

MARY DEMUTH

NOT

MARKED

A thick, horizontal red brushstroke with a textured, splattered appearance, crossing through the middle of the word 'MARKED'.

FINDING HOPE & HEALING AFTER  
SEXUAL ABUSE

# A CAVEAT

*“The sovereign Lord has given me His words of wisdom,  
so that I know how to comfort the weary.”*

ISAIAH 50:4, ESV

I am not a psychologist. I hold no counseling degrees or certificates, though I’ve scoured many sexual abuse books written by counselors. I don’t write this book as though I were a counselor. It is not a sterile healing manual or a proven method. My hope is that in simply telling my story, you will find some gouges I’ve made in the rock to use as footholds as you climb your way toward health. May you, perhaps for the very first time, understand this powerful truth: you are not alone. And when the days seem especially dark, when you feel like you’re forever marked and doomed to darkness, you’ll pick up this book again and remind yourself that you are in the midst of God’s restoration process. I wish you healing. I wish you light. And as I type these words, I can’t help but start this book with prayer.

Dear, dear Jesus. Please surround my friend reading this book with peace. Take away the fear that rumbles inside. Remove the panic. Slow the racing heart. Silence the maniacal voices that shout unworthiness, dirtiness, and shame. Would You please begin a new, vital healing journey even right now in this moment? I believe You long to set all Your sons and daughters free from what happened in the darkness. On the cross You crushed the schemes of the evil one, who comes to steal, kill, and destroy. May it be that we realize afresh that You, naked on that cross, understand violation, particularly as You carried the weight of every sexual sin ever committed. Oh Jesus, just as You triumphed over every sin when God the Father raised You to life, please show my friend that morning is coming, resurrection awaits on the horizon. Bring life from death. Beauty from chaos. Hope from despair. Clean from unclean. Heal, restore, and renew. Amen.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

*“If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would’ve lived in the land of silence.”*

PSALM 94:17, ESV

This book started with my post, “The Sexy Wife I Can’t Be” on the blog Deeper Church.<sup>1</sup> In it I wrote about my own struggle with sex in the aftermath of sexual abuse. I figured some people would resonate—that usually happens when I’m gut honest—but I wasn’t emotionally prepared for the onslaught of comments and stories. Deeper Church had to switch servers—so much traffic came their way that day.

And the comments. Oh the comments. So many stories shared, some for the very first time. I felt their anguish, carrying their words in my heart. That week my soul heaved. Because how can it be that so much pain in the world has gone unnoticed? Why is it that so many suffer in silence, trying to cope with haunting memories alone? Why haven’t we talked about it?

The silence should not be.

Which is why I’m writing this book.

If you're like me, you may feel that the sexual abuse you endured left an indelible mark on your soul, staining your emotional, physical, relational, and sexual health. It has permeated the way you view the world. It scars the way you process information, and it has left you cynical, scared, and hyper-vigilant. I've walked that painful and bewildering path. There have been times when I've yelled (screamed) at God, asking Him why in the world I'd been "entrusted" with this abuse. I've railed at the utter unfairness of it all, suffering for years for other people's sins. Wondering why it is still a struggle for me to enjoy sex. Worrying if I'd ever feel emotionally healthy in sexual abuse's aftermath.

The mark the abuse left has deeply injured me, yet I dare to believe that we serve a God who heals. Not always instantly. It often takes years to lighten a deeply tattooed mark, after all. But He does salve the wounds of sexual abuse. Like Jacob who wrestled with God, we who are sexually abused have our own sparring matches with the Almighty, hurling a slew of why-why-whys and why-why-why-nots His way. Like Jacob, we walk with a limp in the aftermath. Yet, we walk.

I don't have to trod this earth as a marked victim, and neither do you. So I'm writing this book to offer you the hope I have found along the way. To demonstrate the healing possibilities to those of us who have long felt different, dirty. In trying to erase the mark, I've tried many avenues of healing, some successful, some not. I've spent over thirty years of my life

pursuing health, and I've gained insight into the healing process. This book represents all the wisdom I've gained—wisdom I want you to have as you chase after the joyful life you hope for.

That doesn't mean your journey will resemble mine. I've never met a human exactly like me (thank goodness!), so my hunch is that we will all heal in us-shaped ways. Often that comes by simply believing that we can heal and having an audacious desire to be whole again. It's my desire that in reading my undecorated story, you will believe healing is possible, and you'll sense God's nearness as you take the next step.

I recently re-read one of my favorite books, *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan. One of the chapters addresses healing. He writes about how we can go on in our lives without healing, becoming quite content in our pain. "Restoration meddles with what they've learned to handle, removes what they've learned to live with, bestows what they've learned to live without."<sup>2</sup> In short, we become adept at living with a gaping wound. It's our comfortable place, what we embrace as our lot in life. Dysfunction is our safe place; it's what is knowable and navigable. The prospect of healing frightens us because we don't know what it looks like. Living with freedom would be new, different—alien to the way we've conducted our lives until this moment.

Mind if I ask you a question? Does it frighten you that you might not heal? Do you worry that it's too scary to try? What if you find you can't be healed? Not

healing would be devastating, so you might believe you'd be better off not trying at all.

Your fear of healing is likely fueled by Satan, who is aptly called the Father of Lies. Why would he care if you heal or not? Because he knows that if he can keep you shackled to the past, shuddering in the darkness, you'll never understand healthy, beautiful relationships. You'll shrink back from life, people, and opportunity because of your story. Saint Irenaeus purportedly wrote, "The glory of God is man fully alive."<sup>3</sup> When was the last time you felt utterly, joyfully alive? Does that seem impossible to you? Has dysfunction become your comfortable, cozy place? Does growth seem terrifying?

I won't lie to you.

Sometimes healing and growth excruciate. Today I received a tweet that indicated this agony: "But did you ever get to a point where you felt like you couldn't deal with the healing process?" And then: "I just feel like I can't do it anymore, it's so painful!"

Tears, heaving sobs, and a feeling of being lost accompany a healing journey. But you can't have change without tension and fear. Any great adventure has obstacles, right?

## THE HEALING TRAIL

In my book *Thin Places*, I likened the journey of healing to a mountainside tunnel. It goes something like this.

You're hiking along a difficult trail, shrouded by looming, arm-waving evergreens. The air is invigorated

with the scent of pine, and in the darkness of the forest you are grateful to be alive. Because at least you can walk. Ahead of you is a tunnel hewn from the rock, created by engineers in the 1920s to simplify a train's route, but now it's for folks like you, hikers discovering the beauty of a mountain. There's a problem, though. It's terribly dark inside. Somehow, you know that if you walk into the darkness, you'll be attacked. So you hesitate. You pace outside the tunnel, wondering if it would be safe to venture inward. You look behind you at how far you've come, how much the forest has sheltered you. There is safety in the path you took, but this tunnel represents mystery.

From inside you hear a voice like the voice of God, a thundering, beckoning, frightening, beautiful voice saying, "I will be with you in the tunnel. Don't be afraid." You debate whether to step inside. You stretch your toe into darkness.<sup>4</sup>

And then, you take the first steps into the tunnel. You freeze. But Jesus takes you by the hand and sits beside you. Although He already knows your story, He asks you to retell it, and while you do, a giant IMAX screen illuminates the tunnel. When the words of your devastation leave your mouth, the story comes alive before you, stunning you to your spot, trembling you inside and out. Technicolor is almost too much to bear. And then you hear weeping.

Is it yours? Could be. But it's mixed together with the weeping of the Almighty who wept at Lazarus's tomb at the finality of death and the grief of life.

Something in you died when that person (or people) stole from you, and you've had a life of grieving your innocence ever since. Jesus laments alongside you in the dark place as the credits roll. He opens up your wounds, not to frighten you, but to fix you. He cleans the festering sore, which hurts like the dickens, then sews it up. It leaves a scar. When He's finished, He opens His embrace, and in doing so, you see His scars too. He hung naked on a cross. He received the nails of hatred and violation. His brow still bears the marks of thorns piercing flesh. He understands. Oh how He understands.

He walks through the tunnel alongside you, His scarred hand in yours. The light that comes from the end of the tunnel stuns you, hushes you. Because of the black darkness behind you, the squinting sunshine is even more brilliant.

On the other side of the tunnel is a blessed, joyful light. But more than that, you realize that while you were in the tunnel you'd been climbing above the tree line. Before, you'd been wandering around in a dark forest and now you stand above it. You see mountains majestic, a sky of cumulus clouds, the sun peek-a-booing through them. You see the trail that you traversed as important and necessary, but this new vista fades the pain a bit. You thank God for the necessity of the

tunnel, how it became the avenue from back then to right now.

That's the journey I want to take you on in this book. From darkness to light. From fear to hope. From violation to healing. From victimized to victor. From marked to unmarked. From one who was hurt to one who doles out healing. I couldn't, and wouldn't, make this promise if it weren't true in my own life. Jesus has healed (and continues to heal) me, particularly in the area of sex.

Before we begin the journey, let's look at ways sexual abuse can affect us today. But as you do, be careful you don't minimize what happened to you. Dan Allender wrote in *The Wounded Heart* that any kind of unwanted sexual touch is a violation. In surveys and studies, the reaction to, and healing in the aftermath of that touch is oddly similar whether there's been full penetration or an unwanted hand on a leg. Anything that crosses that line leaves a scar. So, as you read this list, see if any of these problems/issues resonate with you. This isn't an exhaustive inventory, but it may help you see how deeply sexual abuse affects you right now. Many of these (but not all) are things I've experienced.

### **In Your Sexual Relationship:**

- You are afraid to have sex. In fact, if sex were suddenly erased from planet earth, you would throw a party.
- You can't have sex—it hurts or it doesn't work right.

- You feel guilty for not being “enough” for your spouse, but have no idea how to sufficiently heal in this area to want sex. It’s more duty than joy.
- You are compulsive about sex and take extreme risks in your sexual behavior.
- You view sex as a commodity, not as a loving act between two people.
- You are repulsed by sex. Though you might tolerate it for the sake of your loved one, deep down you feel sickened and having to wrestle so much with trying to “like” sex makes you angry.
- You are drawn to pornography. This causes you to feel even more shame.
- You worry that if you learn to enjoy sex you’re somehow validating the abuse you experienced.
- You freeze when a trigger or flashback happens during sex, but you don’t speak about it, leaving your spouse confused. You are terrified to speak to your spouse about your triggers and flashbacks.
- If you do have sex, you disconnect from the act in order to tolerate it. You’re never “in the moment.” Instead you float above yourself.
- Or you fantasize to take you out of the equation. You make up stories so it’s not actually you having the sex.
- You become so reliant on the fantasies for your pleasure that you don’t know how to enjoy sex without them.

- You grow deep resentment toward your spouse and even toward God because you “have” to have sex.
- You have orgasmic difficulties.
- You have zero desire to have sex.
- You have an insatiable desire for sex.

### **In Your Emotional Health:**

- Shame is your constant companion. Shameful feelings are familiar and normal—it’s how you process life.
- You have memory blocks where you cannot access large chunks of time. You want to know what happened, but are also afraid to uncover the truth.
- You worry that you brought on the abuse yourself and you shame yourself for not breaking free from the abuse sooner.
- You gravitate toward abusive relationships because that is what is known (safe) and what you feel you deserve.
- You feel dirty.
- You’ve experienced symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>5</sup>
- You have had strong feelings of suicide.
- You battle catastrophic thinking—if one thing bad happens, you automatically leap to believing the entire world is falling apart.
- You deny that your past has any bearing on your present or your future, hurting you and others. That was “back then,” you argue. It was so long ago, that it no longer affects you, and you don’t

need to think about it. And yet, your behavior shows that no matter how long ago it happened, it is having a profound effect on you today.

- You minimize what happened, rationalizing that other people have worse stories, so why should you be affected by your sexual abuse?
- You fear that if you deal with the abuse from the past, you will explode or die or start crying and never stop. You worry you'll become so overcome you might take your life.

### **In Your Relationships:**

- You feel used easily. If your spouse doesn't pay attention to you during the day and expects to have sex at night, you feel like a prostitute or a gigolo.
- You absolutely need the approval of others to feel okay.
- The word "trust" freaks you out.
- You avoid others because you think you have nothing to offer them.
- You have a titanic fear of being abandoned. That fear controls you, keeps you up at night, and dictates how you act around others.
- You don't know how to process your pain without yelling or acting fearfully inappropriate, so you believe it's better to keep your mouth shut.
- You're good at stuffing your feelings and emotions way down deep.

- You worry that if you talk about the sexual abuse, your family of origin will abandon you (particularly when the abuse happened within the family). You believe telling the truth means you aren't honoring your parents or that you're breaking an unwritten code of silence.
- You harbor deep resentment toward a parent or caretaker who didn't protect you. Sometimes the rage is palpable.
- You have a hard time developing close, intimate relationships.
- To feel safe, you control people and things.
- You have victimized others.
- You have a fear of one gender (either all men or all women).

### **In Your Daily Life:**

- You battle an addiction. That addiction fills a hole you can't seem to fill otherwise. Often this addiction is secret.
- You feel you've been marked for sexual abuse, even as an adult. Predators seem to find you.
- You startle easily.
- You are afraid to be alone, particularly at night.
- You have flashbacks and/or nightmares about the abuse.
- You fear being grabbed from behind.
- You are either an obsessive risk taker, or a complete risk-avoider.

- You have carried the secret for years and never let it out because you fear you won't be believed. You wonder if you'll carry it to the grave.
- You walk through life hyper-vigilant, always worried something bad is going to happen.

### **In Your Identity:**

- You believe you are worthless. In fact, you know you are. Why else would those perpetrators do that to you?
- You overachieve to prove your worth. It has become another form of addiction.
- You underachieve because it's better to remain invisible. And you underachieve because, honestly, why bother succeeding if you're worthless?
- You rebel to gain attention, the crazier the act, the better—anything so someone will pay attention to you.
- You believe you are different from others—and not in a good way.
- You feel you don't belong.
- You feel utterly alone, like no one else in the history of the world understands what it is like to be you.
- You constantly wonder why you are on this earth, other than to be abused and taken advantage of.
- You feel small.
- You often battle insecurity.
- Even when you're complimented, you don't believe the sentiment.

**In Your Health:**

- You deal with panic attacks, sleeplessness, or autoimmune disorders.
- You struggle with a food addiction.
- You're overweight. Your weight keeps you safe from predators, so the thought of losing weight scares you.
- You have a poor body image. Nothing about you is ever perfect or beautiful or handsome or enough.
- You think you will die young.
- You battle depression.
- You fear doctor exams (gynecological or otherwise).
- You battle self-mutilation, anorexia, bulimia, or any self-destructive behavior.

Go back through and circle your struggles, and feel free to add more in the margins. If you're extra daring, share your circles with your closest friend, a counselor, or your spouse. Chances are, folks have no idea how much you've been affected by the past. When I started sharing some of these things with my husband, Patrick, he was surprised and saddened. He had no idea how much grief and shame and sorrow and fear I housed inside myself. It felt therapeutic to share it, but it took me a long time to be brave enough and trust my husband enough to let him know how I felt.<sup>6</sup>

Honestly, I wish I could wave a magic wand and erase the mark from both me and you. I've felt like the writer of Proverbs, "I am weary, O God. I am weary and worn out" (Proverbs 30:1, ESV). But immediate healing doesn't always work—though I would welcome that. Dismantling lies we've lived with for so long takes a lot of time, a lot of truth, and a lot of unconditional love.

The aftermath of sexual abuse is sad and grim, but I thank God that He didn't leave us resourceless. I thank Him that although there is a large swath of devastation, there is also a larger story of reconciliation and redemption. The mark we carry does not need to become our identity. I believe this verse for you: "Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 23:18, ESV). I fully believe Jesus can fade the mark, eventually erasing it. He can heal us so much so that we become agents of healing in a sex-injured world.

Still, healing has to be wanted. You can't expect healing to happen magically to you, slipped under your pillow by the Healing Fairy. It has to be pursued. You cannot and will not heal in passivity. When Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda if he wanted to get well, the man never answered him. He had been sitting by that pool for over three decades, waiting passively for something to happen. The beauty of that story is that even though the man had no response, Jesus graced him with outrageous healing.

So even if you start this book with no desire to heal, mad at the world and bitter toward others, with no unction to get better, it's my prayer that Jesus would woo you toward the wanting of it all. Like Peter whose faith faltered as he stepped onto the water, Jesus didn't let him sink into the waters because of his frailty, He lifted him from the murky depths.

My story is simply this: "He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along" (Psalm 40:2, NLT). That is my deepest, utmost prayer for you as you read this book.