people came from, they had to “go up” to worship at his temple. As they walked toward Jerusalem through the twists and turns of the dry, rocky terrain of the Jordan Valley, these pilgrims were threatened by bandits and wild animals. It was a perilous and unpredictable journey.

As the Israelites traveled to worship, they probably wondered how they would make it through each uncertain day. To reassure themselves of the Lord’s protection, guidance, and blessing, they rehearsed words of faith along their journey. These have come down to us as Psalms 120 through 134, which are known as the Psalms of Ascent.

Take the opening verses of Psalm 121.

I lift my eyes toward the mountains.
Where will my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not allow your foot to slip;
your Protector will not slumber. (vv. 1–3 CSB)

In these verses, the psalmist-sojourner sees the mountains ahead and immediately realizes that he can’t do this on his own. He faces a long uphill journey over rough terrain. He wonders, “Who can help me?” and then quickly asserts, “I know . . . the Lord is my helper.”

The way the Lord helped the Israelites move out of dangerous valleys and toward the temple celebration provides a useful metaphor for how he cares for people who suffer—and how we can care for them ourselves. Psalm 121 gives both sufferers and helpers the freedom to ask the Lord for help with their own journey and to confess that they feel overwhelmed

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and doubtful about the path ahead. Thankfully, God will help both the afflicted *and* those who guide them. *He* is the one who leads sufferers to the Temple Mount, where their worship of him will be restored.

These are glorious truths that we can count on as we walk with trauma survivors up and out of their valley. Hold tight to these ascent psalms. We will need to continually find the same strength, steadiness, and confidence from the Maker of heaven and earth. We can be confident that God will not let our feet slip. He is our good, trustworthy, and ultimate Guide.

THE TERRAIN OF TRAUMA

“My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.” (Lam. 3:17)

TRAUMA IS LIKE LIVING IN EXILE. Sufferers feel cast out from the presence of God, surrounded by danger, and unable to flee. They are unsure whether rescue will ever come.

Suffering like this transcends a single event. It disrupts the very fabric of their lives and fractures their sense of belonging. Trauma often leaves its victims feeling unsafe—stripped of the familiar comforts of connection, purpose, and peace. They crave refuge yet feel vulnerable. They yearn to rest but cannot stop scanning for danger. They desire to pray but struggle to find the words. Trauma silences the voices of many and disrupts their worship, leaving songs feeling hollow. Prayers falter. Scripture feels distant. Like Babylonian exiles, they wonder, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:4). Trauma renders worship into a foreign language; the familiar becomes unfamiliar.

Trauma leads to a sense of exile. Survivors may struggle to feel at home in their bodies, with their stories, or even within their church communities. They struggle with their sense of identity—feeling uncertain about who they are, whether they belong, and if they are still lovable or desired. The effects of trauma continue to influence their daily choices and relationships. They live much like Israel lived in Babylon long after the temple was destroyed. Their feeling of exile continues even as the world around them moves forward.

This feeling of dislocation is often intensified by how others react. In some churches, trauma is misunderstood or overlooked—treated either as nothing more than a spiritual problem or as if it were not a spiritual concern at all. In those moments, the sanctuary can feel like a wilderness. The church can also be a place where those who are suffering are welcomed, acknowledged, and cared for—a place where people gently help each other rebuild trust and rediscover worship, one note at a time. In the body of Christ, returning from exile is not a solitary journey. We sing the psalms of lament alone, but we also sing them *over* one another, making them into shared prayers when our words fail. These sacred songs give voice to our sorrow and encourage us for the journey ahead. Healing springs forth most effectively in an atmosphere of presence, patience, and shared hope.

God never abandoned his people in Babylon: He sent prophets to Israel who wept with them (Jer. 9:1), provided them with psalms to express their sorrow (Pss. 42:3; 137:1), and promised that they would eventually return (Jer. 29:10–14). He met them in the wilderness with steadfast love (Deut. 2:7; Hos. 2:14). He does the same for sufferers today. The experience of trauma can feel like living in exile, but we have a God who embraces outcasts, restores what has been broken, and brings beauty from ashes (Isa. 56:8; 61:1–3). He is not waiting at the temple gates for us to return; he is with us in the wilderness to start the slow and sacred journey of guiding us home (Isa. 43:19; Luke 15:20).

Before we begin exploring what it means for us to walk alongside those who live in exile, we must first understand the challenges they navigate. Trauma is not merely a narrative of past events; it is a complex landscape filled with disorientation, pain, and longing. To truly care for others, we must understand the nature of their sorrow. Here are some important points to understand about trauma before we begin our journey.

What Trauma Is and Isn't

The term *traumatized* describes someone who has been severely impacted by a devastating event that was (1) sudden and unpredictable, (2) life-threatening, or (3) a profound violation of trust. People may also be traumatized when they are overwhelmed by a series of adverse

experiences, such as childhood abuse, war, or domestic violence. Natural disasters, medical crises, serious accidents, and sudden losses of loved ones are common sources of trauma. In war-torn regions and marginalized communities, the prevalence of trauma is even higher because chronic exposure to violence compounds its effects.

Two people can endure the same crisis, yet respond in remarkably different ways. One person may process the event and move on with little disruption, while the other's life may be marked by anguish.

While no two individuals experience trauma in precisely the same manner, I use the term *trauma* because it effectively captures a specific type of suffering. By embracing a meaningful definition, we can provide compassionate care for those who are suffering and avoid both exaggerating and minimizing their experiences, which will allow us to support them wisely and graciously on their journey toward healing.

Trauma goes far beyond just a "hard time" or an inconvenience. Nor is it defined by how strong or composed an individual may seem after a crisis. It also does not signify weakness, sin, or a lack of faith in God. Moreover, it is not always obvious. The reality of trauma is not discerned by what the eye can see or by how quickly someone resumes everyday life. Some people who seem fine may be unraveling inside. Others may carry deep suffering for years before they can name it.

Recognizing trauma does not mean elevating victimhood or excusing sin. It means honoring the reality that wounds disrupt a person's ability to live, relate to others, and worship God. When we clarify what trauma is, we create space for survivors to feel seen, not scrutinized.

Trauma Is Common

Research indicates that trauma is alarmingly widespread, affecting people across all demographics.¹ Trauma is woven into the fabric of our

1. A global survey of nearly 69,000 adults across twenty-four countries found that over 70 percent of respondents had experienced at least one traumatic event, and nearly one-third had experienced four or more. The most commonly reported events included witnessing death or serious injury, suddenly losing a loved one, being mugged, experiencing a serious car accident or a life-threatening illness or injury. This is not to say that all such traumatic events result

communities, our churches, and our homes. It does not merely exist “out there”; it sits beside us in the pews and lingers in the hearts of those we love. The lives of many people you know have been forever altered by the weight of suffering, often at the hands of another. Many are trapped in shame and silence. They long for acknowledgment, for understanding, for someone to say, “I am with you.”

No Two Reactions to Suffering Are the Same

Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will be deeply affected by it, and trauma can manifest in various ways. The differences extend beyond a victim’s inner strength or weakness; they reflect the unique stories that each person carries—stories that are shaped by their past experiences, relationships, access to care, and understanding of suffering. Some individuals’ feelings of distress may gradually lessen with compassion and support. For other people, a single moment can create a lasting impact that is often difficult to comprehend. Some trauma survivors may experience numbness, while others may feel overwhelmed. Some people can’t stop talking about it, while others struggle to find the right words.

Though their experiences vary, sufferers share a common sentiment: *Life no longer makes sense as it once did*. That’s why trauma doesn’t simply vanish with time. Time may pass, but unacknowledged or unaddressed pain doesn’t just fade away. Time may dull memories, but it can’t heal the deep wounds of terror, violation, or profound loss. Even after Israel’s initial devastation, the sorrow of its exiled people lingered. In Lamentations, they confess, “The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning” (Lam. 5:15). These people carried their grief, confusion, and fear for years, undeterred by the passage of time.

in traumatized individuals; rather, it is to highlight how widespread people’s exposure to potentially overwhelming experiences truly is. See Ronald C. Kessler et al., “Trauma and PTSD in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 8, no. S5(2017): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5632781/>; along with C. Benjet et al., “The Epidemiology of Traumatic Event Exposure Worldwide: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium,” *Psychological Medicine* 46, no. 2 (2015): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4869975/>.

Unaddressed trauma can lead to self-protection, silence, or despair. It isolates. Its wounds don't disappear when they are ignored; they linger, waiting to be acknowledged. Healing doesn't follow a linear path. Some wounds need to be expressed aloud right away, while others require time and space before they can be acknowledged. One individual's healing may begin with rest, while another's might start with feeling believed.

The journey is unique for each sufferer, but the Lord offers the same promise to everyone: "I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners" (Isa. 57:18). He does not wait for us at the end of our exile. He walks with us through the wilderness, caring for each story, embracing every heart, and gently guiding us home, one step, one wound, one person at a time.

Trauma Is Recognized by Its Wounds

A distressing event in itself does not automatically determine whether something is traumatic. Trauma is defined by its impact: the extent to which an event or experience disrupts a person's sense of self, safety, and connection to others. Something is considered traumatic when it overwhelms the individual who has experienced it. People who have endured extreme suffering—regardless of how extreme that suffering appears on the outside—often experience profound disruptions to their emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational well-being (see Prov. 14:10). The severity of these disruptions allows us to identify trauma.

Factors like someone's past experiences, personality, cultural background, and even belief systems all influence how they process a traumatic experience. This means that we should avoid making assumptions. Instead, we should be willing to listen patiently, provide compassionate care, and learn from each individual's unique journey through suffering.

Trauma Disorients the Whole Person

Trauma is a type of suffering that arises in a fallen world. It presents individuals with overwhelming threats that can shatter their innate sense of safety and order and their ability to cope. It highlights the limits of human strength and reminds us that we were never meant to carry the burden of such threats without the supportive presence of the Lord.

Trauma impacts every aspect of a person's life. It's not just an emotional response. It manifests in physical ways, such as fatigue, sleeplessness, or hypervigilance. It has interpersonal implications: damaging relationships, eroding trust, and making connection seem risky. It affects a person's beliefs and raises profound spiritual questions about God's goodness, presence, and protection. It affects the way they process life, disrupting their memory and attention.

In the aftermath of trauma, people often feel that the emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual aspects of their lives are fragmented. They think, feel, remember, and even pray differently from before. Trauma causes them to completely reevaluate everything they once trusted. It presents itself not as a tidy set of symptoms but as a whole-person cry: *What just happened to me? Am I safe? How could God allow this?*

Trauma Healing Is a Slow Journey

Healing requires careful attention. When we understand how disorienting trauma can be, we start to see why survivors often feel stuck, lost, or inconsistent. Beneath their outward actions is a strong desire for stability, connection, and meaning. Our role is not to rush them into a quick resolution but to patiently walk with them as they gradually begin to rebuild what they have lost.

Our hope is not in our strength but in the Lord. He walks with the brokenhearted. He is not overwhelmed by what overwhelms them. Because of this, we can enter into their pain with confidence while bearing witness to Christ's faithful presence within it.

When you walk closely with those who have been deeply wounded, you begin to notice recurring patterns and ways that suffering shakes a person's sense of safety, hope, and connection with God and others. God's Word has been naming and addressing these realities for centuries, offering language, comfort, and truth that go far deeper than anything else. At times, what we observe in people's lives echoes what modern research describes, but Scripture has already spoken with greater authority and compassion. The Bible shows us that God understands the full weight of suffering and meets his people in it with unmatched wisdom and care.

Scripture Speaks of Dark Valleys

One of the most compassionate things God does in his Word is to tell the truth about suffering. The Bible does not sanitize trauma or treat it abstractly. Instead, it addresses it with striking honesty. It names evil, records betrayal, describes the collapse of the human spirit, and preserves the laments of those who are barely holding on. It does not tuck trauma stories out of sight; it positions them at the heart of redemptive history. God does not turn away from trauma. Instead, he records it so that his people will know they are not alone.

The raw laments of Psalm 22 and Psalm 88 describe suffering that feels unbearable and unending, illustrating the way trauma fractures a person's sense of safety, belonging, and trust. These psalms give voice to darkness and despair: "Why have you forsaken me?" and "Darkness is my closest friend" (NIV). They do not resolve easily, yet the inspired Word of God still includes them. This teaches us that lament is faithful speech.

Tamar's story in 2 Samuel 13 illustrates the deep and lasting impact of sexual violence. Her body has been violated, her voice has been silenced, and her dignity has been taken away. Her cry "Where could I carry my shame?" (v. 13) resonates in the hearts of many survivors today. This account illustrates the depth of human depravity, the tragic consequences of unchecked sin, and the ways in which human leaders fail to uphold righteousness. Tamar calls for justice and expresses the need for a King who will defend the oppressed and heal the brokenhearted. Christ's coming answers her desolation.

Elijah's collapse in 1 Kings 19 reveals that trauma affects not just the mind but also the body. Reeling from death threats and the exhaustion of ministry, he isolates himself, succumbs to despair, and pleads with God to take his life. The Lord meets him not with a rebuke but rather with food, rest, and a gentle whisper.

The exile of Israel, as depicted in Lamentations, Jeremiah, and Psalm 137, illustrates that trauma is not always contained by a singular event. It can unfold across years, even generations. The people mourn by the rivers of Babylon, too numb to sing. Their pain is shared, and their grief rooted

in history. And yet, in that grief, God's covenant faithfulness persists. Even outside the temple, his presence still reaches them.

The Gospels too are filled with trauma: the bleeding woman whose suffering isolates her for twelve years, the father of the demon-tormented boy who cries, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), the disciples who hid behind locked doors after Jesus's crucifixion (see John 20:19). At the heart of it all is Christ himself. He is mocked, stripped, beaten, and abandoned—the Man of Sorrows who bore not only our sins but also our griefs and sorrows (see Isa. 53:3–4). His wounds reveal that God has not only witnessed our trauma but has experienced anguish alongside us.

Among all these stories, Job's suffering stands out as one of the most profound. He loses everything: his children, his livelihood, and his health. His body is consumed by pain, his soul is weighed down by sorrow, and his friends hurt him even more with their misguided judgments. Job's trauma is total. Yet he continues to cry out to God. His story doesn't provide simple answers, but it invites us into the profound intersection of deep suffering and rich theology. In Job, we see a man who holds nothing back—and a God who listens.

More than any other figure in Scripture, Job vividly illustrates that trauma leaves many types of wounds. God's Word deepens our understanding of these wounds by not only identifying them but also delving into their depths. The book of Job offers a raw, powerful portrayal of a person who is experiencing trauma in real time. Job's words convey the soul's overwhelming emotions, a deep sorrow that engulfs the body, confusion that disrupts the mind, and questions that emerge from the darkness.

In part 2 of this book, we will examine some of the wounds that trauma most commonly inflicts—ones that Job's story clearly illustrates and that frequently manifest in our own lives and the lives of those we know. Each chapter explores a wound of trauma, analyzes its effects on suffering individuals, and shows how God speaks to that wound in Scripture and provides resources to help his people. Below is an overview of these wounds to help us understand them better as we prepare to enter the landscape of suffering.

Physical Anguish

Trauma is not just stored in the mind; it floods the body as well. Job's suffering is visceral. He can't eat. "I refuse to touch it; such food makes me ill" (6:7 NIV). He can't sleep. "When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night is long, and I toss and turn till the dawn" (7:4). He weeps constantly. "My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness" (16:16). His grief interrupts every function. "My sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water" (3:24).

Shame

Job's friends wound him further by labeling him guilty and godless. He becomes confused and ashamed. "If I am guilty, woe to me! If I am in the right, I cannot lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace" (10:15). For many trauma survivors, shame also comes from within as they begin to believe they are dirty, unlovable, or somehow responsible for what happened to them. Shame is often one of trauma's most isolating effects.

Faith Questions

Job's cries to God are raw and unresolved. He fears that God is targeting him: "Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?" (7:20). He wants to understand God, to restore their relationship, but can't make sense of how to do it. Many trauma survivors ask similar questions: *Where were you, God? Do you see me now?*

Hypervigilance

When life comes undone, fear stays close. Job says, "The thing that I fear comes upon me. . . . I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes" (3:25–26). This is the nervous system on high alert, always bracing for the next blow.

Reexperienced Trauma

Even when Job tries to rest, his mind is haunted. "You scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions" (7:14). He can't escape his terror. It finds him in the dark.

Avoidance

Although Job never hides from his pain, he longs for an escape. “[Oh] that it would please God to crush me . . . let loose his hand and cut me off!” (6:9). Sometimes the pain of living feels heavier than death itself. Many trauma survivors understand that feeling intimately.

Even this small collection of verses reveals that Job’s agony is loud, deep, and unrelenting. His cries are not signs of unbelief. His wounds are signs of a soul that is stretched to its limit. His story teaches us that God listens to these cries, records them, speaks to them, and invites us to do the same.

Scripture does not shy away from difficult stories. It collects them. It acknowledges the reality of trauma and gives it a voice. Yet it also does more than just describe suffering. The Scriptures reveal a God who joins his people in their exile. From Genesis to Revelation, we encounter a God who does not stay in the sanctuary while his people weep by foreign rivers. He accompanies them into the wilderness. He listens to their groans in Egypt, walks with them through the desert, and weeps for them outside Jerusalem. He collects their broken pieces, restores what they have lost, and guides his people home. His actions remind us that trauma does not put us beyond his care. These stories provide us with a sacred space to stand on both as helpers and as sufferers ourselves.

Our mission is not to repair what trauma has broken. Rather, we are called to walk alongside those who are suffering as they navigate a world that feels unsafe and confusing. Instead of beginning by offering solutions, we begin by being present. Before we can guide those who are suffering, we must first learn to connect with them. In part 1 of the book, we will explore how to walk wisely, patiently, and redemptively alongside those who are navigating the wilderness of trauma. We are tasked not with fixing what is broken but with reflecting the heart of God, who stands alongside those who are displaced and offers comfort to the wounded. The journey ahead of us will require humility, courage, and grace, but we will not walk it alone.

Part 1

FOUNDATIONS OF CARE

1

SEEING AND DRAWING NEAR

IT HAPPENED IN THE CHURCH FOYER, right after the service. The room buzzed with chatter, and a smiling woman reached out to hug her friend Abby, whom she hadn't seen in a while.

Abby's reaction shocked her. At the unexpected touch, Abby jerked away, her scream slicing through the pleasant hum of Sunday fellowship.

Conversations halted as Abby fled. Heads turned. People seemed confused, startled, uncomfortable. A few stepped back, murmuring quietly, unsure of what had just happened.

But I knew.

I knew that Abby's body wasn't reacting to the present moment. It was reacting to the past—to memories of being grabbed and hurt when she was young. Although lovingly intended, the hug had come from behind, unannounced. What others saw as an overreaction was, for Abby, a matter of survival. Her body had done what it was created to do: protect her.

This is one way trauma can appear in the context of community. It sometimes erupts in reactions that don't seem to match the moment, but those reactions make perfect, heartbreaking sense when you know the story behind them.

But trauma does not always announce itself in a dramatic scene: It can be masked by quiet withdrawal, excessive busyness, or even a smile. Many sufferers do not immediately disclose their traumatic experiences, often because they have learned that it is not safe to do so. They may have been disbelieved, blamed, or dismissed when they first sought help. Sometimes the events surrounding their trauma are shrouded in too much shame for them to talk about it at all. Others do not speak because they lack the words to describe their suffering. Trauma disrupts memory, language, and identity, making it difficult for sufferers to articulate what has happened to them. In fact, they themselves may not recognize that their hypervigilance, shame, or emotional detachment are signs of trauma.

As members of the church, we must understand that trauma is not limited to those who share their stories openly or reveal them inadvertently; trauma can also be true of those who sit silently, who avoid eye contact, and who disappear when a difficult topic is preached from the pulpit. Trauma survivors are among us, and many are waiting to see whether the church is a safe place for them to bring their pain. This book is written to help you help them.

Too often, sufferers feel isolated or misunderstood within Christian communities, whose well-meaning members are often tempted to offer quick fixes or demand immediate spiritual resolution. But biblical care is not formulaic. It is deeply personal. Each survivor's path to healing will be different. You don't need to become an expert to recognize trauma in the church, nor do you need a degree to walk faithfully with suffering people. You do need to get to know individuals, however, and to understand their stories so that you can apply Scripture with wisdom. When you learn to reflect the heart of Christ, you prepare yourself to do what he did: to see the wounded, to move toward them, and to guide them to their true refuge.

Seeing Charlotte

Charlotte had learned what many trauma survivors in the church learn: It is safer to be unseen. Like many, she sat in church week after week, listening to sermons on God's justice and wondering why justice never came for her. She heard countless others describe the church as a

family, but to her, “family” meant betrayal. When her Bible study leader asked for prayer requests, she wondered why no one asked why she never shared anything.

No one saw. Or maybe no one wanted to see. Because, if anyone looked long enough, Charlotte’s pain was palpable.

Then, one Wednesday night, Miriam, the new Bible study leader, handed Charlotte a study guide and met her eyes. She didn’t look past Charlotte, and she didn’t rush past her to the next person. Instead, she asked, “Are you okay?”

Charlotte forced a smile. “I’m fine.”

Miriam hesitated. “Are you sure?” she asked softly. “You seem sad.”

For the first time in years, someone had noticed that something was wrong. Charlotte wanted to run, but Miriam seemed steady, unafraid, welcoming. She didn’t push, didn’t pry. She just stayed close.

Over the next few weeks, Miriam kept sitting next to Charlotte. One night, in a whisper, Charlotte finally told her the truth she had buried.

Miriam didn’t gasp. She didn’t offer clichés. She didn’t rush to fix Charlotte’s pain. She did what no one else had done: She saw Charlotte’s wounds and didn’t turn away. She listened. She knew that loving a wounded person meant stepping into her suffering—even when it was messy, painful, or uncomfortable. She knew that loving like Jesus meant stopping for the ones the world had harmed.

Charlotte’s journey to healing would be a long one. But she was no longer alone.

Responding to Trauma with the Ministry of Presence

When suffering rises to the level of trauma, its emotional, spiritual, and physical disruptions are overwhelming. This suffering is crushing to endure, but it can also be difficult to witness. The magnitude of another person’s pain can leave us feeling helpless. We feel powerless to ease their burdens and unable to restore what they have lost. Even when we want to move toward them, we often hesitate, uncertain what to say or do.

When Job lost his wealth, children, and health, his friends’ first instincts were correct: “They made an appointment together to come to

show him sympathy and comfort him” (Job 2:11). Seeing his deep distress, “they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven” (v. 12). In their ancient Middle Eastern culture, tearing their robes communicated that they had joined Job in his anguish and mourning. They openly wept with him and covered themselves with dust, acknowledging that they too were but dust and faced the sting of death themselves. Their actions showed how deeply his suffering affected them.

“And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (v. 13). Job’s friends sat with him in an ash heap, devastated, bearing the weight of his loss and anguish. Instinctively, they knew they could do nothing to fix what had befallen him; all they could do was sit by his side and remain with him, the way Miriam stayed close to Charlotte.

Discussing Christian community in his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer encourages believers to think about the importance of being *physically present* with others, especially in hard times. This simple act is a precious gift: “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, the imprisoned apostle Paul calls his ‘dearly beloved son in the faith,’ Timothy, to come to him in prison in the last days of his life; he would see him again and have him near.”¹ Bonhoeffer challenges us to recognize the sacredness of simply being with others. He believes that by doing so, Christians embody Christ’s love and create a space for God’s grace and comfort to be felt deeply.

Caring for those who have been shattered by traumatic experiences begins with our simply offering them our presence (though it certainly does not end there, as we will see). This ministry of presence means that we enter their world with care, listen to them well, and remain steadily near to them while honoring them as image bearers and acknowledging their pain. I have seen the ministry of presence play out beautifully with many people I counsel, and those whose churches support them with such a ministry typically spend only about a third of the time in counseling with me that people spend who otherwise suffer alone.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper & Brothers, 1954), 19.

This ministry isn't about words or solutions; it's about creating space for you to recognize a sufferer's pain and remind them that they are not alone. In the wake of sorrow, sufferers often feel unseen and misunderstood. By being present with them and attentive to their heartache, we reflect the character of Jesus and help sufferers connect to the One who sees, understands, and heals the brokenhearted. We invite them to experience Jesus's love through us. Once sufferers are secure in Jesus's love, they will be better able to respond to and recover from their suffering.

God's Persistent Presence from Eden to Eternity

Presence is a key way in which God himself expresses his love for his people. From the beginning, he intended to enjoy close fellowship with his creation. After he created Adam and Eve, he was literally with them and walked with them in the garden of Eden (see Gen. 3:8). Even after sin disrupted their relationship and Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, God continued his pursuit. Starting with his covenant with Abraham in the land of Canaan (see Gen. 12:1–3), each successive covenant he made with his people showed a fuller expression of his nearness.

In the Mosaic covenant, God promised to dwell among his chosen people if they obeyed him (see Ex. 19:5–6; 29:45–46; Lev. 26:11–12) and commanded them to build him a tabernacle. His people were vulnerable in the wilderness and struggling with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Although the tabernacle was a temporary structure, it served as a place of meeting and as a physical representation that God was near to them to lead and guide them. He was not distant or aloof but was a close companion who offered his people comfort and security despite their weaknesses and fears.

Later, God had King Solomon build the temple, a more permanent structure where he would live among his people. The temple was a symbol of stability and a reminder of God's unwavering faithfulness (see 2 Chron. 7:16). His holy presence in the temple reminded his people of his transformational presence in their lives.

These Old Testament examples ultimately point us to Jesus. He is our Immanuel, which means "God with us." God sent Jesus to dwell with his people—not simply to be near us but to live among us so that he could

fully identify with our suffering and brokenness (see Heb. 4:15) Jesus is the true Temple (see John 2:19–21) and the perfect dwelling place of God with humanity. He offers us the comfort of God’s presence as well as a transformative relationship that addresses our need for salvation, love, and belonging. His life, death, and resurrection make it possible for us to have eternal communion with God.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit—also God himself—to dwell within believers (see John 14:16–17; Acts 2). The Spirit guides, comforts, and strengthens us and is our guarantee of God’s continued presence and faithfulness. We are never alone. We ourselves are now tabernacles and temples because the Spirit of God indwells our hearts (see 1 Cor. 6:19).

God’s promise to be present with his people reaches its ultimate fulfillment in Revelation. In John’s final vision, we learn that God intends to dwell with us in perfect fellowship: “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rev. 21:3).

The new Jerusalem, God’s eternal dwelling place, will be on the new earth. Not merely a city, it will be a community of believers who live in perfect fellowship with God and one another. In the new Jerusalem, God and his people will be united in a world that has been fully restored from the effects of sin. We will be free from sorrow, death, and suffering as we experience his commitment, steadfast love, and protection. Worship, joy, and peace will replace the brokenness of the previous world as God dwells with his people in an everlasting covenant of love.

Jesus’s Presence with His People

The Holy Spirit’s presence within us today allows us to embody God’s presence to those around us. But what does that look like? To better understand the profound gift that we can offer others, we must examine in more detail the life of the One who embodied God’s presence perfectly.

When God the Son stepped into human history, his arrival fulfilled God’s covenantal promise to be near his people—not as an abstract idea

but as a living, breathing person. Through his incarnation, Jesus demonstrated God's faithfulness and personal involvement in our lives. God binds himself to his people; he doesn't stay far off.

Jesus's identification with our weakness and suffering is perhaps one of the most profound aspects of his presence. His earthly life was marked by the full range of human experiences: joy, sorrow, hunger, fatigue, and, ultimately, suffering. When he faced the cross, he endured the ultimate pain to reconcile us to God. Hebrews 4:15 reminds us that we have a Savior who was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (NIV). Jesus entered fully into our frailty, ensuring that he is not only understand our struggles but also able to walk with us in them. His presence makes it clear that God's nearness is not theoretical: It is deeply personal and real.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus walked closely with others. He invited twelve men to join him, not just as followers but as companions. He taught them through his words and actions, and he shared life with them in a way that modeled the importance of community. By doing so, Jesus demonstrated that the Christian life is not a solitary endeavor. The early church would later reflect this model as believers shared life together and bore one another's burdens as they worshipped and fellowshiped together. Jesus's presence with his disciples underscores the value of walking with others in their struggles and joys.

Jesus's presence is also central to the work of redemption. As the Mediator between God and humanity, he bridged the gap that sin had created. Both fully God and fully man, he represented both perfectly. Jesus didn't just accomplish redemption; he *embodied* it by his life, death, and resurrection, and he made his presence essential to his redemptive work.

Salvation is rooted in relationship. As he fulfilled his roles as prophet, priest, and king, Jesus actively engaged with his people. As a prophet, he brought God's truth to them; as a priest, he interceded and atoned for them; and as a king, he ruled and guided them. These roles were not distant or ceremonial; they were personal and relational. Jesus's ministry shows us that God's guidance, intercession, and sovereignty are immediate and tangible, offered directly to his people.

The Gospels are filled with stories that showcase Jesus's compassionate presence in action.

- When Lazarus died, Jesus went to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha. He didn't rush to perform a miracle or offer a solution; instead, he wept with them, entering their grief with tenderness (see John 11:35). His tears revealed a deep empathy and willingness to mourn alongside them. This reminds us that sometimes the most loving thing we can do is simply to be present in someone's pain.
- When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he didn't avoid her or condemn her for her painful past. Instead, he engaged her in conversation, listened to her, and offered her living water: hope and restoration (see John 4:1–26). By meeting her where she was, Jesus showed her that she was seen, heard, and valued, even though others may have judged or dismissed her.
- While on a boat in the middle of a ferocious storm, Jesus calmed his disciples' fears and demonstrated his power over nature (see Mark 4:35–41). His presence reassured them that they were not alone, even in life's most terrifying moments. Jesus's peace and authority remind us that his presence is a refuge in the storms of life.
- Jesus healed the sick and the outcast as he reached out to those considered unclean or untouchable. In Mark 10:46–52, he restored sight to Bartimaeus, a blind beggar who was crying out for mercy. Jesus not only healed his physical blindness but also called him to be his follower, giving him a place to belong. Through his compassionate presence, Jesus restored dignity and community to those like Bartimaeus who had been marginalized.
- Even in his final hours, Jesus embodied the ministry of presence. At the Last Supper, he shared a meal with his disciples and instituted Communion to be a profound reminder of his ongoing presence with believers (see Luke 22:14–20). This sacred act points to the mystical union between Christ and his followers—one that ensures we are never separated from his love.

In every moment of his ministry, Jesus modeled the power of presence. He didn't always offer people immediate solutions, but he joined in

their experiences, listened to their struggles, and shared their pain. Even his interest in their suffering was deeply healing because his compassionate presence made others feel seen, heard, and valued. It encouraged and strengthened those he loved, despite their doubts and fears.

Perhaps most amazing of all, Jesus himself desired the presence of others. The night before his crucifixion, he invited his closest friends to stay, keep watch, and pray with him—not because they could change his circumstances or the course of events but because their presence mattered to him (see Matt. 26:38). Jesus longed for companions when he was suffering. His sorrow was deep, and, in his humanity, he desired to be seen, heard, and supported. When Peter, James, and John failed him by repeatedly falling asleep, he felt the weight of their absence.

Yet this episode in Jesus's life affirms a profound truth: Presence is a gift. When words fail and suffering cannot be erased, simply being with someone in their distress carries immense meaning. Jesus, our perfect Savior, both modeled this ministry and sought it himself.

If Jesus—the very Son of God—desired the presence of his friends when he was suffering, how much more do those who are burdened by trauma need compassionate companionship? Christ calls us to reflect his presence in the lives of the sufferers we seek to care for.

Presence as Worship

A ministry of presence is a profound act of worship because it reflects the heart of God, who chose to be with us. In Christ's incarnation, we see a God who is willing to dwell among the broken, to suffer alongside humanity, and to love us unto redemption. Offering our presence to others who are suffering allows us to become vessels through which Christ works. Our presence reflects not merely human kindness but God's attentive love. Being present with someone in their pain is not only compassionate—it is a transformative, hopeful, and inspiring act of worship.

When we choose to be present with someone, we glorify God by mirroring his character—his compassion, humility, and steadfast love. To be present requires us to surrender our comfort, our agendas, and our instinct to try to solve problems in favor of trusting instead in God's power

to work through the simple act of our being with others. Entering someone's suffering means embodying the love of Christ, who also stepped into human pain and sorrow. In these moments, we also join Christ in his suffering. Just as he bore the burdens of others, we ourselves take on the weight of another's pain—not to fix or resolve it but to reflect the love of the One who suffered for us.

We stay. Because love lingers. Love listens. Love enters the ache without trying to fix it.

And somehow, as we offer that quiet companionship, we find ourselves walking beside the Man of Sorrows. His path winds slowly through valleys in which burdens are carried together. In those places, grace takes root and grows.

The ministry of presence is not the scenic route around discipleship. It *is* discipleship—the kind that looks a lot like Jesus kneeling, weeping, waiting. The kind that says, not in thunder but in a whisper, “You’re not alone. I’m not going anywhere.”

Seeing

The ministry of presence begins when we see another person, recognize that they are in pain, and move toward them instead of keeping distant. The next chapter of this book will look more closely at *how* we can be present with someone who is suffering from trauma. As we close out this chapter, let's consider what it means to see a sufferer in the first place.

Seeing someone's trauma can be difficult because the wounds it leaves are often invisible or express themselves in ways that keep us from recognizing what is going on. (Think of Abby and her “overreaction” to the hug she was given, or to Charlotte's smiles and silence.) However, while we cannot diagnose others with trauma or assume that they have it, we can learn to recognize common indicators of unaddressed trauma. Sufferers may display emotional, relational, or spiritual patterns that have been shaped by deep wounds. Some key signs include the following:

- *Emotional responses*: unexplained anxiety, hypervigilance, panic attacks, or emotional numbness. Some sufferers struggle to

manage their emotions and may seem either overly reactive or disconnected.

- *Relational patterns*: difficulty trusting others, fear of authority, reluctance to engage in close community, or cycles of unhealthy relationships. Sufferers may struggle with drawing healthy relational lines or feel intense guilt when they do.
- *Physical responses*: chronic fatigue, headaches, digestive issues, or other physical symptoms that have no clear medical cause. The body carries trauma, and survivors may struggle with illnesses that are related to their stress and past harm.
- *Spiritual struggles*: Some trauma survivors wrestle deeply with God. They may fear him, feel abandoned by him, or struggle to believe that he truly loves them. Others may overachieve or become perfectionistic out of a belief that they must earn God's favor. Their faith may be marked by either rigid rule-keeping or deep spiritual disengagement.

A trauma victim may not exhibit all these signs, but when we notice that someone is deeply anxious, withdrawn, or resistant to connection, we help them best when we respond with curiosity and compassion rather than judgment. Trauma often isolates, and one of the greatest gifts we can offer someone is the simple assurance that we see them and value them.

But another way to identify sufferers in the church is to make it easier for them to be open about their pain. Trauma survivors *are* in our midst. By acknowledging suffering rather than dismissing it, we communicate that they do not need to hide.

Consider the environment of your own church.

- *Do sermons, Bible studies, and conversations in your church acknowledge the reality that many in its congregation have been abused, betrayed, or deeply harmed?* Speaking lightly about suffering shames the wounded and encourages other church members to demand premature healing from them.
- *Do the members of your church recognize that the disclosure of trauma is a sacred trust?* When someone in the church opens up

about their suffering, the way that others respond to them is crucial. Do others listen to them and validate their pain—or do they react in ways that reinforce the sufferer’s fears of rejection? Survivors of trauma are watching to see how we handle the suffering of others before they risk revealing their own.

- *Do people in your church model vulnerability?* When leaders and mature believers acknowledge their own griefs, fears, or struggles genuinely and appropriately, they foster a culture that welcomes honesty.
- *Do prayers and teachings in your church reflect a God who draws near to the brokenhearted?* Hearing that God sees and cares for those in deep distress opens the door for people to believe that he sees them too.

Many trauma survivors struggle with deep self-doubt and shame. When their churches rush them to heal or minimize their suffering, they reinforce the lie that these survivors are *too much*—too broken, too emotional, or too slow to recover. Instead, we must communicate that their pain is seen, that their questions are valid, and that their healing is not measured by how quickly they are progressing or how little anxiety they feel.

As we’ll see in the chapters ahead, God’s Word never diminishes the reality of suffering; instead, it meets it with profound mercy, truth, and hope. Throughout Scripture, God acknowledges the depths of human pain—from the cries of the oppressed, about whom he says in Exodus 3:7, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people”; to the lament of Job as he wrestles with his losses; to the anguish that the psalmists pour out before him.

God does not dismiss suffering or demand that it be quickly resolved. Instead, he enters into it. We too can do likewise.

But how? How do we sit with those who are grieving, wrestling, and deeply wounded?

In the next chapter, we will explore what it means to be present with trauma sufferers in a way that reflects Jesus’s love and compassion for them. Presence is not passive; it is an intentional act of love—a way of bearing witness to another’s pain without rushing to fix, explain, or

minimize it. Chapter 2 will help us consider how we can be the hands and feet of Christ for those who desperately need to know they are not alone.

Reflections for the Journey

As you seek to grow in compassion and wisdom, consider not only how you view others but how you respond to pain and a ministry of presence in your own life. Our ministry to others always begins with our willingness to be formed by the love of Christ.

Seeing the Sufferer

1. When have I misinterpreted someone's behavior or underestimated their faith because I wasn't considering the possibility that they had unseen trauma?
2. What postures or assumptions may be keeping me from seeing the wounded people whom God has placed in my life?

Entering Their World

1. What challenge does Jesus's example of staying near to the brokenhearted pose to my own instinct to fix or retreat from them?
2. Am I willing to offer people presence without offering them answers—and to trust that Christ is at work for them, even when I feel helpless?

Engaging My Own Story

1. How has my own suffering shaped the way I relate to others who are in pain? In what ways am I tempted to avoid them out of self-protection or over-identify with their suffering?
2. When ministry makes me feel powerless or weary, where do I turn for comfort and strength? What might Christ be inviting me to see about himself when this happens?