never alone
Exchanging Your Tender Hurts for God’s Healing Grace
Tiffany Bluhm
Praise for *Never Alone*

“Have you ever had your heart broken? Have you ever felt abandoned, unloved? If you have, you will find a friend in these pages. With disarming transparency, Tiffany walks us through her own heartbreak to the glorious realization of this truth: she has never been alone, and neither have we.”

—*Sheila Walsh*, author of *In the Middle of the Mess*

“In her powerful book, *Never Alone*, Tiffany reaches down a hand of been-there hope to those who still wonder if anyone sees their aching loneliness—to the ones who live with a perpetual sense of being on the outside, of looking in through an impenetrable barrier at an unreachable place of true belonging.

The richest theology combines study with story, especially one’s own personal story of pain, grace, and redemption. With raw honesty, beautiful imagery, Tiffany brings flesh-and-blood life to this biblical truth: Jesus. Is. With. Us. Always. This book 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*

“Tiffany so beautifully articulates stories of rejection, with which we can all identify, only to make way for acceptance in the presence of Jesus. What a beautiful extension of Tiffany’s heart, so that we too can call out our pain in order to usher in wholeness and freedom. *Never Alone* is a must-read!”

—*Kelsey Chapman*, Radiant Podcast

“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’s story, shared with vulnerability and remarkable insight, invites us into meaningful reflection on our own lives and the truth of God’s Word. This is a must-read for anyone who needs a reminder that they are *Never Alone!”

—*Harmony Dust*, MSW, founder and executive director of Treasures Ministries
“Never Alone is a boldly intimate portrait of the journey to healing and wholeness. Tiffany’s vulnerability, tenderness, and wisdom unveil page by page the heart of God toward those who are brokenhearted. This book is a must-read that 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, NYC

“We were not designed to make decisions and live our lives alone; still, loneliness and isolation plague our generation. With her powerful storytelling and relatable content, Tiffany feels like a friend. She is relentless in her encouragement, in her passion for freedom, and in her desire to communicate the love of Jesus to us. She lives what she preaches and writes, which gives her a unique authority to speak truth. I believe God has created her to bring transformation, love, and compassion everywhere she goes. Her book will not only bring freedom but also provide a safe place for women to share, grow, and change.”

—Ashley Abercrombie, director of Liberty City, NYC

“Up close, Tiffany is a spark, a fire, something different. Her own story is one I hope more people will hear. Her writing is rich and fiery and full of voice. Read it slowly. Don’t gulp the words down; instead, sip and savor them, and rest in the warmth of the revelation that you are Never Alone.”

—Brian Dolleman, author of Peace & Rest and pastor of NWLife Church

“Through courageous honesty, Tiffany Bluhm presents a map and compass to the one longing to find the seemingly elusive reality of God’s ever-present love. For those struggling to navigate the deep and troubled waters of the soul, Never Alone is a gift to your life.”

—David Resinger, senior pastor, Redeem Church
For Derek, Jericho, and Kingston
Home is wherever I'm with you.
Contents

Introduction .................................................. ix

1. Shame ...................................................... 1
2. Doubt ..................................................... 17
3. Isolation ................................................... 33
4. Undesirability .............................................. 51
5. Lovelessness ............................................... 67
6. Exposure .................................................. 83
7. Jealousy ................................................... 99
8. Faithlessness ............................................. 117
9. Bitterness ............................................... 135
10. Hopelessness ............................................ 151
11. Loss ..................................................... 165
12. Fear ..................................................... 183

Notes ....................................................... 201
Introduction
In my early twenties, before a husband and kids came on the scene, I was a morning person. Up early, tea in hand, sitting in a cushy chair by the window as I poured out my thoughts into a trusty journal. By 9:00 p.m. I was snug in my sweatpants, hair in a bun, and dozing off to sleep. One night, in particular, I was cuddled in bed around 8:30 p.m. and heard the faint sound of footsteps making their way up the carpeted stairs of my townhouse. My roommate had texted that she’d be out for the night, unsure of what time she would return. From my bed, I called out her name a few times to see if it was her. I didn’t hear an answer. I froze. Too terrified to even reach for my phone to call for help, I sunk deep in the covers. The only sound I heard was my own heart beating out of my chest. In a pool of sweat, I whispered my roommate’s name once more, as if anyone could hear me from inside my bedroom. Again, I heard no answer.

Growing up, my worst nightmare was the idea of being attacked while sleeping in bed. Maybe it was too many scary movies or my own imagination hard at work. But each night as a child, it took me a considerable amount of time to fall asleep because I was mortified I would be attacked lying alone in my room.

So there I was, with two decades’ worth of bad dreams tucked in my sheets, paralyzed by the monsters in my own mind. Within two minutes I had all but jumped into my own grave. With someone outside my bedroom door, I knew this was the end. Here I was, alone, with an intruder in my house. With no defense, I felt totally helpless. I
Introduction

had no one to scare off the boogieman. No one to protect me from the unknown. I felt completely hopeless in saving myself. I had no stock in my ability to fight off my attacker.

After nearly fifteen minutes, I decided I could not just sit there. At the very least, I needed to switch on the light. With fear dripping from every pore of my body, I mustered enough guts to address the intruder head on. I swung the door open and slapped the light switch on ready to shout as loud as I possibly could. To my surprise I found my roommate puttering around the house. She looked at me with a smile and said, “Hi, how’s your night?”

To which I replied with a straight face, “Well, I thought I was going to die an early death. I called out your name about fifteen minutes ago and didn’t hear a reply. So, I assumed the absolute worst and anticipated I was about to die alone from a phantom intruder!”

As my dread turned to lighthearted laughter, I couldn’t believe the array of emotions I felt in a mere matter of minutes. Of all things that terrified me the most, being alone was the worst. When we’re alone, every isolating thought holds us captive. We feel helpless, hopeless, and forgotten.

As little girls, we feared playing alone on the playground. In middle school, we feared sitting alone at lunch. In high school, we feared going alone to the prom. As adults, we fear we may never marry or have children. We fear our husbands may leave us. We fear we will be left to our solitary selves to fight the hardest battles of our lives. We spend our lives doing our absolute best to prove we are lovable and valuable, never to be ignored or left alone.

While season after season brings fresh mercy and unforeseen misery, the good Lord is available to each of us. The same Lord who sat with harlots, beggars, and the blind sits with you and me. He’s patient and kind. Strong and brave. We may test His limits, doubt
Introduction

His faithfulness, or walk away, but He is always good to us. No matter what.

I am not alone. You are not alone.

The words of this book are an offering to you. An offering in hopes to encourage your heart no matter what season of life you are in. They share about the God who not only gave us life but also gave us His Son as our first companion. The One for whom our soul longs. I have discovered without a doubt that life is hard but Christ is sovereign. He is near. Whether in times of tears or bouts of laughter, He is near. Whether in singing or silence, He is near.

We will find that as our plans, hearts, and lives change, He does not miss a beat. What we may have mistook for His absence was only our mind questioning His goodness and grace. We will never escape His love. We do not possess that kind of power. If we are willing, we will discover the sacred truth that we, indeed, are never alone.

As you thumb through these pages, I pray you receive a fresh revelation of God’s mercy. Like a windy day, with gusts that remind you that the unforeseen is powerful and all-encompassing, would you delight in His compassion for you, His patience and mercy, His love and grace?
CHAPTER ONE

Shame
With middle school girls squished on both sides of me, I sat between them as their “fearless” youth group leader on a cushy church pew. These bright-eyed girls were full of faith as they threw their prayers to God, believing He would answer. After hands rose in worship and heads bowed in prayer, we feverishly took notes from the guest preacher. The preacher man, with his youth pastor–like faux hawk and distressed jeans, fervidly shared the gospel message with the youngsters, as many of us were on the edge of our seats. At the close of his sermon, he held up a kabuki mask explaining how God beckons us to remove our masks, exposing our raw hearts. I smirked at his cheesy, predictable youth-group analogy.

He went on for some time, sticking proudly to his example of the kabuki mask. As he wrapped up his sermon he instructed the crowd to bow their heads and pray. He asked each of us to remove his or her “masks” and to be honest with God. To fall in line and set the example for the sweet youth-group girls sitting around me, I repeated the prayer under my breath, asking God to remove any mask I might have been wearing, to get to my heart, to walk in the light and fullness of all He had for me. Next thing I knew, I found myself hunched over in the pew scratching at my face. This prayer begun in genuine honesty changed to one of earnest desperation. I was blown to bits by what I felt. Pain. A dull pain. In the depth of my belly, I felt alone and in the dark. I felt like a deserted little girl. I was unable to explain why I felt so bleak. So achy.
Never Alone

There I was, the barely-out-of-high-school youth leader, scratching at my face like a toddler. I groped around the ground for anything to comfort me, anything to save me. Hot tears poured from my eyes; I was overcome with the murky emotions that bubbled to the surface of my heart. Only later, in counseling, did my therapist explain that when a baby fails to cope she is driven to rage, hitting and scratching herself. I was aware, yet again, that I had unresolved issues that I could not button up.

The feelings I later identified as loneliness, abandonment, and rejection that erupted during the youth service first made me their slave when I was four years old. Tiny tears dripped into my pink plastic sippy cup as I wondered why on earth my mama did not want me. Thoughts twisted in my head: What did I do that was so bad? What if I apologize? Is it because I am a girl? Does she ever think about me? At four years old, I was aware that my dark skin did not match the skin of my parents or brothers. Their skins boasted a creamy whiteness while mine looked like muddy water.

Only by the love of Jesus do we exchange our shackles of shame for the robe of freedom.

Later, at seven years old, I still could not put it all together. Why did everyone have these common stories of a hospital delivery and Olan Mills baby pictures? No trauma at birth. No lost mama never to be met. No daddy never to know of her existence. I was sodden with grief, without words to articulate my heaviness.
I guess that’s the affliction of shame on a young soul, a trauma one cannot explain. It’s the voice of shame that whispers: “You are different. You are broken. You always will be.” You are, simultaneously, not enough and too much. Shame is worn like a corset tied so tight that it makes it hard to breathe. Full of disgust, we look in the mirror, ashamed of ourselves, our stories.

Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly*, writes:

Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That’s why it loves perfectionists—it’s so easy to keep us quiet. If we cultivate enough awareness about shame to name it and speak to it, we’ve basically cut it off at the knees. Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither. Just the way exposure to light was deadly for the gremlins, language and story bring light to shame and destroy it.

Just like Roosevelt advised, when we dare greatly we will err and we will come up short again and again. There will be failures and mistakes and criticism. If we want to be able to move through the difficult disappointments, the hurt feelings, and the heartbreaks that are inevitable in a fully lived life, we can’t equate defeat with being unworthy of love, belonging, and joy. If we do, we’ll never show up and try again.¹

Shame. Once it happens it can never un-happen. It affects how we think, feel, and relate to one another. It gives us a false sense of self, a fragmented view of our soul. We can feel shattered under the weight of loss. The pains of neglect or rejection leave a scar on us. The scars will always be part of our story. They won’t be the end of the story, only the beginning. While shame can never un-happen, it can certainly be redeemed. We can show up for our own lives. Lives marked by grace and acceptance, not guilt and shame.
Never Alone

A shamed heart shapes our view of God, His love, His nearness, and His restorative grace. If we dare to trust Him, even though we don’t fully understand how He operates in our lives, the distressed pieces of our soul can be resurrected into something beautiful. Something whole. No matter the source of our shame, the wound is dressed the same way. Not through self-help. Not through applause from others. Only by the love of Jesus do we exchange our shackles of shame for the robe of freedom.

The Never-Ending Cycle

I was told she made her way to the orphanage, birthed me, then left. She didn’t sign any papers. She left. With no way to track her down. The caregivers at the orphanage waited for a couple months, wondering if she might change her mind, come back, and take me with her. She didn’t. Before long I was given the name Abhilasha. I was one of more than twenty-five million orphans in India. Although orphanage caregivers were far outnumbered by a seemingly endless influx of orphans, the caregivers truly believed each orphan’s life was not meaningless; there was something for each of us.

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.

I own just one baby picture of myself, taken at five months. I’m wearing a simple cloth diaper with my moppy black hair piled atop
my head. My pursed lips appear to be permanently carved on my face. Every time I look at that picture my heart drops. Even at five months old I was scared and unsure of everything around me. Those overwhelming emotions of fear and uncertainty, my demons, were already there for me to fight, not only as a child but also as an adolescent, and later still as an adult.

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. It grows as we grow. Shame threads itself through our ideas, dreams, and hopes. It convinces us we aren’t good enough, strong enough, or worthy enough for anyone’s love and affection.

Regardless whether our shame stems from abandonment, abuse, neglect, or loss, we believe we are defective, rejected, and just plain broken. The other women in our life may be able to keep it together, parent well-behaved children, sport a size 4, and flirt with their husbands like newlyweds, but not us. Shame keeps us from closing the gap of what we think life should be like to who we really are. Deep down, we aren’t OK with who we are, what’s happened to us, and where we’re headed. The devastating effects of shame can be healed, but not alone. 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.

The Lonely in Families

A small-town family from Washington State went through the three-year process to adopt an orphan from India. They adopted me
when I was a year and a half old. I was suddenly part of a family: a father, a mother, and two brothers, six and eight years older than me. My adoptive father was a firefighter and fire extinguisher technician for the military. My adoptive mother was a homemaker. My oldest brother, Teddy, had brain damage. Although he was nearly ten years old when I was adopted, he still had the mentality of a toddler. My other brother, Tim, was cheeky and sweet. He played the big brother to both Teddy and me.

All together we made a family that had both a child with disabilities and an international adoptee. This became my family. We were our own brand of odd. I grew to love my brothers and to give my parents grief, just as all little girls are entitled to do.

The funny thing about adoption is that for the family who is adopting, they often have stars in their eyes about what adoption should look like when adding a newcomer to their home. The truth is, adoption originates in abandonment. Inviting a bedraggled child, who hasn’t experienced a healthy home life before, into a home is about as trouble-free as bathing a cat. Rooted in trauma, adoption is only the first step in a long road to healing; and for the adoptee and the family, the road is rocky and rough.

A completed adoption doesn’t presume a heart made whole. A new marriage doesn’t presume a heart made whole. New friendships don’t presume a heart made whole. The broken pieces of our lives will follow us until we surrender them to someone who can fix them. Surrender and healing is a choice. A long road. Healing comes from confronting dark parts of the soul and choosing restoration, incident-by-incident, ache-by-ache, pain-by-pain.

And healing takes time. It doesn’t happen instantly with a new surname or a green card. It doesn’t happen instantly with new parents or new brothers. It doesn’t happen instantly with a new husband or
child. It doesn’t happen instantly with a new job or applause. It happens at last when a soul surrenders to Jesus, choosing His love and His grace. It happens when peace, forgiveness, and a renewed mind, by the power of the Holy Spirit, work inside an ashamed ragamuffin. It happens when insight from those who have walked the road before, build up the soul that’s been traumatized.

It’s not impossible. It’s not out of reach. Freedom is ours to claim.

Scorn the Shame

I unwrapped my bologna sandwich from my hot pink lunchbox and did my best to hide my excitement as I snagged a seat next to my potential best friend, a transfer student new to the third grade. Since our school was small, just two classrooms for grades K–6, I was eager to learn everything about the new girl. Before I could even utter a measly “Hello,” she hastily gathered her juice box, turkey sandwich, and Fruit Roll-Up to find a new spot at another table. I was baffled. Confounded as to why she would flee in my presence, I pursued her. There were only nine kids in the third grade, slim pickings in the way of new friends. When I finally mustered up the courage to ask her why she left, she answered, “I’ve never met anyone brown before. I’m scared to be with you. You are so different.”

In February, she wouldn’t eat the cookies I brought to the Valentine’s Day party. I assured her they were delicious, shortbread with red crystal sprinkles, my favorite. She quietly took them off of her plate and put them on a napkin. I had no words for the feelings she left me with that day. I didn’t have a clue what to make of it. But I could feel the heat of disgrace on my face.

Back then, I wouldn’t have been able to explain it like I can now. I know the word for it now. *Shame*. Shame left me embarrassed about the
Never Alone

color of the skin God gave me. It started young, and I battled the beast through many seasons. I was ashamed of my body because I believed others were dissatisfied with my almond eyes and thick brows and the honey hue of my skin. My skin and story didn’t fit into their world, and therefore, I—with my thoughts, feelings, dreams, and ideas—didn’t fit into their world either. I was a minority in almost every situation I found myself in. I was unremittingly reminded of how different I was.

Whenever you feel like the outsider, with a difference you can’t control, you feel utterly helpless. You have no way to get what you want. It doesn’t matter if you try to ignore your differences. Others will point them out to you unannounced. It’s a crippling feeling, being different.

It was true for me. I felt debilitated with my brown skin and broken story. I felt the narrative of my life being written without my consent, a narrative in which shame forever played the leading lady, never to be replaced on stage. The truth is, shame is a liar. She is no friend to the abandoned heart; she is only capable of destruction.

Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us:

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus scorned and despised shame and endured the cross. Not the other way around. We spend far too many days enduring shame and despising the cross, our path set out by Father God. If we scorn shame, if we shoo it off the stage as soon as it makes its appearance, we will
begin to understand our place as free and beloved daughters. We will be victorious. We will endure the cross as we follow Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. The Author and Finisher of our story.

*The Dance of Shame*

I pulled my long sleeves down over my tanned skin and wiped my tears. How had I let this happen? I had been so careful to stay out of the sun. I already felt so out of place and there I was, darker than before. After hours in the Ford Aerostar, bound for a family camp in Santa Cruz, California, we spent the night at an economy motel. Eager to splash with my brothers in the motel pool, I knew the sweltering California sunshine would leave me with an unwanted tan, my skin wheatish brown.

We shed our coat of shame when we accept that He took on our shame, once and for all, so we wouldn’t have to.

I wanted so badly to be white. I would’ve given anything to have the strawberry blonde locks. The hairless legs. The peachy skin. I swore to myself I could wear that proudly. I wanted to be white because I was convinced it was not OK to be brown. Other than my African American Barbie doll, I saw no one around me who was proud of her dark skin. I struggled to identify as East Indian. I didn’t know a lick about the culture. At school, learning about national holidays, popular cuisine, and customs of the Hindu culture fascinated me.
As women, we find ourselves in the traditional female dance of body shaming. Why is that? Why is it that our hair is not straight enough, curly enough, soft enough, or shiny enough? Why is our nose too small or too big, our ears too pointy? Why freckles, why crossed eyes, why arm fat, why facial hair, why a flabby tummy, and for God’s sake, why cellulite? These are the questions that consume us for so long. We can’t seem to hush the earworms of shame. We stare in the mirror, wishing for a different body. One that is the right height, the right weight, and most of all, the right color.

As time went on I began to accept my skin color, my broken story, and the soul it housed. Still, for so long, I let others steal my dignity. They had no right to take it from me, yet I meekly allowed them to step up, take stock, and decide if I was fit to be loved, to belong. For the rejected heart, it can feel impossible to escape the weight of shame.

In the Gospels, we read of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with costly perfume and found freedom from her shameful past. Luke 7:36-50 reads:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” And Jesus answering said to him,
“Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “Say it, Teacher.”

“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (ESV)

This woman found out Jesus was eating at the table of Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3). She walked in, ignored the others, and made her way to Jesus. While the disciples and Pharisees dismissed her life and actions as irresponsible, Jesus disagreed. This wasn’t a high-society girl. Commentators and historians agree that she, indeed, engaged in prostitution. Some say she was Mary Magdalene; others claim she is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This passionate woman approached the King of Glory, wept at His side, wiped the tears with her hair, and poured costly perfume over His feet. Who knows what she had planned for that costly perfume? An expensive ointment she probably wore.
Her shame—what happened to her and the life she lived—was laid raw at the feet of Jesus. He accepted her. Her repentant nature made room for forgiveness. Even more, He allowed the ointment she brought to coat His feet. No doubt, He left the Pharisee’s home smelling like her. He wasn’t ashamed to associate Himself with a woman like her. No shameful past, act, or thought separated her from the love of God made plain in Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth welcomes us all. As we are. He welcomes us from every nation, tribe, and tongue. One does not have to be from the Western world or have white skin to be blessed. You don’t have to live on the right side of the tracks to be blessed. No one has to be rich to be blessed. No one has to have a perfect start in life to be blessed. No one has to be the right height or have the right hair color or eye color to be blessed. Galatians 3:28 proudly proclaims, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NLT).

You, just as you are, is enough for Him. No one is outside of His love, His reach, and His embrace. We all make the cut.

Shame for who we are, where we have come from, what we have done, and what we look like will always convince us that God and His healing grace are not enough. It will always 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. 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 love. Anything less leaves room for shame to grow like weeds in a rose garden, choking out the immeasurable beauty of the Master.

Jesus is near. He’s been there all along. He’s present in our shameful moments. He aches for our brokenness. He’s close to the forsaken
heart, itching to rescue and redeem us from shame that is far too heavy for the heart to bear. Jesus came to take away our shame. We shed our coat of shame when we accept that He took on our shame, once and for all, so we wouldn’t have to. When we lie at His feet, pour out our heart, and accept His healing touch, we can stand up and walk in freedom and peace, for shame is no longer ours to bear.