

6 Encounters
with Jesus to Heal
Your Deepest
Hurts

never alone

A Bible Study by
Tiffany Bluhm

Praise for Never Alone: 6 Encounters with Jesus to Heal Your Deepest Hurts

“With raw honesty and in-depth study of Scripture, Tiffany brings flesh-and-blood life to this biblical truth: *Jesus. Is. With. Us. Always.* This study is for those (like me and everyone I know) who need this reminder and a fresh look at how the ‘with-ness’ of Jesus changes everything, even in our most desolate seasons.”

—**Jodi Detrick, author of *The Jesus-Hearted Woman: 10 Leadership Qualities for Enduring and Endearing Influence***

“Loneliness and isolation plague our generation, yet Tiffany is relentless in her encouragement, her passion for freedom, and her desire to communicate the love of Jesus. She lives what she teaches, which gives her a unique authority to speak truth. This study will not only bring freedom but also provide a safe place for women to share, grow, and change.”

—**Ashley Abercrombie, director of Liberty City, New York**

“Through the stories of biblical women and her own personal stories, shared with vulnerability and remarkable insight, Tiffany invites us into meaningful reflection on our lives and the truth of God’s Word. This is a must-do Bible study for anyone who needs a reminder that she is never alone!”

—**Harmony Dust, MSW, founder and executive director of Treasures Ministries**

“This study is rich and full of insight. Savor every word and rest in the warmth of the revelation that you are *Never Alone.*”

—**Brian Dolleman, author of *An Invitation to Peace and Rest* and pastor of NWLife Church, Renton, Washington**

“*Never Alone* is a journey to healing and wholeness. With vulnerability, tenderness, and wisdom, Tiffany leads us through six Gospel stories to unveil the heart of God toward the brokenhearted. This study will give you the courage to face your pain and embrace the unfailing love of Jesus!”

—**Nicole Reyes, writer, speaker, and director of Liberty Foundation, New York**

“Tiffany so beautifully articulates biblical and personal stories of pain and rejection with which we can all identify, only to make way for acceptance in the presence of Jesus. What a beautiful study to usher in wholeness and freedom.”

—**Kelsey Chapman, Radiant Podcast**

“God has brought Tiffany from an orphanage in India to be a voice of hope and healing the world needs to hear. Though her story is unique, the struggles she speaks to are within us all. This study will ignite hope and healing deep in your heart.”

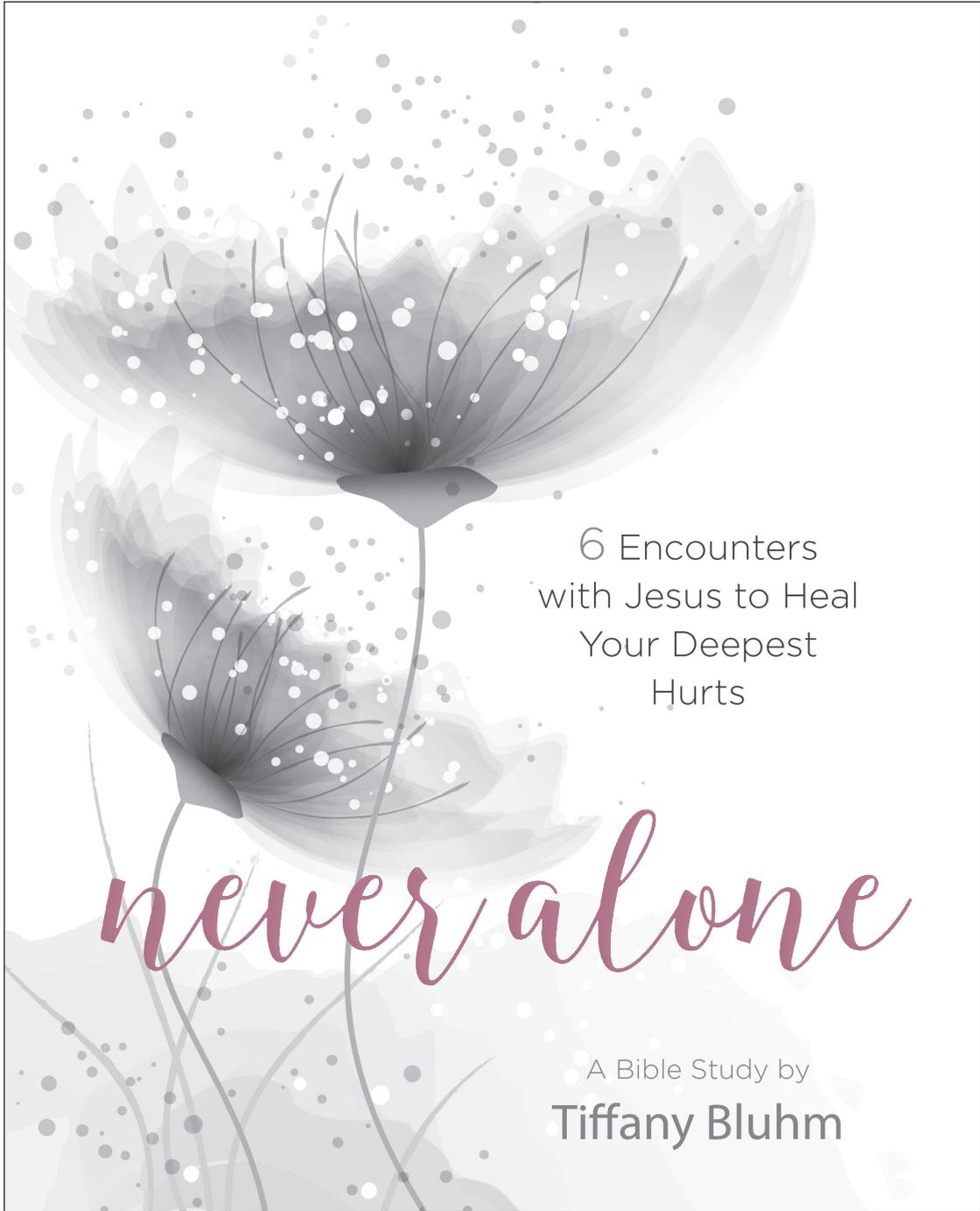
—**Tyrone Rinta, senior pastor, Bell Road Church**

“One of the most profound women of spiritual influence and insight for encouraging us in our walk with our Abba Father!”

—**Josh Dunn, president and publisher, Premier Media**

“Tiffany Bluhm presents a map and compass to anyone longing to find the seemingly elusive reality of God’s ever-present love.”

—**David Resinger, senior pastor, Redeem Church**



6 Encounters
with Jesus to Heal
Your Deepest
Hurts

never alone

A Bible Study by
Tiffany Bluhm

Abingdon Women
Nashville

Never Alone

6 Encounters with Jesus to Heal Your Deepest Hurts

Copyright © 2018 Abingdon Press
All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, PO Box 280988, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., Nashville, TN 37228-0988 or e-mailed to permissions@umpublishing.org.

This book is printed on elemental chlorine-free paper.

ISBN 978-1-5018-4582-6

All Scripture translations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. <http://nrsvbibles.org/>

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 — 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



Contents

About the Author	6
Introduction	7
Week 1: Unashamed and Free Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)	10
Week 2: Desperate and Hopeful Jesus and the Hemorrhaging Woman (Luke 8:40-56)	42
Week 3: Dignified and Entrusted Jesus and the Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)	74
Week 4: Grateful and Audacious Jesus and the Woman Who Anointed Him (Luke 7:36-50)	106
Week 5: Rescued and Redeemed Jesus and Mary Magdalene (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3; John 20:1-18)	136
Week 6: Chosen and Courageous Jesus and His Mother, Mary (Luke 1:26-38)	168
Notes	203
Video Viewer Guide Answers	206



About the Author

Tiffany Bluhm is a speaker and writer who is passionate about helping women come to know their worth, value, and purpose because of a loving, redeeming God. In an engaging and relevant approach that speaks to women right where they are, she shares insights from a life spent chasing after Jesus while walking alongside women from suburbia to the inner city, jails and brothels, and the slums of Kolkata. Because of her own story of international adoption and the adoption of a son from Uganda, Tiffany has a heart for women and children in the margins and has created a number of unconventional outreaches to serve them. In addition to speaking regularly at conferences and events, she leads a local gathering called Sip at the Table, where women break bread, study God's Word, and commune with God and one another. Tiffany writes for a number of online and print publications as well as popular blogs, including the YouVersion Bible app, *Deeply Rooted Magazine*, ScaryMommy.com, and her own weekly blog at TiffanyBluhm.com. She lives in Tacoma, Washington, with her husband and two sons.

Follow Tiffany:

 Twitter @tiffanybluhm

 Instagram @tiffanybluhm

 Facebook @TiffanyABluhm

Blog TiffanyBluhm.com
(check here for event dates and booking information)



Introduction

From the time we're little girls, we long to be loved and accepted—from the playground to the lunchroom to the places where we live and work as grown women. We spend our lives doing our best to prove we are lovable and to avoid being left all alone. For many of us, one of our greatest fears is that we will be left to our solitary selves to fight the hardest battles of our lives.

The truth is that it's impossible to walk through life without experiencing the pain and loneliness of betrayal, shame, guilt, loss, judgment, or rejection. These wounds can shape our views of ourselves, others, and God and even make us question if we are worthy of love and acceptance. Our heartache, whether old or new, can chip away at who we are created to be—women of worth, value, and dignity—convincing us there's no one who understands or cares. No one to dress our wounds and wipe our tears. Yet Jesus tells us a different story, promising us that we are never alone. It's a story of beauty, hope, grace, and divine companionship—and it is our destiny. The Redeemer of broken lives and wounded hearts longs to heal our deepest hurts and satisfy us with His unfailing love and presence—regardless of our pasts.

If this seems too good to be true, consider the women in the Gospels who encountered Jesus. To them He was the most revolutionary gentleman, breaking cultural norms as He not only engaged with them but actually lifted them up. Even the most bedraggled, shame-filled women were restored to a place of purpose and influence as He spoke life into their present situations and their futures, offering hope, second chances, and grace-giving love. His plans for them were good—and far superior to any plans of their own.

The same Lord who healed the hearts of harlots, beggars, and outcasts longs to do the same for you and me. He's patient and kind, strong and brave. We may test His limits, doubt His trustworthiness, or even walk away from Him, but He is always faithful and good to us. No matter what. Though we may mistake our own questions and doubts for His absence, the truth is that we can never escape His presence or His love. We do not possess that kind of power. Without a doubt, life is hard; but our Sovereign Savior is always near. Whether in times of tears or bouts of laughter, He

is near. Whether in singing or silence, He is near. And as season after season brings both unforeseen misery and fresh mercy, the Good Lord promises to walk with us, bringing healing and wholeness and abundant life.

In this six-week study, we will discover the healing power of Jesus' unconditional love for us as we explore six encounters He had with hurting women in the Gospels:

- the woman caught in adultery
- the hemorrhaging woman
- the woman at the well
- the woman who anointed Jesus
- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, the Mother of Jesus

These life-changing encounters, as well as the stories and experiences that we will share together, will help us to recognize and embrace our incredible value and our indispensable roles in the Kingdom. As we study, share, and pray together, it is my prayer that we will find healing for our deepest hurts, experience the unfailing companionship of Jesus as never before, and embrace the sacred truth that we are never alone!

Getting Started

For each week of our study you'll find five readings that include the following segments:

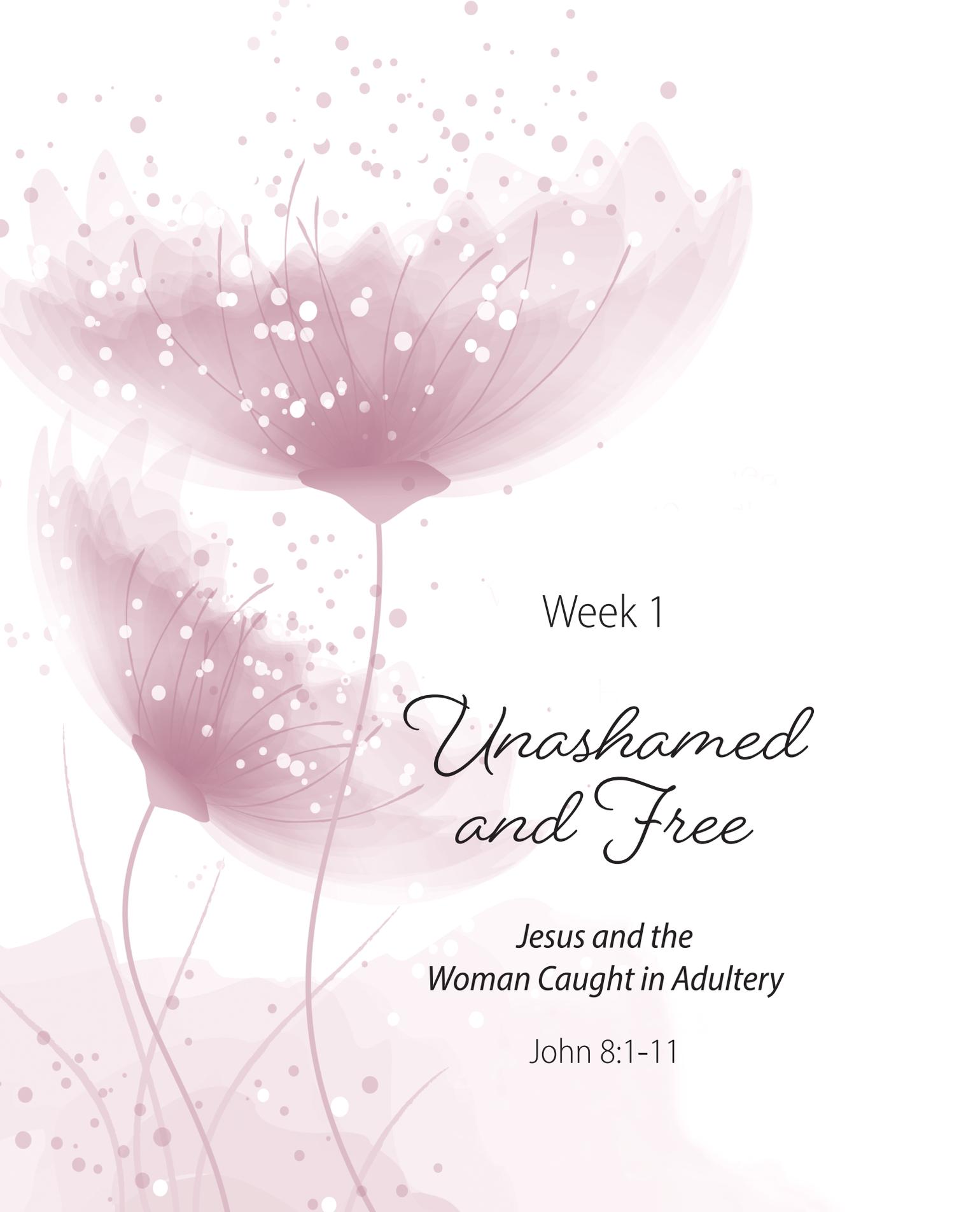
Read God's Word	A portion of the Bible story for the week, occasionally with other Scripture readings.
Reflect and Respond	A guided study of the Scripture and themes with space for recording your responses. (Boldface pink type indicates write-in-the-book questions or activities.)
Talk with God	A prayer suggestion to guide you into a personal time of prayer.
Act on It	An idea to help you act on what you have read.

In the margins you'll find some Extra Insights, Scripture verses, and highlights. You will be able to complete each lesson in about 20–30 minutes. These lessons will help to prepare you for the discussion and activities of the weekly group session, where you will gather with your group to watch a video and discuss what you are learning together. I encourage you to share with one another how God is working to bring healing in your own hearts and lives, which will enable you to see God's activity even more clearly and be able to encourage and pray for one another.

I pray that as you dig into these six encounters, you'll find the life-giving words our loving Savior spoke over two thousand years ago to be challenging, uplifting, and redeeming in your own life today. Jesus is the only One who can heal your heart and lead you into the fullness of God. He is the One for whom your soul longs. When you feel that you have nothing left to give and no one to turn to, He will be by your side because you, my friend, are never alone!

Tiffany



The background features two large, stylized purple flowers with white dots scattered throughout. The flowers are rendered in a soft, painterly style with overlapping petals. The white dots vary in size and are distributed across the entire page, creating a sparkling effect. The overall color palette is light purple and white.

Week 1

*Unashamed
and Free*

*Jesus and the
Woman Caught in Adultery*

John 8:1-11

DAY 1: SCANDALOUS

Read God's Word

¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

(John 8:1-11)

What characteristics do you discover about Jesus from this passage?

Reflect and Respond

As women, we seem to be hardwired with a longing to know that we are loved and accepted—to know that we are not alone in this world but are valued and treasured for who we are. Regardless of our age, race, background, or circumstances, we all hunger for the safety and security that come from being fully known in healthy relationship. Whether or not we're aware of it, we crave this kind of love because we were created for it. God placed within each of us a deep desire for unconditional love that can be fully and completely satisfied only by Him. Yet as the song says, so often we look for love in all the wrong places.

That's why I've chosen to begin our journey with the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery, because beneath her act we see a woman who *longed* to be loved and accepted just like you and me.

Extra Insight

Despite the systems of first-century Jerusalem, which oppressed slaves, women, and minorities, Jesus spoke with dignity, respect, and love to those the world considered less than reputable. He was especially countercultural in His conversations with women. One source notes that "He spoke to women directly, instead of through their male-headship standards and contrary to the order of the day."¹

Throughout my own life, nothing has marked my days more than looking for love. And like the rejected and ashamed woman caught in adultery, I've looked for it in the wrong places—from people, things, and situations. I've been ashamed of my thoughts or actions only to be found by Jesus. And I've discovered that the love I went looking for was available all along—all in Jesus—just as this woman discovered.

Here in John 8 we find this scandalous story of grace—unconditional love awarded in an extremely high-stakes situation. Jesus, neck deep in full-time ministry, made His way to the temple in the early morning. As He taught those who gathered to hear His message of hope and truth, the chief priests and Pharisees planned and plotted to trap Him in His tracks.

Their bait was a woman caught in adultery. We don't know if they discovered her the night before as she engaged with a man who wasn't her husband or if they found her early in the morning, but they had no remorse making a spectacle at her expense. While the Law of Moses demanded that both the man and woman be stoned to death for such actions, we see only the woman on display.

What does the fact that they brought only the woman reveal about their true intent?

How do you imagine this woman felt as she stood before Jesus and her accusers?

It was the woman alone who was shamed for the choice to commit adultery. No doubt she already had faulty beliefs about her own value. We don't know what her life was like growing up or how she ended up in the situation she did. Yet there she was, her sin bare before all—bare before Christ.

The Pharisees and scribes had set a trap for Jesus. This unsuspecting woman would be the bait to catch Him in front of everyone. They hoped to use His reaction as evidence of His insubordination to the laws of the day. They were familiar with His acts of mercy and kindness. If He were to show such tenderness, they would catch Him breaking the law. They also were familiar with His judgment. If He shamed and condemned this poor woman, He'd violate His own values and beliefs.

No one could have shamed or rejected her any more than the Pharisees and religious leaders had already done, but Jesus wouldn't shame or reject her. Surely inner shouts of rejection, embarrassment, and fear ate at her self-respect as onlookers mocked her. I can only imagine she played the morning's events over and over in her head, wishing she had a way out of her trap. But she didn't. The choices she had made were likely a result of a distorted view of herself.

Perhaps she believed she would only be loved if she gave away her body—not to her husband but to another man. Perhaps to any man who would offer even a shred of companionship. She shared her body, but no doubt what she wanted most deeply was a heart that was genuinely loved.

With His back up against the wall and a woman's dignity on the line, Jesus saw through the slimy actions of the religious leaders and chose to dignify the woman. As the crowd waited on every word, He silently bent down and wrote in the sand. While we don't know exactly what He wrote, we know it made a statement. Perhaps it was a word that informed the crowd of condemnation for their own sins. Others suggest that He may have written, "Let the names of these wicked men be written in the dust," and some say it could have been, "The earth accuses the earth, but the judgment is mine."² While we don't know with absolute certainty what He wrote in the sand that day, we do know He wasn't hotheaded but instead hushed the crowd with his answer.³

Jesus then addressed the Pharisees and scribes.

Reread John 8:7. What were the scribes and Pharisees doing as Jesus wrote in the sand?

What did Jesus say to them when He stood up?

Again, Jesus bent down to write in the sand. He wasn't a man to be trapped but the very presence of God on earth to restore value to a broken soul. He remained calm while the crowd likely grew angrier by the minute. They wanted this woman, this lone woman awaiting doom without the man she had slept with by her side, to get what was coming to her. They wanted blood. Jesus, meek and compassionate, would use this moment to rewrite her story. He made a way to redeem her impossible circumstance.



“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

(John 3:17 NIV)

One by one, the crowd left the scene. Jesus' words had made it plain that everyone struggled with sin, not only the shamed woman on display. Each person in the crowd that day was painstakingly aware that he or she was worthy of condemnation. Yet it was—and is—in the very fabric of Christ to set us free from our condemnation.

Read John 3:17 in the margin. Why did God send His Son into the world?

How does this verse speak to your understanding of condemnation?

Once everyone left, Jesus addressed this woman with kindness and respect. He knew the answer to His question when He asked, “Woman, where are they, has no one condemned you?” Her response indicated she knew He was a rabbi, a man of mercy. She said, “No one, Lord.” His next line was so powerful, we repeat it with vigor to this day.

Write Jesus' words found in John 8:11 below:

Condemnation and shame had no place in her life. And they have no place in ours. No matter how our shameful thoughts and actions find us, Jesus is able to dismantle them with His love and grace, just as He did with the woman accused of adultery. Our shame—our feelings that lead us to believe we are unlovable and undeserving of belonging—is in direct conflict with the love of God made plain through Jesus.

Based on His words and actions, what do you think Jesus believed about this woman caught in adultery?

No matter how our shameful thoughts and actions find us, Jesus is able to dismantle them with His love and grace.

Why does this matter for us today? Why does it matter for you personally?

Jesus isn't the originator of shame. He's the answer to it. He isn't a distant deity unacquainted with our disgrace but the embodiment of love, mercy, and grace. Never a harsh and unloving Father disgusted with our pain, God sent His Son to offer the great exchange of love for our shame-filled past and present.

In our quest for love and acceptance, the shackles of shame distort what is true of us. Shame finds us through rejection, abandonment, and approval that ebbs and flows based on our performance. Shame tells us we aren't good enough, pretty enough, smart enough, skinny enough, or ever worthy of the love Christ gives for free. Shame is the very opposite of what our souls desire. Shame battles against the truths of love. Love is kind, compassionate, keeps no record of wrongs, endures, and hopes (see 1 Corinthians 13). Shame keeps records of our rejection and mistakes, fostering fear and isolation.

But here's the good news: our lovability and belonging aren't based on what we do or don't do. They are determined by the God who created us and calls us His own.

Read Galatians 3:26-28 in the margin. What do these verses tell us about our identity and value?

Women in first-century Jerusalem craved the dignity and belonging Galatians 3 speaks of. We are no different.

Shame is easily woven into our thoughts about ourselves and others. It can be disheartening to see how it has permeated our relationships with those around us. As we suffer from the disapproval of others, we sense their withdrawal of belonging, approval, and respect. As human beings, we'll do anything to be loved, even if it means suffering silent shame in the name of counterfeit love.

I see this most often in my children. As their mother, I expect perfection and unintentionally shame them when they don't fit the pretty picture in my head. A snarky comment of how they seem to never "get it right" slips

Our lovability and belonging aren't based on what we do or don't do. They are determined by the God who created us and calls us His own.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:26-28 NIV)

out of my mouth before I even realize it, forgetting that I put myself through the wringer anytime I mess up. Shame leaves little room for grace. But love does! As my children feel like they don't measure up, I spot the same disappointment in my own heart.

Do you remember a time you felt shame? Perhaps it was a time when you felt that who you are is not enough or acceptable, that you didn't belong, or that you were unlovable. Describe it below:

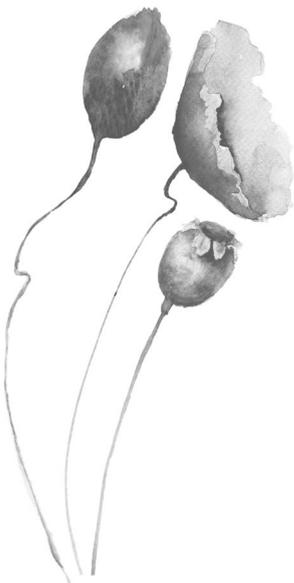
Our rejection, no matter where it comes from, kicks at our belief that we belong. That we are lovable and capable of loving others. That we are worthy of belonging. That we are beloved by a holy and sacred God. It leaves us susceptible to searing shame.

Whether you feel ashamed of your own thoughts and actions or have been shamed by the harsh words and demeaning actions of others, Jesus' love and grace can lead you to a place of belonging and love. Offer your shame to Him, and He will rework your distortions.

I remember when I was in high school and a woman I admired and adored spoke bitter words that stung my heart, leaving me with the feeling that I wouldn't be loved by anyone who truly knew me. I doubt she knew the power of her words that day, but her seemingly offhand comment dug itself into the recesses of my heart and caused me to question my lovability. But as I offered my broken experience to Jesus, He slowly but surely led me to believe I was lovable. Lovable to my core.

Look again at the second half of Jesus' statement to the woman in John 8:11. Why do you think Jesus gave her this instruction?

When Jesus instructed the dear woman caught in adultery to go and sin no more, He didn't expect her to change overnight. He didn't expect her to carry on in her own strength. It was His declaration that gave way for her freedom from shame. It laid the foundation that she was loved by the Rabbi.



She belonged. She wasn't leftovers for another man. She was worthy. She was valuable.

Like her, we are loved by the Rabbi!

Shame seems to be hardwired in all of us. At times it appears as though we can't escape shame, and it gets the best of us. It attempts to dictate who we are and what we're worth. It mars the soul. We often see others through our shame, and it's our shame that has a profound effect on how we see God. It's easier than we think to shame others and threaten their sense of belonging with offhand comments and shabby thoughts. When we do, it's a mirror of our soul. Any way we withhold love and belonging of another is an indicator of our own struggle with shame.

We shame our children for not fitting the perfect picture in our heads, for not acting the way we'd hoped. We reject our friends for thoughts or actions we deem out of line. We withhold love because they don't meet our approval.

But with Jesus as our Helper and Healer, we can break through shame to a place of grace and freedom. We can love others from a healthy place, free from how others feel about us. We can throw off disapproval, rejection, and abandonment as our hearts are held by the Prince of Peace, not the principalities of this world. As we do, we'll lend our love and strength to those around us. Our families, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances will gain a glimpse of unconditional love not bound by rejection or shame. And our breakthrough will make room for others to find themselves in their own stories of freedom from shame.

Talk with God

Recall the instance of shame you described on page 16, and offer it to God in prayer, asking Jesus to give you a fresh wind of His love and grace.

Act on It

For the rest of the day, I encourage you to meditate on these powerful words of Christ:

*"Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."
(John 8:11)*

When a shameful thought tries to squeeze into your day, claim the words of Christ that you are free from condemnation and able to live a life of freedom—able to conquer sin because of Christ's love, power, and mercy.

Any way we withhold love and belonging of another is an indicator of our own struggle with shame.

DAY 2: FREE AT LAST

Read God's Word

¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.
¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law...

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.
(Galatians 5:16-18, 22-25)

How do these verses describe life with the Spirit?

Reflect and Respond

Yesterday we met the woman caught in adultery and discovered her shame exposed in public. Like her, many of us struggle with shame from our past mistakes, situations, and struggles. Here's the honest truth: shame has the run of our hearts when there is an absence of truth.

In my own life, I have grappled for the truth but unintentionally settled for a lie and shame. I struggled to believe I was lovable in my most vulnerable moment: infancy. If I wasn't worthy of keeping, surely I wasn't worthy of loving. This lie of my life kept me from the truth of God's Word—the Word that declares I'm loved beyond measure; the Word that declares God sent His only Son to love me and redeem me from my sin and shame.

Freedom-giving truth is found only in the unconditional love of Jesus. Shame binds. The truth sets free. Shame isolates. Love comforts. It was the truth of Jesus' love that set free the woman accused of adultery. When He told her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11), it was from a position of love that He spoke and acted with



grace, respect, and compassion. Her freedom was found in the truth of His love.

Shame has no trace of love. It is completely void of hope and the promise of vulnerability. With its isolating effects, shame cuts us off from Jesus and others in our lives whom we trust. The shame heaped on the adulterous woman by her accusers was devoid of all love. It lacked any hope for redemption. In one way or another, we all have fallen prey to shame-induced thoughts that come from our own hearts or from others, seeking to disqualify us from wholeness and grace.

I was adopted at the age of seventeen months. Growing up, I felt shameful of my birth story, and that shame influenced both my thoughts and actions. Gaping holes in my story left me questioning if I was worthy of love. My biological father and mother were absent from the beginning, and I spent years of my life wondering if I deserved abandonment. “Earworms of shame” spoke lies that cemented my beliefs about myself—lies such as “once an orphan, always an orphan.” It seemed as though others around me were wanted and desired from the moment they took their first breath while I was a mistake, an accident. Others had baby pictures and baby books. I had neither. I thought that I was unwanted and unlovable. I didn’t yet understand that Christ had already decided I was lovable. The verdict wasn’t up to any other soul on earth—only Jesus.

What about you? How has shame influenced your thoughts? How would you complete the statement below?

Once a _____, always a _____.

What other shameful lies have you believed about yourself?

Read Romans 8:1-4 in the margin. What has the law of the Spirit of life set us free from?

Shame attempts to disqualify and condemn us from the love and acceptance our hearts so deeply crave. From others’ biting words, unlovable

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

(Romans 8:1-4)

actions, or blatant sin we can experience a deep sense of shame that clouds our understanding and belief that we are loved. The shame we feel from others' judgment or rejection coupled with the angst that festers from our own sin reminds us we fall short. And regardless of whether our shame results from others' sin or our own sin, it leaves us with a shattered view of self and despair for who we are. It's all too much. We need a Savior. We need a Redeemer who will free us from the shame that mars our hearts.

There is great freedom in realizing that we have been loved all along! Our shame will never destroy the love Jesus has for each of us. Never *ever*. The apostle Paul wrote these words to the believers in Rome to solidify their understanding that there is great freedom in Christ. Each and every one of us can be united with Christ by the Spirit and set free from sin and shame. It's sin—ours and others'—that perpetuates our feelings of shame, causing us to believe we aren't fit for belonging or love. But sin is no match for Jesus! When God sent His own Son to conquer the law of sin and death, it meant we were no longer left to our own devices. The final fight for our souls' freedom was never ours; it belonged to Christ. His desire for each and every soul to know its worth and value sent Him to the cross. There He paid the price for sin—a price we could not pay, one that demanded a sacrifice of the highest kind: His one and only life. He did what we were powerless to do.

*But he was pierced for
our transgressions;
he was crushed for
our iniquities;
upon him was the
chastisement that
brought us peace,
and with his wounds
we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:5)*

*He himself bore our
sins in his body on the
tree, that we might
die to sin and live to
righteousness. By his
wounds you have been
healed. For you were
straying like sheep, but
have now returned to
the Shepherd and
Overseer of your souls.
(1 Peter 2:24-25)*

Read Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 2:24-25 in the margin. What did Jesus endure on our behalf?

What did His sacrifice produce?

Let this good news sink deeply into your heart and mind: The Law condemns sin, but Jesus forgives it! The blood of Jesus washes away all guilt, bondage, and fear. Any condemnation we might experience can be settled by the death and resurrection of Christ. He took on our sin and shame so we could be united with Him in love. Just as He refused to condemn the woman caught in the act of adultery, He will not condemn you or me when we turn to Him. His sacrifice made a way to pardon us. We are free in Christ Jesus!

Perhaps you've heard these claims before. I had, too, but I remained in bondage until I let them *take root* in my heart and rework my understanding

of love. Friend, let the truth of Christ's sacrifice wash over you, renewing your mind to believe that He is who He says He is and that He can do what He says He will do.

Once we accept that we are truly free because of Christ's sacrifice, we must walk in that freedom. And we do this by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Look up John 14:15-17, 25-27 and John 16:13-15. What are some other names for the Spirit, and where does the Spirit dwell?

Briefly describe the role of the Holy Spirit:

According to Romans 8:14-17 in the margin, what bond with Christ does the Holy Spirit offer?

The Holy Spirit, who lives within us and proves that we are children and heirs of God, serves to encourage, strengthen, and guide us in our life with Christ. Walking in step with the Spirit is our key to walking in freedom from condemnation, and this requires a rhythm of life that continuously listens to the Spirit.

Reread Galatians 5:16-18. According to these verses, what happens when we walk by the Spirit?

We may want a deep, abiding life in Christ, but unless we are willing to walk by the Spirit, we'll find ourselves susceptible to the flesh—our sinful desires—because our flesh is in opposition to the Holy Spirit. Only when we choose to walk by the Spirit are we victorious over sin.

The life we crave, a life that is authentically satisfying and full of wonder and awe, is found in step with the Spirit. It is not defined by the cultural norms of the world but by the upside-down way of the kingdom of God. Yesterday we read of the Pharisees' and religious leaders' trap for Jesus, one intended to corner Him by publicly shaming a woman. They deemed

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

(Romans 8:14-17)

A life that is authentically satisfying and full of wonder and awe is found in step with the Spirit.

The world may decide we are unfit for grace, love, and mercy, but Jesus is the One who makes the call.

her to be guilty, unworthy of forgiveness. The world may decide we are unfit for grace, love, and mercy, but Jesus is the One who makes the call. You see, shame has no leg to stand on when we are marked with mercy, grace, truth, and peace. Our lives are chock full of meaning, purpose, and passion when we are consumed with God's ways.

Reread Galatians 5:19-21 and list below the works of the flesh that are named. If other desires of the flesh come to mind, add them as well:

Our fleshly desires threaten to destroy us, but the Spirit of God is able to rescue us—to give us the gifts of adoption and liberty. A new way of life is available by the life-giving, merciful Holy Spirit.

Reread Galatians 5:22-23. What word is used here for the evidence of the Spirit in our lives?

The evidence of the Spirit in our lives is the *fruit* we produce. It's the sweet result of walking in freedom, truth, and grace. Notice Paul lists the attributes here as the *fruit* (singular) of the Spirit rather than the *fruits* (plural) of the Spirit. Each attribute is part of the whole. When the fruit is on display in our lives, it blesses, nourishes, and encourages our own souls as well as the souls of those around us. This fruit is not the result of our own effort or work but is the work of the Spirit. And like a seed planted in good soil that produces a fruit-bearing tree, the Spirit within us will continue to bear fruit season after season.

Sin and shame, like bad apples, can rot our hearts, causing us to forget the taste of freedom in Jesus. But there is sweet freedom in the unending love of Jesus! And with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can learn to walk in that freedom. May your life be marked not by the stains of shame but by the work of the Spirit.

Talk with God

Write a prayer below expressing gratitude for your freedom in Christ:

Act on It

If you are caught in the throes of sin and shame, no matter where or when—you can ask the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen you. Meditate on Paul's words in Galatians 5:25:

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit."

DAY 3: RID OF DISGRACE

Read God's Word

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

What did Jesus do for the joy set before Him?

Reflect and Respond

Some time ago, I scrolled through my social media feed and stumbled upon a video of a woman in court accepting her fate as the judge read a list detailing her unpaid parking tickets. Tears streamed down the convicted woman's face as the judge asked questions concerning her parking tickets. Between sobs she explained some unforeseen expenses and how she had



recently lost her son. After collecting his thoughts, the judge offered his condolences to the dear woman and forgave her parking tickets. I teared up watching this woman receive grace from an official who had the power to shame and sentence her but instead chose the way of grace. The short video of the exchange between this convicted woman and the judge has been viewed more than six million times! There's something within us that longs to witness and celebrate grace—grace that hushes shame and offers second chances.

This week we've seen that the woman accused of adultery in John 8 wasn't shamed by Jesus but by the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day, who saw fit to shame a woman as part of their bombastic plan to trap Jesus. This public shaming only added to the shame she must have already carried as a woman sleeping with a man who wasn't her husband. As her opposition demanded that Jesus take a stand on the issue of her adulterous affair, Jesus made it crystal clear that He didn't condemn her and instructed her to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11 KJV). He knew she couldn't continue in her own strength, and so as we saw yesterday, He offered to this publicly disgraced woman freedom from condemnation—a gift only He could give. A gift that He still offers today. A gift that makes way for abundant life.

Today we're going to continue exploring this gift and how we can embrace it—how we can walk in freedom from shame and be rid of disgrace—by examining Hebrews 12:1-2. Let's get the big picture first, and then we'll narrow our focus for the remainder of the lesson.

Reread Hebrews 12:1-2 and complete the following:

We are to lay aside every _____ and _____.

We are to run the race before us with _____, looking to _____.

We've already considered the need to lay aside sin and walk in the freedom made possible by Jesus' sacrifice and the power of the Holy Spirit. But what can we learn about handling shame by looking to Jesus' own example?

Reread Hebrews 12:2 and fill in the blanks on the following page with the appropriate verbs:

Jesus _____ the cross.

Jesus _____ the shame.

Jesus gives us an example of how to run with endurance in this life. For the joy set before Him, He *endured* the cross and *despised* the shame. It's important to note that He didn't endure the shame and despise the cross—as might be our inclination. We tend to despise life's difficulties and endure the shame that results from them. But Jesus knew that shame was to be despised. His cross was to be endured. His cross—a life lived for the glory of God and the salvation of humankind—led to His sacred sacrifice in obedience to the Father. Only when He despised the shame was He able to obediently follow in the path God had planned. Shame had no place in the life of Christ, and it has no place in yours or mine. The danger of shame is its ability to trip us up, stop us short, and peck at our belief in the God who orders our days.

Has shame ever tripped you up, stopped you short, or pecked at your belief in God's plan for your life? If so, describe it briefly below:

Shame is not our cross to bear. And because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, it never will be. Despite what we have done or may do, shame doesn't have to be the shadow cast over every chapter of our stories. Many of us treat shame as the thorn in our flesh, to be accepted as part of who we are. But allowing shame to serve as punishment for what we have done is not, nor will it ever be, the way of the Father. Christ makes it clear with His own life that we are to endure difficulties but send shame on its way. Shame wasn't the definitive end in His story, and it won't be in ours, either.

Did you catch that Jesus didn't merely shoo the shame of life away? He *despised* it. Some translations say that he "scorned" it. In other words, He had a no-tolerance policy for it. As women of faith, we can do the same. We can name shame for what it is, a tactic of the enemy of our souls. This could look like a lie we believe about ourselves, rejection that has eaten away at our understanding of God's love for us, or even believing we are not enough simply because of who we are. The great news is we can ask the Lord to give us His perspective on our struggles and hurts. We can ask for help in enduring life's trials while scorning shame. We can claim His joy and freedom in our imperfect lives of faith.

The danger of shame is its ability to trip us up, stop us short, and peck at our belief in the God who orders our days.

Extra Insight

"If you scorn something, you refuse to have it or accept it because you think it is not good enough or suitable for you."⁴

The gospel's instruction to endure difficulties but scorn shame has set me free in ways I never could have imagined. It's a principle I often remind myself of when shame wraps its claws around me. Yesterday I shared a little of my story of abandonment, which caused me to wrestle with feelings of rejection and other strong emotions that left me ashamed of my beginning—ashamed because, in my most innocent moments of life as a newborn baby, I was left without a mother or father. I was left at an orphanage overrun with dozens of other dark-skinned baby girls who would never see or know the names and faces of their families; left to fight for a place of value and belonging. Despite external instances of acceptance or belonging that I experienced through the years, I couldn't shake off my internal shame.

Fragile feelings of disgrace ate at my heart throughout my younger years. Too often I tried my absolute best to silence lies of inadequacy only to be overwhelmed by their isolating echoes. I grew resentful and bitter as I struggled to find answers to the questions of my heart. Shame had a critical voice in my life. Feelings of defeat and isolation sullied opportunities and relationships. Thinking I would eventually be rejected by those who were around me, I feared being fully known. Actually, I was fearful I would be known but not loved. But everything changed when I fixed my eyes on Jesus! At thirteen, I discovered that Jesus had been with me all along. In the multipurpose room of a country church, I dared to believe Jesus loved me. Although I had heard of His love many times before, I took the plunge and trusted Him when I felt my self-sufficiency was gone. And I discovered I had been circling a battle that was already won—won by the King of my heart, the Lover of my soul, the Savior of my life.

Over time, my feelings of inadequacy were met with significance. My feelings of worthlessness were met with unconditional love. My feelings of shame were met with joy. Christ gave me freedom to live as a beloved child of God. When finally I despised the spirit of shame, I was able to live from a position of love, not fear; generosity, not scarcity; truth, not lies.

Have you ever despised life's difficulties instead of enduring them? If so, explain.

Have you ever endured shame instead of despising it? If so, explain.



Enduring pain while scorning shame—this is what it means to run with endurance. Like Jesus, we are to run with endurance *for the joy set before us*. When we rid ourselves of shame and disgrace, we are given joy in exchange. It's Jesus who supplies our joy in the life of faith. As verse 2 tells us, He is both the “founder and perfecter” of our growing faith. Some translations say “author and perfecter.” Not only is He the originator but He also is the master who cultivates our communion with Him. One commentator says of this magnificent dichotomy, “He is the Leader of the whole army of faith, whose standard we are to follow, and whose own completed victory is the enabling cause as well as the earnest of our own.”⁵ In other words, Jesus is our leader, our guide, and our champion. We can rest in His ability to lead our lives to victory.

For the joy set before Him, Jesus obediently, at the Father's request, endured the cross. He endured the cross to restore a sacred connection between God and humanity, and His obedience made room for our salvation—our freedom and our joy. The joy set before you and me, then, is an abiding life with Christ! No matter what sin ensnares or entangles us, it's possible to lay it aside and walk in freedom when we look to Jesus and keep our eyes on Him. And when we do, we experience the joy, the sacred connection with God, that only He gives.

In our honest communion with Christ we discover life-giving joy that can stand up against anything we encounter. He actually cloaks us in joy as we choose to place our faith in Him. This joy, a gift of our salvation, gives us strength. It gives us feet to stand on when our world comes crashing down—when the person we love ends the relationship or when the unexpected diagnosis alters the life we once knew. Joy provides us with a heavenly perspective of our earthly troubles. It's living proof that Christ dwells richly in our hearts.

Without a doubt, we witness joy's best work in our times of loss, devastation, grief, and change. As followers of Jesus we are not promised a trouble-free life but experience troublesome times just like everyone else (see John 16:33). And when feelings of worthlessness, rejection, and disgrace creep in as a result of those struggles, it's actually our *joy*—a gift from Christ—that stomps on the bothersome feelings. When life throws us curveballs, it's the joy of the Lord that gives us strength to carry on. It's the joy of the Lord that enables us to thrive in even the most frustrating of circumstances. The joy of the Lord truly is our strength! (Nehemiah 8:10).

I've experienced the reality of this in my own life. At a time when my husband and I sensed the Lord leading us to say good-bye to our jobs and our church, it was the joy of the Lord that sustained us every step of the way.

When life throws us curveballs, it's the joy of the Lord that gives us strength to carry on.

We grossly underestimated how difficult it would be to say yes to the ways of the Lord. Ways that didn't always make sense. Our obedience to the whisper of God, calling us to step into a new season, made room for fresh plans, exciting dreams, and humble beginnings—ones so beautiful and fulfilling that we never could have imagined all that the good Lord had in store! He invited us to endure, not despise, the plans He had for us. And when we did, He was faithful to provide food for our table, a precious community of faith, and opportunities that once were dreams but now, by God's grace, were becoming reality.

⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

(1 Peter 1:8-9)

Read 1 Peter 1:8-9 in the margin. According to Peter, what happens when we choose to believe in and love Jesus, even though we cannot see Him? And what is the outcome of our faith?

Peter's audience hadn't seen Jesus with their physical eyes. Like us, they held tightly to faith in Christ although they didn't have access to Christ in the flesh. Like the majority of the New Testament believers, we fix our eyes on Jesus even though we can't see Him—especially when life is difficult. It's our belief that prompts the eyes of our hearts to gaze upon the author and perfecter of our faith.

In this life, each of us runs a race of faith. Each of our lives provides a unique set of challenges, setbacks, and hardships. The shamed woman caught in adultery had her own struggles and disgrace, yet Christ didn't intend for shame to be a stumbling block in her story; and He doesn't intend for shame to be a stumbling block in your story or mine. Remember, even Jesus Himself despised shame. Friend, shame provides no earthly good for our intimacy and growth in Christ. Instead, Jesus awards us joy so we may not only endure but actually live vibrant lives of faith.

Talk with God

Invite the Lord into your struggles that leave you feeling disgraced. Ask for His grace and inexpressible joy to strengthen your heart and mind as you run your race of faith.

Act on It

Galatians 6:2 instructs us, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Today, I encourage you to share with someone you trust any shameful thoughts that have tripped you up in your faith. Choose someone who can comfort you and pray for your growth in and obedience to Christ.

DAY 4: SHAME ON YOU

Read God’s Word

¹Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

²For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

³He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered



*that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?*

*⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

*¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.*

*¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.*

*¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.*

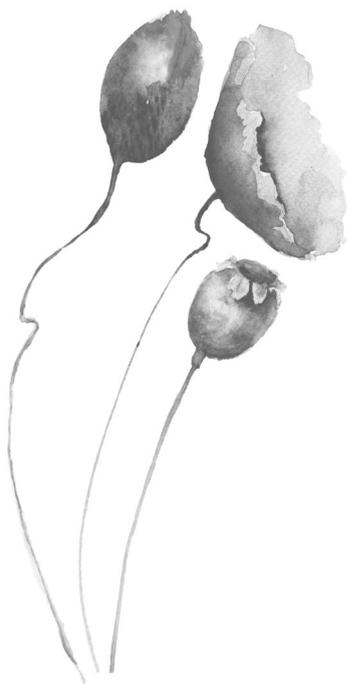
(Isaiah 53:1-12)

What did Isaiah proclaim would happen to the coming Messiah?

Reflect and Respond

This week we're looking at shame and rejection through the lens of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery, and today we will consider our Savior's own experience with scoffers and the religious elite. As I read this woman's story, it touches my heart to know that the One who showed her mercy—the One we love and follow—would Himself be no stranger to accusation, shame, and rejection.

Four hundred years before His birth, the Messiah's public shaming was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus would be despised, rejected, and shamed by the people of His time. Isaiah claimed He would be oppressed and judged. Within Isaiah's prophetic declaration of the coming Christ



we find a description of a man who knew sorrow, grief, and affliction. The prophet's words proved true. Christ was familiar with rejection. He was One from whom people hid their faces. He lived a sinless life but was treated with contempt and disgraced by the people He loved.

Despite it all, Christ's rejection did not shake His commitment to the Father. He knew that the Father loved Him and was ordering and sustaining His steps even as His rejection led to death. It was a death orchestrated by heaven and carried out by the hands of men for the salvation of us all. Christ took on the ultimate rejection, exchanging our sin and shame for redemption, so that we could experience life in the fullness of God without limitation or exception.

Not only was Christ acquainted with His own grief; He is acquainted with ours. Every rejection, every shame-filled moment, He understands. He isn't unaccustomed to our battle against disgrace. He Himself was intimately involved in the fight, and He won! He did not live the life that others expected or do as the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day wanted, and He was shamed because of it. But, praise God, He did exactly what was instructed by the Father.

Read John 5:19-20a in the margin. According to these verses, what couldn't Jesus do? What did He always do?

Christ came to earth, died a brutal death, and victoriously rose again at the request of the Father. He endured the cross so that we could have a place at the table—the table of salvation, freedom, and grace. In Christ, we belong. We are accepted. Because of Jesus, shame has *no place* in our lives. That is incredible news!

What encourages you most from Isaiah 53:1-12? How does knowing that Jesus experienced rejection yet was victorious over it give you comfort and hope for your own hurts?

Isn't it encouraging to know that Jesus understands? He was measured against others' expectations and then shamed and rejected for not fitting the mold—just as we often are.

The truth is that unfair expectations of women have contributed to a culture of shame throughout history. Women who've spoken up or bucked

**Because of Jesus,
shame has *no*
place in our lives.**

¹⁹So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.²⁰For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing."

(John 5:19-20a)

Extra Insight

The prophet Isaiah describes the suffering servant or Messiah as a lamb led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). Similarly, John the Baptist described Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), alluding to the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:1-28).

cultural norms of their times have often faced undue ridicule. Even today women in the third world, developing world, and Western world are often given an unspoken set of expectations and limitations. Unspoken expectations concerning marital status, appearance, ability to birth children, and professional endeavors are often subject to judgment. If a woman doesn't fit the social norms of her society, she is frequently shamed for her behavior by other women, men, and onlookers who don't know the heart of the very woman they are choosing to shame. In our broken world, a woman's age, class, race, and appearance still largely determine who society says she can and cannot be or what she can and cannot do—even in the West. Regardless of her skill or acumen, a woman is often judged, rejected, and shamed—whether in government, business, entertainment, education, or ministry—simply for being a woman. And when these unspoken expectations placed by media, broken systems, and ideals aren't met, she's sometimes unduly punished. She can be rejected by friends for professional aspirations or by coworkers for family aspirations. She may face scrutiny by outsiders observing a life they don't understand. And sometimes in her own home she may be shamed by a distant, disrespectful, or abusive husband.

When I was newly married, a door-to-door salesman knocked on my door and pitched his goods. In our short conversation, he asked what I did for a living. When I told him I served in ministry, his face turned sour and, without hesitation, he lectured me on why, as a woman, I was weak and unable to carry out the good news of Jesus. The stranger on my doorstep assured me I was wasting my life as a young minority woman. He drove his point home as he said, "You are unfit. You aren't a man but you're trying to do a man's job." I stood speechless as he scolded me. My failure to meet his expectations, as a woman, was enough to shame me at my front door. After I gathered my thoughts, I interrupted his spiel and said, "I know who I am in Christ." That was it. No lengthy explanation. No excuses.

After she was caught in the act, the accused woman in John 8 was paraded in front of a crowd for the sin of adultery—*alone*. Her partner in crime? Absent. She was the one whose feet were held to the fire. The disgust for a woman who was "out of line" came from both parties opposed to Jesus' ministry. While the man who should have been accused of adultery wasn't thrown on center stage to be judged, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had no qualms throwing a woman under the proverbial bus.

Reread John 8:3-5 in the margin. Why do you think the Pharisees and religious leaders chose to publicly shame the woman and not the man?

As women, expectations have been placed on us since childhood. Some of these expectations damage and destroy the true image of God inside us, such as the instruction to be seen and not heard or the teaching that men are superior to women and women exist only to serve them. The result of failing to meet the expectations of others, whether stated clearly or left unspoken, is when shame takes center stage. We're shamed by those around us, or we shame ourselves for not measuring up to the standards people have placed over us.

If we aren't fit enough, skinny enough, tall enough, quiet enough; if we don't have clear skin, a charming demeanor, a clean record, and a whip-smart mind—the world lets us know we don't belong. We entertain the lie that perhaps we don't have what it takes to be beautiful and happy, smart and successful, loved and accepted.

If we're shamed by others because we've failed to meet their ideals, we resolve to fight harder, hungry for acceptance and value. And if Christ hasn't broken the shackles of shame off our souls, we find ourselves in circumstance after circumstance contending for approval but left feeling disgraced.

Or worse, we shame other women. Have you ever noticed that some of the most shameful remarks about women come from other women? If a woman has been shamed and hasn't found freedom, she may find a false sense of control in shaming other women. It might happen on social media, around the dinner table, or on national television. We've all experienced it or witnessed it—or perhaps even instigated it ourselves. But when we shame another soul, we erode our own sense of dignity and value. It only serves to tear down what the Lord is trying to build between us: acceptance and belonging.

Describe a time when you felt you didn't meet the unfair expectations of others. What happened as a result?

³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"
(John 8:3-5)

When we shame another soul, we erode our own sense of dignity and value.

For you were called to freedom, brothers [and sisters]. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

(Galatians 5:13)

According to Galatians 5:13 in the margin, what is our role as a woman declared free in Christ?

Just as Christ didn't allow rejection to detour Him from the call of the Father, may you cling tightly to the truth of God's Word and the call on your own life. Whether expectations come from the culture, those you love, or even those you don't, may you filter them through the love and freedom of Jesus. While others may dismiss you simply for being the woman God created you to be, I pray that you will stand in freedom, kindness, and grace.

Talk with God

If you've ever shamed other women because they haven't met your expectations (resulting in their embarrassment, humiliation, or rejection), ask the Lord for forgiveness. Then ask Him to give you grace to live in the freedom and fullness of God.

Act on It

Imagine what our world would look like if we women embraced the command in Galatians 5:13 and, through love, served one another. How would it alter your response to shame if you regularly witnessed acceptance and belonging among other women regardless of faults or failures? What message would that send to our sisters? our daughters?

Below, write a declaration stating your commitment to do your part to end the shaming of other women. In a world that frequently shames us for both our faults and our accomplishments, clearly state your pledge to speak well of and encourage women from all walks of life.

DAY 5: HONEST CONVERSATIONS

Read God's Word

¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

(John 8:10-11)

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

(Romans 8:34)

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

(John 3:17)

For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

(1 John 3:20)

What is the thread that weaves these verses together?

Reflect and Respond

For four years I volunteered at the county jail, leading Bible study for female inmates who were serving short-term sentences or awaiting trial for prison. On Tuesday nights, I would gather alongside three dozen women in jumpsuits and sit in plastic lawn chairs, sharing about the unconditional love and grace of Jesus. Together we'd laugh, cry, and discover the role of the Savior in our lives.

Time and time again, with tears in her eyes, a woman would pepper me with questions, asking if God could truly forgive her. If God loved her. If God had forgotten her. If God condemned her. If God heard her prayers. The weight of her sin and shame left her feeling destroyed and beyond repair.

Could the God of all creation really love a woman with a drug conviction? A woman who had abandoned her children? A woman who took what wasn't hers? Yes. Yes. Always yes. That's the power and love our God has. That's the power and love our God is.

Shame threads itself through our ideas, dreams, and hopes, convincing us we are not good enough, strong enough, or worthy enough for anyone's love and affection. . . . We need a Savior to rewrite our story and renew our thinking.

As women discovered life with Christ for the first time, they were flabbergasted at the exchange. A holy and sacred God would blot out their trespasses and mistakes as they turned from their life of sin. Week after week, women returned to those plastic chairs, ravenous for the truth of Scripture that anchored their newfound faith. Even though still jailed, they walked in freedom—a freedom that sustained them through their incarceration and would preserve them for the rest of eternity.

Before women were released from jail, they would often leave behind for others the Bible study notes they had taken in our times together. An incoming woman, unsure of her fate, would read words of freedom from a previously jailed woman. Words of truth and grace. Words of hope and healing. She would learn from the living proof of another that she was not condemned by the Savior. Rather, His love would redefine her life. His freedom and grace would shout louder than her shame.

Shame never lets us rest. It reminds us how we feel about ourselves when we'd rather forget. It's a mark of something deeper. It evokes emotions that cause us to question why we wallow in them day after day. Yet every shameful thought in us has a story, a birthplace deep in our core; and it grows as we grow. Shame threads itself through our ideas, dreams, and hopes, convincing us we are not good enough, strong enough, or worthy enough for anyone's love and affection.

Regardless of whether our shame stems from abandonment, abuse, neglect, or loss, many of us believe we are defective, rejected, and just plain broken. The other women in our lives may be able to keep it together—excelling at work, maintaining great relationships, parenting well-behaved children, and staying in shape—but not us. So often shame keeps us from closing the gap between what we think life should be like and who we really are. Deep down, we aren't OK with who we are, what has happened to us, and where we're headed.

The devastating effects of shame can be healed, but not on our own. We need a Helper, a Savior, to rewrite our story and renew our thinking. We need Him to tell us we aren't beyond repair. We need to know it won't always be like this—feeling like we can't get ahead, stuck in a forsaken cycle of life.

Whatever your story may be, please hear me, my friend: in no way, shape, or form are we *ever* beyond God's sovereign hand of redemption! It can be easy to think He extends a hand of grace and a life of freedom to others but not to us. Often we disqualify ourselves from His unconditional love. But the very cure to our heavy weight of shame and condemnation is the transformative love of God. His love will remake and reorient our lives. That's the power He has. He can do for us what we can never do for ourselves.

Have you ever felt beyond repair—so broken that no one could fix you? If so, where do you believe that idea came from?

Reread John 3:17, and rewrite this verse below in your own words:

Now reread 1 John 3:20. What does this passage indicate about the power of Jesus?

When we stare down the barrel of our sin and shame, usually one of two things happens: a breakdown or a breakthrough. A breakdown will leave us feeling empty, depleted, and broken—caught in an endless cycle of isolation, regret, and low self-esteem. A breakdown will push us away from the source of our strength, Jesus. A breakdown will reiterate any lies we believe about ourselves—lies of shame and condemnation. We may be convinced that life will never change and we will be forgotten.

Describe a time when you felt caught on the hamster wheel of isolation, regret, and low self-esteem as a result of shame:

How was the cycle broken?

Here's the good news about a breakdown. Whether it's before, in the middle of, or after a breakdown, there is always wiggle room for a breakthrough. A breakthrough defies the odds and has a white-knuckle grip on hope, believing for a fresh wind of transformation even when it appears



to be impossible. Yet no matter what season of life we are in, we are not the orchestrators of our breakthroughs. We are the participants. We are the willing parties who long for mercy, grace, truth, and peace. A breakthrough requires repentance, acceptance of the Lord's freedom, and a rhythm of grace for the rest of our days. It's a yes to Jesus and a no to our old ways of life. A breakthrough will lead us into the vibrant fullness of God.

What can keep us from a breakthrough? Self-sufficiency. When we appoint ourselves captain of our own ship, we deny Christ the supreme role of Master Captain (a role in which He can never fail us). When we are the captain, we allow our flesh, our desires, and ultimately our sin to lead us away from life with Christ. We fall short every time, overcome by sin and shame.

But when we repent, we turn away from the world and back to life with Christ. Just as Jesus invited the accused woman to "go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11), He extends the invitation to us. It is an invitation to turn from our own ways and desires and enjoy never-ending companionship with Jesus. Christ declared, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

Will we choose to be the captain of our own life, running our ship ashore on the beaches of condemnation and shame, or will we allow Jesus to be at the helm, steering us toward what only He can give: freedom? More than two thousand years ago, Jesus invited the accused woman to a life of freedom. Today He invites you and me to that same life-giving freedom—where there is no sign of condemnation or shame, only grace.

Is there an area of your life that is out of balance? An area where you are trying to call the shots? Check any that may apply:

Family

Friendships

Finances

Future

Failures

Offer the area(s) you checked to the Lord in a prayer of repentance, invite Him to be captain over your distress, and receive His grace.

In our companionship with Christ, we walk in grace. His grace is the undeserved gift or favor that reminds us we aren't in charge. We aren't the

captain. He is. It's grace that lifts us up, dusts us off, and gives us room to grow, forgive, and move on.

The Word of God is clear on the role of grace in our lives.

Read the following Scriptures, and underline any words or phrases that resonate into your life right now:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

(Matthew 11:28-30 MSG)

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

(Romans 6:14)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

(Titus 2:11-14)

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

(Hebrews 4:16)

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

(2 Peter 1:2)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

(Ephesians 2:8-9)

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

(Ephesians 4:7)

It's grace that lifts us up, dusts us off, and gives us room to grow, forgive, and move on.



It's the healing grace of God that steers our ship away from lies of shame and condemnation for who we are, where we have come from, what we have done, and what we look like. Shame will always try to convince us that we are a colossal problem never to be solved. That is the danger of shame; its power lies in deceit and sour thinking. But God, in His infinite kindness, longs to rid us of our disgrace by convincing us we are worthy and whole. We can see His handiwork when we speak over ourselves His promises of healing, mercy, and outright grace.

As we close today, take time to meditate on God's word and speak it over yourself, soaking in His grace.

Choose one of the verses on page 39 and meditate on it, thinking about it deeply. Say it aloud, and then rewrite it below in your own words, personalizing it with your own name wherever it may be appropriate.

Talk with God

In the space below, write a prayer of gratitude for God's grace in your life:

Act on It

Memorize the verse you chose earlier. You might write it on a note card and post it by your bedside or on your refrigerator as a reminder of God's grace in your life.

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: WEEK 1

Others don't get to _____ you when you have life in Christ.

John 8 – The Woman Caught in Adultery.

Others don't get to _____ you.

John 3:17 – Jesus came to save, not condemn.

Your sin and shame don't get to _____ you.

Jesus longs to _____ you.

Psalm 23:2 – Jesus is a shepherd who protects.

We can _____ on the Scriptures.

Psalm 5:11 – God spreads His protection over us.

We have to _____ those who haven't protected us.

We can, in prayer, _____ Him to protect our hearts.