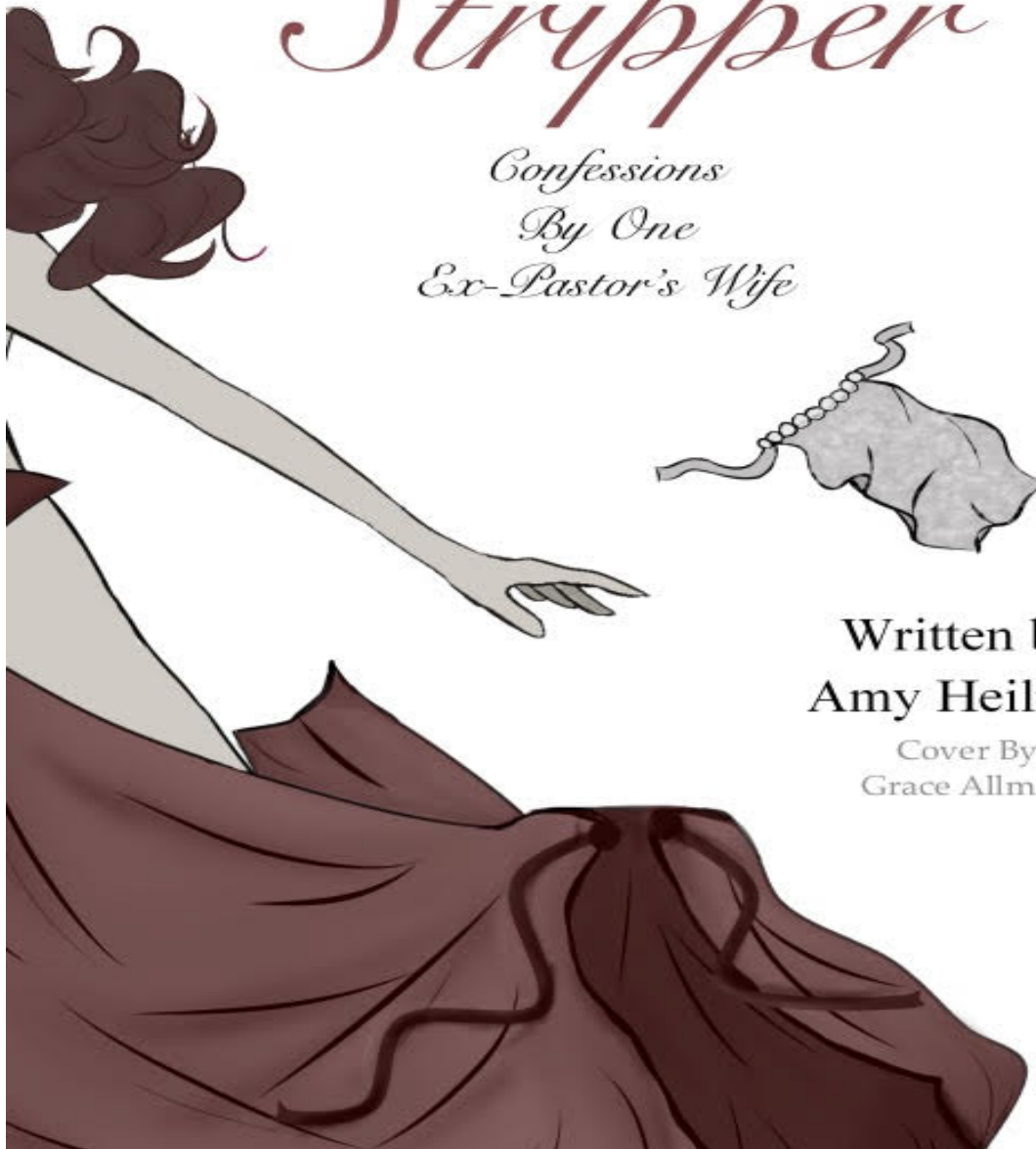


Soul Stripper

*Confessions
By One
Ex-Pastor's Wife*



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Soul Stripper
Confessions By One Ex-Pastor's Wife

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This book is dedicated to my greatest prayer warrior, my mom, Sandy Allen.
Thank you for loving and inspiring me.

My deepest thankfulness and gratitude to all my sisters and brothers in Christ who have
supported and prayed for me on the journey
to put my story into writing to encourage others.
My life is enriched, and I thank God for you.

To my family, Joe, Lilly, and Jed.
Thank you for giving me the breathing room to embrace
who God created me to be.

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Introduction

~...let us throw off everything that hinders.... And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus...

Hebrews 12:1-2

One by one the layers began to come off. Every flaw revealed. Though exposed, I did not feel shameful; amazingly, I felt thankful. The light felt warm and inviting. There was no fear of needing to hide, as I kept my eyes focused on His face.

This is one desperate woman's testimony as a stripper, but not the kind you may be thinking of. It's a journey of allowing God to have His way in the "stripping away" and "throwing off" of emotional and spiritual layers to get to the authentic self. The stripping has been a process that has led to a more fulfilled life in Christ. I have been leaning into my true identity as a daughter of the King, Jesus. Living loved.

The premise of this book is from Hebrews 12. It is woven throughout the pages. If you are in a place in life where you are longing for more of what our Triune God has for you and desiring spiritual growth through a deeper personal relationship with Him...then read on, Friend, and I am honored that you chose to share this journey with me!

I have a deep reverence for our Triune God. (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinity: three in one unity, as the Godhead. Referenced in Matthew 28:19) I have a life filled with stories of how He has changed me and my life from the inside out.

I believe the Bible is absolute truth, the Living Word, alive and active in our lives!

~ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

I am especially fond of the book of Psalms. The writer David was real and raw with his feelings and emotions with God. Like David, I am transparent and genuine in these chapters. I strongly believe there is a spiritual battle going on for our hearts and minds.

~ For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:12

I'm learning to discern this spiritual war and want to share what I've gleaned to help you see and recognize your own battle. My hope is for you to learn how to live in God's fullness and freedom for your life.

~ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. John 10:10

If you own a real tangible Bible, fantastic! I encourage you to get it out and read it! I believe that there is something powerful in holding a real, book style Bible in your hands. Some of the Bible verses you will get to look up yourself. It makes the adventure more fun! I generally use the NIV (New International Version) translation. Occasionally, you will see that I have used other translations and they are cited. (I enjoy comparing the different wording of other translations.)

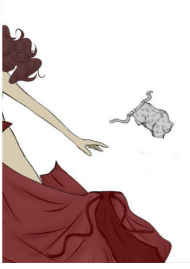
You may also want a journal, a spiral notebook, or even a sketch pad nearby when reading to make notes or draw as you ponder your own journey. At the end of each chapter I have suggested questions for you to reflect on with God. I found that journaling is a wonderful outlet for me to process my thoughts and it has become a daily rhythm for me to write out my prayers to God. It brings me joy to look back on these journals and see how God has answered my prayers and the spiritual growth that has come on the journey. You may prefer to express thoughts and feelings through drawing, sketching, or painting. Whatever way helps you process and self-reflect with God to bring an awareness to experiencing daily life with Him, I encourage you to do so.

Now you have a glimpse of my heart, I am thankful you picked up this book. Consider this an invitation to see into one woman's journey discovering the presence of our faithful Triune God along the way. May you be inspired to reflect upon your own story with Him. My hope is that even one person can relate and connect with different parts of my story and see God's glory.

~ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...
Hebrews 12:1

Be assured we are not alone!

Turn the page, my friend, and let's begin together...



Chapter 1

The Stripping Process

~...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

Hebrews 12:1

When a bout of winter blahs spiraled into a funk of depression, the stripping of layers began. It is so disheartening that depression and mental illnesses have such a stigma and can be so misunderstood. Depression is not a sin, lack of faith, or something one can “just snap out of.” God can do so much healing through proper mental healthcare, and renewal of the mind and soul when surrendered to Him. For we are made by God body, mind, and spirit. All three are connected. That is how we are beautifully made.

In this funk I felt overwhelmed and defeated with juggling fifteen years of ministry, being a pastor's wife, and mothering two young children. The expectations and responsibilities ahead of me in the New Year were more than I could handle. I could not bear the burdens of those whom I feared I had disappointed along the way. I was too tired to even breathe. My layers of responsibility smothered me.

I realized I could not keep these heavy feelings hidden in the darkness of my mind. I knew the father of lies (our spiritual enemy, Satan) breeds deception in the darkness. I also realized that when I brought my struggles into the light, the enemy would lose his grip on me.

*~He reveals the deep things of darkness
and brings utter darkness into the light. Job 12:22*

~For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Ephesians 5:8-10

I recognized the enemy's tactics from previous battles: the feelings of hopelessness and isolation. I had to set my pride aside. I needed to talk to someone. Through tears, I reached out to a safe friend from church that had a degree in counseling. I was confident she could help me sort through all those feelings. Over coffee I poured out my heart and struggles. My friend did not judge nor shame me for my depression. She just listened.

I worked so hard to look like I had it all together. I wanted others to perceive me as a leader who did not have her own struggles. I grew weary trying in to keep up this façade. I finally acknowledged the self-protective layers I had created to hide my feelings of shame for not having mastered my own emotions and thoughts.

As I verbally confessed this internal conflict to God and to my sister in Christ, I began to feel freer. This confession helped me to begin slowly removing the layers of pride I was hiding behind. I felt as if I had shed a heavy-hooded cloak, and my mind became clearer. I received grace, love, and mercy from the Lord and my trusted friend.

Little did I know, God, in His sovereign grace, had a plan to uncover more layers that weighed me down. Of course, His timing is always perfect. My husband and I had a sabbatical from ministry already scheduled. During this time God gently began to undo more of the layers.

~When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" - and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:3-5

Reflection Questions:

- Are there layers you're hiding behind to make others think you have it all together? Have you created facades to cover your weaknesses?
- What are some of the tactics the enemy uses to make us keep heavy feelings of depression hidden in darkness? Do you ever battle with overwhelming feelings of hopelessness?
- Would taking time to talk with God about these heavy layers help you throw off what is weighing you down? Why or why not?
- Do you have a safe, trusted friend or counselor to talk with about these layers? If so, what would help you take the step to do so?



Chapter 2

Misplaced Identity

***~So, God created human beings in his own image.
In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.
Genesis 1:27 (NLT)***

Identity is a big issue in our world today. We have increased fear our identity being stolen through the internet. There is a lot of talk of gender identity, gender fluidity, etc. No wonder there is identity crisis and confusion all around us.

In May 2007, I had my own serious identity crisis. I discovered my identity was truly misplaced. My self-worth was wrapped up in a title. It all came to a head the first time I walked into a church as an anonymous guest. My husband and I were visiting while on sabbatical from ministry, and nobody knew me as a pastor's wife. For most pastors' wives, anonymity of that role would be a dream come true. To be able to slip in the back door and not be bombarded with questions would be a breath of fresh air. To not be eyeballed up and down by other women who size me up and guess where I shopped or how much I paid for my outfit... It would be a relief to not to have the expectation that, of course, the "pastor's wife" would be happy to fill in for (you fill in the blank) that Sunday morning.

For me, however, the response was a different one. Though ashamed to admit it, I was terrified and lost when nobody recognized me. Nobody knew me or my husband by name. They didn't ask me anything. They didn't need me. I felt like a nobody... worthless and of no value. Then, it hit me like a labor contraction and almost took me down. I was sickened by my own sin, as I realized how much I found my worth and identity in being a "pastor's wife." The realization made me feel like vomiting. Of course, I didn't. I was holding one of my children's hands and had the other one on my hip. Plus, my husband was standing next to me in a church lobby packed with people I did not know.

When I arrived home that day and had time alone, I emotionally spewed in my journal to God. It wasn't pretty, but it needed to be done. I confessed and repented to my Heavenly Father. I wrote how I felt unimportant and worthless without another human being knowing my name and title. I realized I was trying to find my identity in the wrong place. That's when I began praying for God to help me strip away the layers of unhealthy and misplaced identity.

Within a few weeks of this experience, I had a dream. Many times in the Bible God spoke to people in dreams. God still does this. I have had dreams before that I thought may have been from God, but this one was different and shook me to the core of my being.

In my dream I was treading water in the middle of the ocean with a man. Our heads were bobbing barely above large waves. Pieces of paper floated in the water around me. These were pieces of my identity.

One by one I recognized the pieces: my driver's license, social security card, and other papers of identification. They were floating away. The man who was with me held up a piece of paper, which looked like my birth certificate. The certificate was torn and tattered. The man laughed deviously. It hit me at that moment that he was the person who had deceived me all along and had stolen my identity. Before I knew it, this deceiver tried to pull me under the water.

As I struggled to raise my head out of the water for breath, a group of people I knew were swimming away waving and saying, "Oh, she must be all right. She is with him, so she must know him." I wanted to scream, but I couldn't!

What? Know him? He's been deceiving me! Help me! He's trying to drown me! This deceiver continually pushed my head under the water. I looked up with blurry eyes to the sky trying to catch a last breath.

Where is God? Does He not care that I am drowning?

I awoke to my three-year-old son whimpering in the next room. The clock on the nightstand said 6:02 a.m. and I was out of breath.

That morning, still frazzled from the dream, I asked the Lord to reveal any significance of the dream. This was the first time I had ever asked this of Him. That day, in my Bible reading time, I came across this passage:

~He reached down from on high and took hold of me; He drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; He rescued me because he delighted in me. Psalm 18:16-17

The Message translation of the Bible says it like this:

~But He caught me - reached all the way from sky to sea, He pulled me out of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos, the voice in which I was drowning. They hit me when I was down, but God stuck by me. He stood me up on a wide-open field; I stood there saved, surprised to be loved. God made my life complete when I placed all the pieces before him!

(Way before Jerry McGuire's famous movie-line, "You complete me!", the Word of truth says God completes us!)

My dream and God's Word were speaking to me about being deceived by the father of lies as to where my true identity is found. I had a false sense of identity, an idolatrous one wrapped up in "doing ministry" and not in Him alone. I was drowning in fear. I had placed my identity in my ministry title/position and not in *being His child*.

Thus, began the stripping of another layer. I confessed my sins of pride (Ugh! Again, my stubborn pride) and reclaimed my misplaced identity. Knowing the truth of God's loving character and my reverence for who He is, I was confident He would be kind and gentle with me in this process. Stripping this layer would take time, but it would be essential if I wanted to live in my true identity as a daughter of the King. I needed to walk in that truth!

~Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship [daughtership] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will - to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us. Ephesians 1:3-8 (emphasis mine)

~But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship [daughtership]. Because you are His sons [and daughters], God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So, you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are His child, God has made you also an heir.

Galatians 4:4-7 (emphasis mine)

Standing in my true identity as a daughter of the King, I have to keep in check where I find my worth and identity. It helps me on this journey to write my prayers in my journal and talk with other trusted sisters in Christ. In doing so, the false foundations crumble like clay, and I find myself standing on the grace of God's Rock.

***~Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress; I will not be shaken.
My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.***

Psalm 62:6-7

~He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear [reverence] of the Lord is the key to this treasure. Isaiah 33:6

Reflection Questions:

Where am I finding my identity and self-worth?

- Is it in my job, ministry position, title, or role in the community?
- Is it in social media with how many people like and comment on my posts?
- Is it how others perceive me?

If that position or title was stripped from me, who would I be?

I encourage you to reflect on the verses in this chapter, pull out your Bible, and take some quiet time for yourself. Pray and ask God to show you His truth. Perhaps, ask God:

Who do You see me as?

Do I identify myself as Your child?

Lastly, have you ever had a dream in which you felt God was speaking to you or revealing something? If so, what was it? I encourage you to write it down. You never know what may come of it...



Chapter 3

The Three D's

~Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews 12:2

I have to confess this isn't the first time I have experienced stripping. The first time God stripped me of my title or role of a pastor's wife was in 1995. As I have mentioned, it is a journey. Three words come to mind when I think about my past:

Desperation. Desire. Dependency.

A couple years ago I received a painting of Jesus as a Christmas gift. The artist portrays the loving, compassionate, smiling, and playful face of Jesus with a woman's worn hands reaching out to cup His face. I love this picture! It hangs on my living room wall. I sit and reflect on it daily, as I meet with Him first thing every morning with my coffee, Bible, and journal in hand.

This is my Jesus... the one I was introduced to in elementary school by a lunch lady (that is what we use to call the cafeteria workers). One summer she invited me to a Vacation Bible School in her home (in the 70's you could do this). Ms. Shoop gave each of us a wallet-sized picture of Jesus to take home. She talked about His love and acceptance, and Jesus being my forever friend. She said He would never leave me. He cared about me, and He would always be there for me. She said I could talk to Him any time. He would always be available to listen. Then we sang, "Jesus Loves Me."

One look into Jesus' eyes in that little glossy picture and I was swept off my feet. My earthly father died when I was almost four years old. Stepdads passed in and out of our house like changing seasons. For me, Jesus was the love I was looking for and desperately needed. I treasured that little picture like a precious piece of gold. I tucked it in safe places in my bedroom and would take it out when I needed to talk to Him about things that only He would understand. The little picture of Jesus grew worn, wrinkled, and tear-stained. At some point I lost it, but the words to that children's song still resonated within my mind.

Occasionally my family went to church growing up, usually when my mom was single and in between relationships. One little Christian church we attended was in an old, white, traditional building with pews, red carpet, and a steeple. My Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Jones, was such a sweet woman who always had the best juice and graham crackers. She taught us, "The Lord's Prayer." She walked us through the meaning of each verse and encouraged us to

memorize the prayer. I still remember. I felt the love of God through Mrs. Jones in that little church.

In middle school, a friend invited me to her church. I loved the youth group and the loving people at that Baptist church. I can still remember the prayer nights and the smell of potluck dinners. I felt valued. I loved the atmosphere and the sense of belonging in a church family. I was baptized and received my first Bible. Sadly, my friend moved away, and I no longer had a ride to church.

My dating years began, and I forgot about my first love, Jesus. It was then I started looking for a new love in boys. I would do just about anything to get their attention and feel wanted. I started drinking to fit in and look cool. I liked the taste of alcohol, and I used it to try to escape the problems in my home life.

During my sophomore year, a friend invited me to her church. I once again enjoyed the community of youth group. A boy caught my eye, and he became interested in me as well. I took every opportunity to get to church to see him. The relationship didn't last long. He got into some pretty serious trouble with the law and stopped attending church. The youth leaders knew about this relationship break up and reached out to keep me connected with the youth group.

I continued to attend church. (God will use many catalysts to get our attention and pursue us!) A couple of good friends had very loving Christian families. I stayed with them on weekends and went to church with them. They had meals together and prayed. Their conversations were about God, the Bible, and how to live out their faith on a daily basis. There was something different about them. I longed for that atmosphere of love, security, comfort, and peace. I cherished the times I spent in their homes.

Though I longed for that atmosphere I experienced in my Christian friends' homes, a battle raged within me, and I struggled. I wanted to party on Saturday nights and then be the good Christian girl on Sunday mornings. The two worlds were hard to juggle. Though I did not understand it at the time, I believed the lie that I needed a boyfriend to feel I had value and worth as a young woman. As I reflect on those years, I can see God's loving kindness, mercy, and grace. There were so many situations and predicaments I found myself in with boys simply because I wanted to feel loved. I could have gotten myself into a lot of painful trouble. I look back now and see that my loving God saved me from myself. I was looking for love and self-worth in the wrong people and places. Once, in my naivety, I thought I was just going to pick something up with my boyfriend and his brother. I was actually right in the middle of a drug deal! Thankfully, I was not arrested. The Holy Spirit always led me to a place of safety. His providential hand was over me, even when I did not see it at the time.

By my senior year in high school, I was totally sold out for Jesus even though my home life was very challenging. I looked forward to the Bible teaching at church and youth group and started studying the Bible on my own. I began to understand more about myself, what my passions were, and how to use them in my church community.

I helped with the children's ministry and loved working with the kids. I had amazing spiritual parents and wonderful youth leaders. They took time to really engage me in thought provoking conversations about faith and God. They helped guide and direct me in decisions that would affect me the rest of my life.

I had plans to attend the community college in Tucson, Arizona where I grew up. I planned to take general courses and see where that would lead. One day, I had lunch with the youth pastor, and associate pastor. They asked me if I had considered going to Bible college. (Truth be told, I had visited the school they referred to during a youth trip to California, but that trip had been all about the beach for me. I had hardly noticed the college!) The pastors believed there was a calling on my life for ministry. They even envisioned me marrying a pastor someday! Ha!

“What!?” I laughed in their face. “Me, go to bible college?!”

No one in my immediate family had gone to a four-year college, let alone a Bible college. No one had even left the state of Arizona! And a pastor's wife? No way! I would be poor and have to shop at thrift stores! (I laugh now because those have been some of the best places for me to shop!) These men could see things in me that I couldn't see. They prayed with me, and I left surprised by the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in my heart and mind. I am deeply grateful for those godly men who were spiritual fathers to me in that season. I took time to truly consider what they said and prayed. I decided to send in my application packet to the Bible college in California and waited to see what God would do.

After high school graduation my Uncle Allen (my deceased father's brother and only connection to my dad) invited me to fly to Minnesota to stay for a couple weeks. (My Uncle Allen had always kept in touch with my brother and me growing up, even though he moved out of state and had a young family of his own. He always made us feel loved and valuable.) This trip was what I needed for a reprieve from the tension in my immediate family. They were not happy about me applying to Bible college out of state. However, the trip proved to be God's providential timing, as it gave my family time to process my decision. For me, it was the perfect baby step of independence. God's hand was at work. To this day when I see my uncle, I sense my Heavenly Father's love through him.

After my trip, the rest of that summer was a blur. It's amazing to look back and realize how God miraculously opened doors of acceptance into the college, (I did not have the most prestigious transcripts) and, He provided for my financial needs. In August of 1988 I became a fulltime bible college student in California.

Through God's providence, life with my new college friends was wonderful. I loved the environment, learning more about the Bible, and preparing for my Early Childhood Education degree. I was surrounded by students who grew up in Christian homes and knew all the Bible stories. I knew some of the Bible stories but had some catching up to do, so I taught a Sunday school class to inner-city children in Southern California. I was learning right along with them.

It wasn't long before a young man swept me off my feet. And, yep, he was preparing to be a youth minister! Neither of us grew up in Christian homes, but I believed it to be a match

made in heaven! We sought out pre-marital counsel from our pastor at church. The pastor encouraged us to notice and work on some of our blind spots, and to anticipate things that could create problems in the future. Looking back, there were definitely red flags, but I chose to ignore them. After all, I was with a Christian man who was preparing to be a pastor, and we would be in ministry together. Naturally, we would live happily ever after! (At 19 years old, I knew everything, right?)

As soon as we were married and graduated, we began serving in ministry. My life was consumed with teaching preschool, children's ministry, youth ministry, and being hospitable to church members. Either our house was filled with church people or we were at the church. Life was busy, with little rest, yet fulfilling. I liked being perceived by others as the "perfect pastor's wife." I liked looking busy "doing" for the Lord. Though embarrassing to admit now, I liked the feeling of others looking up to me. I was puffed up with pride. However, I was so busy doing God's work, I rarely had my own personal time with God. I did not make space in my schedule to read the Bible, pray, or be still to hear what God wanted. Behind closed doors, everything wasn't so perfect. There were problems in my marriage. My husband was discontented with me, and I couldn't seem to make him happy. He had a pornography addiction that slowly destroyed our marriage. It grew harder for me to put up the false front pretending that everything was okay. My illusion of being in control of my perfect little life started to come apart.

After four-and-half years of marriage and ministry, the layers of my identity began to unravel one thread at a time. My husband decided Christianity was not for him, nor were ministry and marriage to me. I miscarried a child, and my husband had several emotional affairs. One turned physical. He also had become physically aggressive and threatening, and I feared for my safety. Emotionally, life at this point was way more than I could handle. I struggled with my own faith. What in the world had I signed up for by giving my life completely to Christ and choosing to be in full-time ministry?

Oh, how I wished for an earthly father to run to with all my hurts. I wanted him to hold me and tell me everything would work out. Instead, I ran to an old comfort from my days in high school, a comfort my stepdads had modeled for me. I bought six packs of wine coolers after work to cope with pain. After several nights in a row of drinking and feeling only more hurt I heard a voice ... the voice of the Holy Spirit, "This is not going to work for you!" I cried and screamed to God on my knees while I was holding a wine cooler in one hand and my Bible in the other:

"Where are You? Do you see what is happening to me?
I have dedicated my life in service to You, and this is what I get?!"

Complete silence. No answer.

"If this is the kind of God You are, I don't want anything to do with You!
Do You hear me?"

Sobbing on my knees, I looked down at my Bible and then at the bottle. This was definitely a crossroad in my journey. If I chose to put the bottle down and hold on to the Bible, I didn't know where it would lead. The path was unclear. So far, my future didn't look good.

Why had God let this happen to me? I looked again at the wine cooler and knew that following that road would lead me to a life of death and destruction, just like it had my earthly father.

I put the bottle down, opened up my Bible, and started reading Psalms. Seeing David's heart and authentic feelings in words gave me comfort. I fell asleep with the Bible purposely lain upon my chest and heart. I hoped it would sink deep into me.

~Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

Psalm 69: 1-3

~Yet, I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in Heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever...But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds. **Psalm 73:23-26 & 28**

The next day I drove home from work, and instead of stopping for wine coolers, I prayed. From that day forward I vowed to never again use alcohol as a coping mechanism. I chose to trust God and His Word, as tears streamed down my face. Those old unwanted feelings of rejection, disillusionment, disappointment, and abandonment overwhelmed me. Then, suddenly, the familiar old tune came to mind and I started to sing... "Jesus loves me this I know...for the Bible tells me so..." Through salty tears, I felt a peaceful love washing over me. The Jesus I had met back in Ms. Shoop's living room was the same one loving and comforting me at the place of my deepest need.

~My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:19

That night I called my old roommate from Bible college. I shared with her all that was going on in my life. She prayed with me, and the way she prayed for me was life changing. "Loving God pull your child close into your lap. Love on her, stroke her beautiful hair, and remind her You love her, and she is not alone."

Once again, tears poured out as the vision of being on Jesus's lap became real. I felt the warmth and comfort of His touch. I did not know this loving intimacy with an invisible God could be so real, so very tangible. Intimacy. (As in, "Into me You see") This was the start of a new place for me. I was so grateful. I felt safe and held. Little did I know how much I would need to lean on those loving arms of Jesus and how He was preparing me for what was around the corner.

In 1995, our five-year marriage was dissolved (“dissolved” is the word the judge used in the courtroom. The situation left me feeling so very saddened). I was physically stripped of all that was once my life, my community, and security. I had no control. These were the consequences of someone else's choices. I started attending a new church. This time I was a divorced pastor's wife; I wasn't on a church staff. Single, I felt very alone. Although, not alone; I was held by Jesus.

The Lord provided a safe refuge in a little one-bedroom apartment through the generous help of a loving older couple with whom I was working for. My new home was much different than a house filled with the constant flow of teenagers. However, I was grateful that God took care of my needs, and I learned to enjoy the quiet space.

There I was, a divorced, ex-pastor's wife, and a woman desperate for God. I had no husband, no child, no ministry title, just God. He was all I had. In that very place and season I grew in deeper dependency and desire for God, His Word, and His truth. I saturated my mind in God's Living Word and poured out my heart in journaling. That's when I began to understand a deeper level of the Triune God: My loving Heavenly Father, Jesus, the Lover of my soul, and the gentleness of the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide me.

I started attending a new church, New Life Church. (Even the word “new” was in the church name!) God, in His sovereignty, provided me with two friends in that church body. One of them was going through the same heartbreak of divorce from a man who had betrayed her. We cried together and sought the Lord's comfort in the promises in God's Word. We learned to trust in God's sovereignty over our lives. We framed our life verses as constant reminders:

~And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who are called according to His purpose for them. Romans 8:28

~For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and hope. Jeremiah 29:11

That season of life taught me what it truly means to trust God in total desperation and dependency. I learned how to walk in faith on a darkened, unknown path where I could not see my foot in front of me. The desire to continue to serve in ministry in some capacity was still there, but I wasn't sure what it would look like. I did know, however, that God was transforming my heart as I fixed my eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of my faith. (Hebrews 12:2)

~I am confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. Psalm 27:13-14

~I'm sure now I'll see God's goodness in the exuberant earth. Stay with God! Take heart. Don't quit! I'll say it again, Stay with God. Psalm 27:13-14 (MSG)

Reflection Questions:

Are there times you have seen provision for God's providence over your life?

What seasons in your life have you questioned if God was still with you?

Did you sense God's presence with you?

- If so, how?
- If not, can you think of why not?

- What difficult situations have you been through that were consequences of someone else's choices? Of those, have you been able to see God working all things for good in your life as promised in **Romans 8:28**?

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

- Have you ever had an experience where God or Jesus felt so tangible that you could feel physical comfort?

- If not, do you desire to? If so, I encourage you to share those desires in prayer to our Triune God.

I would like to suggest you take time to convey your gratefulness and thank God for what He has done during these times in your life. If you feel comfortable try expressing yourself through journaling, drawing, painting, writing a song, or through worship music.



Chapter 4

Begin Anew... Again

*~See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:19*

During my first marriage, while serving in youth ministry, I met a young man, Joe. He was from Baltimore, Maryland, and was passing through our town on his music ministry tour. He was a little, long-haired hippie playing at churches, church camps, homeless shelters, and anywhere God opened the door for him. We kept in touch through postcards and letters. During my difficult separation and divorce, he sent encouraging letters to remind me God was still in control of my life even though it didn't feel like it. We kept in touch and our long-distance relationship grew through phone calls, more letters, and plane trips. After two years of trips back and forth between Arizona and Maryland, we were married.

We didn't spend our honeymoon like most newlyweds. We did spend a lot of time in our room and in bed, but only because Joe was very ill! He had battled tiredness, stomach issues, and had even fainted during the wedding pictures! We thought it was stress-related, and he would feel better once we were settled. Unfortunately, he grew worse. Joe was barely able to eat and hold down any food. He dropped weight and became lethargic. On top of that, he was misdiagnosed and almost died! It was a very frightening time.

This season took me deeper into dependency on God. I had no control over my husband's health or our future. I prayed, and God sent help. My mother-in-law, who was a nurse, and her good friend, a doctor, arrived that week. They made sure he received the best medical care possible in his hometown. Joe was finally correctly diagnosed with Addison's disease, an autoimmune disease. In a nutshell, his body does not produce its own adrenaline, an important hormone to cope with stress. We were told he would have to take medications for the rest of his life to compensate for this hormone deficit. If not treated properly, major stress would trigger Addisonal episodes that could land him in the hospital again. We pulled through that time and walked away with a lifetime treatment plan. We were thankful. We saw the hand of God over us and felt we could finally move into married life together.

After a rough start, we began our life together near Washington, D.C. It had felt risky, but *I married a pastor...again!* I learned to never say "never." I worked alongside my husband, as we helped plant a new church. He was the Worship Leader/Associate Pastor, and I used my gifts with children doing puppet and drama ministry. I loved it! Life was full, fun, and exhilarating! My past experiences gave me a wiser perspective, and it felt good being in ministry again.

In 1998, we were given the opportunity to move to Virginia Beach to help start another church. We were thankful to be a part of such a great church-planting organization and team of leaders. Everyone brought different personalities and spiritual gifts. Along with the spiritual euphoria, however, came the enemy, Satan.

He tried to thwart not only the unity of our team, but the unity of our marriages. For Joe and me all these new pressures and transitions magnified our weaknesses. His struggles and my insecurities became spiritual battles. We sought out counseling and learned how to fight for our relationship. To this day, I have no explanation how God could have used such a broken pair to love and minister to so many people. Through God's mercy and grace, my own compassion and understanding deepened for people going through similar troubling situations. All I had gone through in my first marriage also helped minister to those walking in those familiar difficult places.

~Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Our weeks were filled with Bible studies in our home, outreach projects, teaching, and serving others. We ministered to people dealing with the hard challenges life brings. Illnesses, deaths, marriage, divorce, suicide, a tragic car accident that took the life of a teen, and even a shark attack that killed a young boy were only some of the experiences. It was the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly living life in our church community. We were engrossed in loving people well, the busyness of church growth, and navigating changes on church staff.

In that decade, I birthed two beautiful children: Lillian and, two years later, Jediah. I was deeply thankful to have a sweet "M & M" life; motherhood and ministry were definitely my life purposes. I wanted to do it all well, and do it right! However, trying to do it all perfectly was exhausting. I tried to be "Super Mom!" You know the kind...I had to have just the right educational toys, books, meals, snacks, activities, birthday parties, etc. I felt I had to always please my kids and look like the perfect parent. (This was before Pinterest! Thank God, because I probably would have been a bigger mess trying to be super perfect mom!) I discovered some wise words that helped me tremendously. I honestly don't remember where I found it, but I had them copied and taped to my refrigerator for years.

Super Mom

Does

Finds her worth in accomplishments.
(Clean house, perfectly behaved kids)

Her peace is found in her perfect environment.

She expects perfection from herself and others.

She does everything for her children.

Abiding Mom

Is

Her worth is found in the accurate
view of who she is in God's eyes.
~Ephesians 2:10 God's workmanship
& masterpiece

Her peace of mind is found in Jesus
in the midst of any storm.
~Isaiah 26:3

She practices grace with herself and others.
~Ephesians 4:32

She builds a relationship with her children.
~Deuteronomy 6:6-7

These words continually brought me to my knees. I grew in deeper dependency and trust in the heart of God the Father, my heavenly parent. With God's loving and patient guidance, I chose to strip off the super mom hero cape I had worn raising and nurturing my children. The process continues even to this day. There is only one Superhero to save my kids. My role is to abide in God, and He will guide and lead me.

Reflection Questions:

- Are there any “new and again...” situations on your journey? Perhaps you are finding yourself in a familiar place again, but God is doing something new in you in the process.
- Where did you see the presence of God with you during those times?
- Do any of the “Super Mom vs. Abiding Mom” statements or verses resonate in your mind or heart?
- Do you find yourself trying to be or look perfect?

If you feel led, sit quietly, reflecting on the verses from this chapter. Ask God to show you areas in your life where you need to learn to abide in Him and strip off the cape of super woman.

I invite you to take time to just breathe and be still...and listen as you ponder the questions above. Write down anything God shows you. (It could be a Bible verse, a picture, or just a word)



Chapter 5

My To Do List Vs. The Lighter Load

~Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light.

Mathew 11:28-30

Everywhere I turned I saw this verse or heard a message about it. God kept telling me the same thing in different ways, trying to break through to me. I gave in finally. “Okay, God, I am hearing you!” I sat with God and that scripture from Matthew 11. I was wallowing in my own self-pity party, which are very lonely parties since no one else comes. My mind filled with the needs and wants to please so many people in many different ways. My to-do list was long: clean house for guests, grocery shop, kid’s doctor appointments, neighborhood meeting, meet with team leaders, prepare Sunday school lesson, and bake cupcakes for kids’ class. Bake cupcakes again? Why did I say yes to that again! While looking at all the “to do’s” on my list, I complained to God in my prayer journal. During that reflective time, I heard Him say, “WHY?” (Not in an audible voice, but in my mind’s heart.)

“Why what, God?” I replied out loud.

The conversation went something like this:

Holy Spirit: “Why do YOU have THIS on your list? Those are all wonderful nice things on your list but, I did not ask this of you.”

Me: “I thought You did. I want people to perceive me as a nice person, and I try to please everyone. Isn’t that what a pastor’s wife is supposed to do?”

Holy Spirit: “What are your heart’s motives? Whose affirmation are you seeking? Are you doing it to be accepted and significant? Who are you really trying to please?”

Ugh! I could feel another layer coming off. As I sat with those questions, even deeper layers started unraveling. What tasks on my “To do” list were simply me trying to look like a nice person and pleasing others? What were truly the priorities for my family’s needs? Every time I said, “Yes,” it only added to my already loaded schedule. In addition, my husband was consumed with his ministry obligations, juggling the daddy role, and home responsibilities. I felt overlooked and insignificant. I found myself looking for opportunities to use my gifts to seek appreciation, recognition, and validation from others.... even from other men I served with. I yearned for this affirmation and attention. Like a crack addict looking for another hit, I was craving ways to do things to find people’s appreciation and validation.

Not good. Yuck...double yuck! But there it was! This was not healthy and could lead to trouble. In counseling terms, this would be defined as an “affirmation or approval addiction.” I definitely carried the heavy yoke of a “people pleaser.” I know for many, this is common. We all desire to please, or be approved of, and receive affirmation in life. This is merely human nature. For me, the real problem was deeper because I was looking to find my value and worth in other's opinions of me.

I had to confess those deeper layers to God in my journaling. On my knees, I began to recognize the twisted motives of my heart. That familiar nausea of my own sin came over me once again. God, in His loving way, was revealing more layers for me to throw off. Thankfully, because of His faithful character, I was shown grace. In His gentle kindness, I became more consciously aware of my choices and the motives behind them. My load became lighter, and I began to look up to His face for my value and worth.

~He saved us not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit.
Titus 3:5

~For we speak as messengers who have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He is the one who examines the motives of our hearts. **I Thessalonians 2:4**

I needed help to keep the enemy from getting a foothold in these areas. Confessing my need to two close and trusted sisters in Christ, I asked them to keep me accountable in the unhealthy areas of finding my value and worth. This helped transform my motives from pleasing people to pleasing God first. Truly, this is a lifelong process for me. However, I am quicker to recognize my tendencies to want to say “yes” to look good or to feel significant. I am learning to say “yes” to opportunities that please God. I want to give Him my time and energy and not worry about how I may appear to others. I want to find rest for my soul in Him alone.

Every day, I am responsible to my Creator, my Heavenly Father. If I allow Him to reign over each hour of my day, He alone is capable of showing me what is mine to carry and what is His. The Holy Spirit is more than able to guide, teach, and direct me in what He has for me. He alone is whom I am seeking to please. His yoke is easy, and His load is light. I am living lighter now with that extra layer stripped away. Surely, there is someone else who loves to bake those cupcakes!

~Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.”
Psalm 139:23

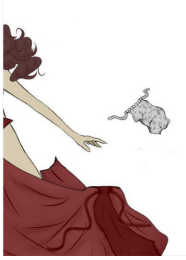
~For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.
Hebrews 4:12-13

Reflection Questions:

- What loads or yokes are you carrying that are not from God?
- Do you say yes to people and tasks because you want others to think you are “nice”?
- Do you try to please people so they will like you?
- Are you “doing” various things to be accepted and significant? If so, what are these things?
- Are you living to please others or God first in your life? Whose affirmation or validations are you seeking?

Don't be afraid to lay your To-Do list before Him each day. Ask God if there is any load you are carrying for the day that is not yours and needs to be stripped off.

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8



Chapter 6

Rearing Its Ugly Head

~A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. Proverbs 14:30

For ten years we were at the same church. Of the original staff, only Joe and I, the lead pastor, and his wife remained. By God's grace we were still together in ministry and in friendship. Our lead pastor and his wife traveled to speak about church planting and the need to make evangelism the number one priority in starting a church. This was the overall theme of their lives. They constantly considered strategies to grow the church. They were always thinking, "How can I get this person to come to my church and know Jesus?" They drank, ate, slept, and breathed in this mindset. They were passionate and definitely utilized their spiritual gift of evangelism. (1 Corinthians 12 talks about the body of Christ and each of us having our own spiritual gifts. If you are not familiar with this chapter in the Bible, I encourage you to read it.)

I began to feel shame and guilt for not living in that high-gear, evangelism mentality. Evangelism is not my strongest spiritual gift. Don't get me wrong. I believe it is important for Christians to share Christ's love. In my daily life, I look for opportunities to love others and reflect Jesus' love. However, after ten years of intense evangelism expectations, "We have to keep working harder, keep growing bigger, more people, more services, multi-campus!" the pressure was too much. I was not feeling inspired to work harder. I felt something was really wrong with me. Was I the only one who felt so worn out? What did I have to show for the ten years we had invested? Why weren't we traveling and doing more like the lead pastor and his wife? I battled envy. I had fallen deep into the comparison trap. I knew it was wrong, yet I found myself falling for it. I was feeling very "un" compared to them: unsuccessful and ineffective. The thoughts continued...

"What do you really have to show for being in ministry for 10 years?"
(Actually 15 years counting my first marriage.)

I heard the condemning voice say, "Nothing compared to them... Just look at all the ways the lead pastor and his wife are being seen as prosperous, successful, and effective."

You hear it, don't you the voice of the father of lies? Well, I didn't recognize it then. Nope, I fell for it hook, line, and sinker! I let the thoughts spiral. Boy, did they spiral, and they festered, and snowballed! They spilled over into every area of our friendship and every conversation I had with my good friend. This underlying competition and comparison trap began to poison our time together and our play dates with our kids. Every little crevice of our friendship became contaminated by my sin of jealousy and envy.

At this same time, I was doing a Bible study on resolving conflict God's way with a couple of moms in my neighborhood. The book, *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande, began to open my eyes. I saw what was happening, the root sins, and the bad fruit that were being produced. From what I had been reading and what the Holy Spirit was nudging me to do, I recognized my need to change, beginning with what the author called the five A's:

Admit
Apologize
Accept
Ask
Alter

I acknowledged and admitted to God my sin of envy and jealousy and asked for His forgiveness. Then came the tough part. I called my dear friend, the lead pastor's wife, and asked if we could get together. I needed to talk without distractions...*really* talk.

We met, and I spilled my guts. I *admitted* my struggle with envy, jealousy, and how I had fallen into the enemy's comparison trap. I shared how I was learning to take responsibility for my thoughts and learning how not to let the enemy get a foothold in my thinking. We reflected on how envy had spilled over into other areas of our friendship and how it affected us both. I *apologized* and took ownership of my sin and *asked* for her forgiveness. She *accepted* my apology. Ugh, that was a lot of emotional work to get to that place of confession, but the weight lifted. We ended that conversation lighter, freer, and thankful for what God had done.

"I don't think I have ever had a friendship where I could have a conversation like that and then the friendship grows healthier and stronger from it."

"Me either," she said with a sigh.

We hugged and knew it was a life changing milestone in our friendship. Oh, the layer of jealousy and envy, was a tough one to peel off!

~Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:2-3

***-Love it patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
I Corinthians 13:4***

Reflection Questions:

- Do you recognize the deceptive voice in your mind as the liar, the accuser, the enemy, Satan as he tries to trap you? (John 8:44, John 10:10) What do you do? What can you do to combat the lies and downward-spiral thinking?
- How can these verses from 2 Corinthians help you?

~For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

- Have you wrestled recently with jealousy and envy? What have you done with it? Would you consider talking with God in prayer about these feelings and emotions?
- Do you think you would be able to have an honest conversation with the person you were struggling with in regard to your jealousy and envy?

~Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13

~Confess your sins one to another and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5:16



Chapter 7

Removing The Veil

*~But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away...
2 Corinthians 3:16 (NLT)*

My husband Joe continued work at the church. At the same time, we got involved in a parachurch ministry called “Sought Out” founded by Katherine Allen. This ministry helped with inner healing and relational wholeness that most churches did not address. Teams of people, led by Katherine, ministered to others dealing with sexual and relational brokenness of all kinds such as, sexual immorality, sexual abuse, pornography addictions, and those desiring to be free from homosexuality. In 2003, I went through one of the programs called “Living Waters.” The purpose in my going through this program was to help equip me for ministry to others and to allow God to have His way in healing my own past.

A woman shared her testimony, which included something about learning how to ride a bicycle. This stirred up a memory from my past. I remembered the hurt, fear, and betrayal as a child. My best friend’s teenage brother, who had taught me how to ride a bicycle, misused that trust to sexually abuse me. I thought I had dealt with this event through counseling years before, but there was obviously another layer God wanted to strip away and heal. I left the room crying uncontrollably.

I will never forget the loving ladies who met me in that vulnerable place and prayed over me. In that moment God’s amazing love and Jesus’ pain and suffering on the cross became so personal and real for me. I could not carry the hurt and shame any longer. Through a personal encounter with Jesus, I brought all the hurt, pain, and innocence stolen from me to the foot of the cross in prayer. Literally. The church had a huge wooden cross where you could lay your written prayers down. In that moment I could *truly* see all of the innocence stolen, hurt, and pain and undeserved shame nailed to the cross with Jesus. I understood now what Jesus meant when he suffered and died on the cross and said *it was finished!* What I knew logically in my mind made a deeper connection to my heart and soul. I knew I no longer had to wear the black veil of shame tied to the sexual sin done to me. God removed the veil and renewed my mind and heart supernaturally.

God continued this deeper healing journey by speaking to me through scripture and spoke to me through others who had experienced their own healing journeys. Through this ministry, I discovered that many suffer from guilt, fear, and shame associated with sexual sin and abuse. The enemy’s lies were exposed, and I discovered layers and lies that needed to be thrown off so I could live in freedom. My Heavenly Father’s loving arms were waiting to scoop me up and

lavish His love, grace, and healing balm over me. Again, in my mind's eye, I saw and felt His presence; it was so real! God has since given me opportunities to minister and love on women who have wounds similar to mine. I gently lead them to the cross to process their hurt and pain.

~But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For, the Lord is the spirit and wherever the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So, all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord--who is the Spirit- makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image.

2 Corinthians 3:16-19 (NLT)

~You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. John 8:32

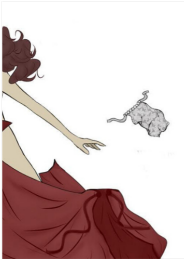
~If the son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed. John 3:36

Reflection Questions:

If this chapter has stirred up any painful experiences, I am deeply sorry something immoral and sinful has happened to you. You may even be struggling with some of the sexual sins mentioned. My intentions, my hopes, and desires are that God will meet you in those deep places of pain and hurt. If you haven't done so already, I strongly encourage you to seek safe trusting sisters in Christ to talk with about your experiences. Look for a licensed counselor or pastor who specializes in this area to help you walk through the healing journey.

May God meet you in those places of deep hurt and wounds. May Jesus reveal His presence to you and transform you with His love and powerful healing over those memories.

- Are there any layers of guilt and shame you want God to remove? I encourage you, don't be afraid to talk with Him about it. Our Triune God longs to meet you in those places to heal and comfort you.
- Does **2 Corinthians 3:16-19** (on the last page) resonate with you in any way? If so, I encourage you to pray, journal and talk to our loving God about it.
- Listen for God's voice. What does He say to you about removing a veil of shame? He wants to give you freedom to reflect His healing power and glory.



Chapter 8

Authenticity and Transparency

~These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. 1 Peter 1:6-7 (NLT)

I love words and looking up their roots and definitions. As my character was being refined and stripped, two words resonated: “authentic” and “transparent.”

Being Authentic: Not false or copied; genuine; real; representing one’s true nature or beliefs; true to oneself or to the person identified.

Being Transparent: Something seen through, like glass or a translucent substance made visible by light shining through from behind.

Over the years, I have learned that the more authentic and transparent I have been, the more God can reflect His love, light, and truth through me.

I have to confess, however, being authentic and transparent about my husband’s health didn’t always come easy. I didn’t like to talk about it. I didn’t want people to think he was weak, and I wanted to feel like we had it under control. Despite a few Addisonal episodes after each of the kids were born, my husband’s health was pretty stable. However, it seemed that every stressful life change caused his immune system to fight against him and put him in the hospital. In 2008, he had a huge immune system attack. Doctors could not figure out what was happening. He ended up in the hospital for weeks. One particular oncologist continually said, “This could most likely be fatal.” We called him Dr. Death (not to his face of course). I refused to believe his words.

I spent day after day in that hospital room, reading my Bible and praying. We were surrounded by the love of God through His people, through meals brought, people taking care of our children and our dog, and even mowing our lawn. It was humbling to be on the receiving end and dependent on others, as I always preferred to be the one giving help. Friends came to visit. Some simply sat in the hospital room to keep us company during this scary time when I thought we might lose him. We called in brothers and sisters in Christ who prayed over Joe. They truly believed in the laying on of hands and trusting God for healing and miracles. (Several nurses carefully watched us and all those who came to pray.)

~At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Luke 4:40

The next day, when the blood test results showed his platelet levels were up, the doctors, and nurses were surprised.

I exclaimed, "Yes! Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

Dr. Death gave us a funny smirk, but I knew God had come through with a miraculous healing over that immune attack.

Leaving the hospital, the next day, we happened to get in the elevator with one of the other doctors who had treated Joe for several years. She shook her head and smiled. The look on her face as we walked out was priceless! Yes, God is our Almighty Healer! (We went back to visit those nurses and thanked them by giving them Joe's original worship music CD.)

When Joe returned to work, our country was in a recession and our church staff was changing. Our lead pastor and his family planned to move across the country to start another church. After eleven years, job roles and positions were changing rapidly, and it became clear that we were not to be a part of the next chapter. We were devastated. Shock, anger, hurt, and disappointment combined. That time period was incredibly difficult on many levels. The way it ended was not pretty. The discouraging communication breakdowns reminded me of the Old Testament story of Babel where languages were in great confusion, and no one seemed to hear words clearly.

We felt a deep sense of loss as the Lord ushered us out of our positions and the only life we knew at that time. My husband not only left his job, but we also lost our friends and church community of over a decade. A letter went out with a positive spin communicating to all the core members of the church that we were moving on to new endeavors, even though Joe and I had no idea what those "endeavors" might be.

Feeling betrayed, lost, dazed, and confused I didn't know who to talk to. Working through these emotions was essential. I just wasn't quite sure how to go about it. The best place to begin was starting my days on my knees, asking God to help me forgive those who I felt had hurt my family and I.

~Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12:14-15

Invited by a dear friend and mentor, I went on a Christian spiritual retreat weekend to process my feelings of hurt, betrayal, grief, and new direction. She and her husband led a ministry as spiritual coaches for pastors, missionaries, and others who were in transition. I was deeply thankful that God knew I needed her in my life even before I did.

She took me to a retreat center, where she introduced me to *Christian Spiritual Formation*, a deepening awareness of our Triune God's presence and movements in our lives. The spiritual practices used are Biblically rooted in scripture meditation, reflection, prayer,

silence, and examining our hearts and minds with God. Taking time for these spiritual rhythms was just what I longed for. God created humans with magnificent brains and minds that can connect with Him. He desires to communicate His presence with us, if we'll slow down the pace of life to notice and allow Him to.

God gently reminded me of His presence in several ways. I am a visual person, and I am grateful God knows this about me and communicates to me in visual ways. One afternoon at the retreat center, I heard a loud chirping sound outside the window of the little room I was staying in. A barren tree was covered with birds on every branch. They were chirping and singing loudly, and a Bible verse rose to my memory: ***Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in the barns, for your Heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? (Matthew 6:26 NLT)*** I felt the Holy Spirit comfort me and remind me of my value and worth, and that my family would be taken care of just as God cares for the birds. My thoughts were interrupted as the flock of birds quickly flew off in a cloud of swirling gray into sky.

During one of the guided prayer reflection times, several ladies and I were listening to Psalm 119 read aloud. These particular verses stood out in the quietness:

***~Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light to my path.
I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.
I have suffered much; preserve my life, Lord, according to your word.***

Psalms 119:105-107

I hovered over those verses in quiet prayer. In the openness of my childlike ways, I surrendered my imagination to our Triune God. I asked God to show me where He was in this place in my life, as I was hurting and not sure where I was headed. I told Him I did not want to carry the ugliness of resentment or bitterness toward anyone who had hurt or betrayed my trust. I closed my eyes and saw myself standing on a woodsy, winding path lined with barren trees. It was foggy and dark, and I could only make out an image of a man standing up ahead. As I looked harder, I recognized Him. It was Jesus holding a lantern to illuminate the path. I walked closer and felt the weight of a huge backpack on my shoulders. The burden felt heavier with every step I took. In this vision Jesus told me I could continue on this dark path and He would be with me, or I could cross over to "there." He pointed to "there"—a beautiful, sunny, open field of green grass and brilliant wildflowers. He looked at me with His kind eyes and motioned for me to hand over the heavy pack on my shoulders. The grace-filled expression on His face said it all without a word. We both *knew* what was in the backpack. He asked me, "Do you want to carry around that unforgiveness on your shoulders, or do you want to hand it over to Me? You can live much lighter and freer in that beautiful field without it. My presence will still be with you, whichever you choose."

I could feel the heaviness upon my shoulders, and I longed to be free of its weight. I slowly slipped off the bulky pack and handed it to Jesus. He took my hand and escorted me to the open field of wildflowers. I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my face and smelled the fragrance of the flowers. Barefoot, I ran with abandon through the grassy field. I turned to look back at Jesus. He smiled, an adoring look upon His face. His radiant eyes gave me assurance.

I wanted to stay in that place and linger a bit, but I was startled by the sound of a rather large sneeze. I opened my eyes and saw a few other women in their own quiet spaces, some with bibles open on their laps, some kneeling in prayer. I had no idea how much time had passed during the reflective prayer time in my vision with Jesus. I only knew I felt lighter and that I had truly experienced something significant.

Later that evening when all the ladies gathered again, we were invited to share any experiences we had with God that weekend. I opened up and talked about my experience with Jesus in the woods, the backpack, and the open field of wildflowers. I suddenly felt very vulnerable sharing such an authentic and transparent experience. I started to regret speaking. Those thoughts quickly disintegrated as the women voiced affirming and encouraging words at my openness. One woman painted a beautiful scene of the wildflowers as a reminder for me to hold on to what God had done in taking the pack of unforgiveness and bitterness from me. I keep the painting on my dresser as a reminder. If the enemy tries to stir up any of those unforgiving thoughts of the past, I turn my eyes to the painting and thank Jesus for my freedom and what He has done. It is a choice to make daily.

In that season, I indulged my desire for a more personal connection with God. I needed my Heavenly Father to continue to help me make sense of my life. I had to rely on His Living Word to define me and remind me where my true worth comes from. God was truly transforming and renewing my mind once again. It became more concrete that my true identity lies in the truth, “I belong to God; I am His daughter.” And that was enough.

God continually reminded me that He was sufficient to provide for our family. Whenever money was tight and we weren't quite sure how we were going to make ends meet, bags of groceries showed up on our doorstep. Cards with checks came just in time for the mortgage. A new car was given to us, and we were able to give our van to a family who needed a vehicle. The gift gave them hope that God had not forgotten them and was taking care of their needs as well.

It was odd being in a sudden search for a new church home after serving eleven years in a church we helped establish. God led us to a small church where we settled in to just “be” and heal for a bit. Joe slowly started using his passions for music in leading worship and preaching again. I took more spiritual retreats and invited other women from different church communities along for the journey. I began leading small groups of women into deeper intimacy with God through *Christian Spiritual Formation*. With God's prompting I started a women's ministry called *Breathe Deep Ministries*. Along with a small team of women, I used my gifts of encouragement and passion for the Bible to inspire women to grow in their relationship with our Triune God. Other opportunities came my way to speak, not only to groups of women, but also to our new church community as a whole.

~In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:6-7

This season truly became a time of pressing into authenticity and transparency with God, myself, others, and proved to be a refining process of fire. My faith emerged deeper and with greater worth than gold.

When my mentor moved, I asked God to fill that place in my life. I needed someone to continue to stretch, challenge, guide, and encourage me. In His faithfulness, God provided another wonderful mentor who has continued to lead me. I have since completed a two-year program and have become a trained Spiritual Director.

It seemed that God was providing what I would call “piece-meal” ministry work. Joe used his talents and gifts to lead worship, write, teach, preach, and play music in various towns. When the pastor of the small church community we were attending moved out of state, we stepped into roles as co-pastors. What I thought was only a transitional place turned out to be our church home for almost five years.

During that five-year season, many families moved, and church finances grew thin. To make ends meet, Joe began playing secular music in restaurants, bars, and clubs. Performing music on a stage is what he does exceptionally well. However, coming in at all hours of the night and then getting up early on Sundays to preach was not working. It became more and more difficult to juggle both worlds. Eventually the church closed and so did that chapter in our lives. Again, so much change, loss, and stripping away of pastoral titles. Thankfully I had been learning along the way that my true identity rested not on a title, but in God Himself and being His child.

A major casualty of the church closing was that Joe had no desire to be engaged in another church ministry or community. My young teens and I found another church to attend. It was up to me to keep them growing spiritually and stay connected in a Biblically sound Christian community. This was as essential for my teens as it was for me.

The first Sunday we visited the church, I discovered the pastor was from my hometown of Tucson, Arizona. I knew I had found my new home church. After service, I introduced myself and my kids to the pastor and his wife. I shared a little piece of my story and said, “I am an ex-pastor's wife. May we just come and rest for a while?” They welcomed us with open arms. I took a few years off from serving in any capacity. I was so grateful my new pastors understood my need to just “be” on Sundays. Now I choose to serve and use my gifts out of a newfound freedom, not from a sense of “I have to” or feeling I must prove my worth or impress anyone. Serving is out of my audacious love for our Triune God and a pure desire to see others grow in a genuine personal relationship with Him.

So, this is me, an ex-pastor's wife, authentic and transparent before you, stripped of any titles, roles, or official ministry positions. I am a daughter of the King; loved and adored by God the Creator of the Heavens and the earth. I continually and intentionally incorporate Spiritual Formation or, as I like to call it, “spiritual rhythms” into my life and encourage other women to do so as well. As I do, God's love transforms my mind, heart, and soul.

Reflection Questions:

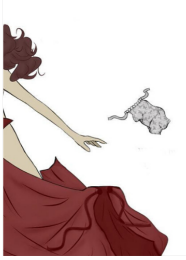
- Are you comfortable being authentic and/or transparent?
Why or why not?
- Do you remember a time in your own life when bitterness, resentment, or unforgiveness needed to be stripped away?
- Can you identify a hurtful situation or broken relationship going on right now in your life?
- Have you ever needed healing so you can live at peace with others as described in **Hebrews 12:14-15**?

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

If so, what did that process look like?

- Did you feel God guiding you through this process?
- Have you ever found yourself in a season of refining through fiery trials as described in **1 Peter 1:6-7**?

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.



Chapter 9

Choosing To Continue. Aligning With God's Stripping & Refining

*~Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.
Psalm 139:23-24 (NIV)*

My days look different as a result of this refining and stripping process. I'm not driven to fill my days with lots of "good things" that were not asked of me by God. If I continued rushing here and there at lightning speed, I would miss His voice. I now run at "God speed" with my altered load and keep my eyes fixed on Jesus. I hear more inspirations and nudges from the Holy Spirit every day that use to escape me because I was too busy. I now make conscious choices for concentrated stillness with God. ***Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10.*** Choosing to live more in an atmosphere that is less hurried and less cramped allows open space in my days for His leading and divine appointments. I can't even begin to explain the numerous opportunities and conversations that I could never have planned on my own. God is full of surprises, isn't He?!

The ways I now serve are in encouragement, discernment, and hospitality. These are the gifts He has given me, and I've embraced His design. They come from a deeper well within of God's love to serve others with no strings attached. I have gone from surface busyness to becoming more self-aware of what is going on under the surface, not just in my life but in the lives of others. I've learned to be more reflective, to be still, and know He is God.

*~Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Psalm 25:4 -5 (NIV)*

Please don't think I am claiming that "*I have arrived*" or reached any higher spiritual plain in any way! I am merely sharing my journey how I'm learning the importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to have His way and address sin in my life on a regular basis. This includes the secret sins in my heart that only God and I know about. The disease of those sins can eat away and destroy our thinking and our thoughts, robbing us of our peace. However, as we align ourselves to allow God His way, He gently disciplines or corrects. This is not in a condemning shameful way. ***For there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1*** Moreover, His correction is out of a loving desire to redirect us into a more fulfilling life. He helps us get to the

layers of our false identity, idolatry, pride, envy, jealousy, unforgiveness, and self-pity, just to name few.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12:11 & 15 (NIV)

An uncleansed heart left unchecked can destroy one's marriage and family, poison one's ministry, and take down a church. Just as loving parents must discipline their own children, so must we, as Christians, allow our Triune God to lovingly discipline us. God can use His Word, as well as our brothers and sisters in Christ, to point out our blind spots. We must be open to allow training, correcting, healing, and forgiveness. Though not pleasant at the time, we will become emotionally and spiritually healthier, leading to more fulfilled lives.

With my decision made to stay aligned in God's light, there comes a freedom with this continual cleansing of the soul and stripping away of the sin of the heart and mind. The stripping has become a necessity in my life. Being completely naked and vulnerable, allowing every flaw to show spiritually and emotionally before our loving, gentle, and kind Heavenly Father. The refining process has far more worth than anyone could ever put a price on.

How freeing it is to live unencumbered by layers of the false self. We are to live the lighter, fuller life God has for us as sons and daughters of the one, true King! I pray you will become comfortable in this place as well.

~Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

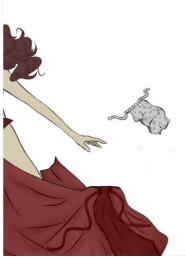
In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his children, He says, Hebrews 12:1-5 (Emphasis Mine)

My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline, but don't be crushed by it either. It's the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects. Hebrews 12:6 (MSG)

I encourage you to read the entire chapter in your own Bible. Comparing different wording in different translations is also helpful

Reflection Questions:

- What layers do you see thrown off or stripped in your own journey?
- Do you agree or disagree with this concept of keeping yourself aligned with God for exposing sin and areas that need discipline in your life? Why or why not?
- Are you comfortable with being vulnerable emotionally and /or spiritually with God?
- Are you comfortable being vulnerable emotionally and/or spiritually with others?
To whom would you entrust this level of vulnerability?
- Capture any last thoughts and/or take-aways from the stripping, refining process in your own journey through journaling, drawing, or painting.



Concluding Thoughts...

“Don’t Shine so that others can see you. Shine so that through you others can see Him.”
C.S. Lewis

My hope is you have been drawn deeper into a relationship with our Triune God, His presence with you daily, and the Living Word that is alive and active in your own lives. I chose to put my raw authentic self on these pages in order that you may relate to different parts of my story and see God’s glory in your own story. My prayer is that you may develop a deeper intimacy (into-me-u-see) with the Lover of your soul, our Triune God.

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17-19

~Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. Hebrews 10:22-25

About The Author

Amy Heilman's specialty is soul care. Her approach is genuine and authentic. Amy is passionate about helping others grow in a vibrant and intimate relationship with our Triune God. She has 30 years experience in different capacities of church ministry. Amy graduated from Bible College at Hope International University (formerly known as Pacific Christian College) in Fullerton, California. She is also a trained Spiritual Director through SDI (Spiritual Direction Institute) and a Chaplain through UCI (United Chaplains International). She moved to Virginia in 1997 and has worked alongside her husband on two successful church planting teams. In 2009, Amy founded Breathe Deep Ministries. Through this ministry she leads contemplative women's retreats and serves as guest speaker for events. Amy also works with Journey Mates Ministry guiding women in spiritual formations. Amy uses the difficult life experiences she has endured as well as her unique spiritual gifts. She ministers with a compassionate heart full of discernment, grace and mercy. Amy has a deep and abiding love for the Word of God and a steadfast desire to see others live in the fullness of who God created them to be as sons and daughters of the King.

The Breathe Deep Website

<https://www.breathedeepministries.org/>

Breathe Deep Ministries Facebook Page

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/70538513585/>

