



Freedom

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tinyurl.com/women-freedomstudy

WHY I WROTE THIS

I have worked with college students from ministries and churches all over the U.S. since 2005, and there has been a common theme: They have baggage from their sexual past that they don't know how to be free of. They enter my life and I quickly see that as a result of their past they are struggling with flashbacks, not being able to forgive themselves, not believing that God forgives them, not knowing how to share their real story with anyone, dealing with other consequences of their sin like STDs or unplanned pregnancies, addictions, personality changes, fear of future marriage, the list goes on . . .

Occasionally, I have the honor and privilege of sitting with someone as they share with me their full story, for some reason trusting me to hear the weight of their shame. I have come to see how important it is to the healing process to share your story with someone.

I wrote this so that anyone, anywhere, could grab a few friends who are on some level struggling with their past, and commit to four weeks together, so that healing and restoration could begin. May your journey together be full of the Holy Spirit, and may Christ meet you in real ways during your time together. Blessings.

— Katie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful for those who have opened up to me, which showed me how very much needed this is. For those who have sat in my room, spilling out things that they had never shared with anyone else, *thank you. Your courage inspired me to write this.* For those who did the trial run of this and circled back with tons of feedback, thank you. Jacqueline, thank you for your input and help. Jordan, thank you for turning this into something that isn't just a word doc. You truly are a wizard.

I would love to hear your feedback, questions, thoughts, and stories. You can email me at katie.laravia@gmail.com.

A NOTE FOR GROUP FACILITATORS

Your role will be to make sure the group is as safe and welcoming as possible, so that people feel able to share vulnerably. Perhaps you are wondering if you are qualified to facilitate a work such as this. All that is required is that you be a fellow brother or sister also on the journey toward healing. Here are some tips that may help you as you facilitate this time:

- Vulnerability invites vulnerability. Try to lead by example.
- Try to elicit equal sharing time from everyone. This might mean you call on someone specifically who is typically hesitant, or you stop someone who tends to talk a lot by saying, “Let’s get a chance to hear from everyone else first.”
- The group should take about 1.5-2 hours of actual time. Please plan accordingly.
- Feel free to split up the reading material, who shares first, etc. It may be helpful for you to just simply guide the time in proceeding to the next portion and making sure you stay on track.
- You bring a presence anytime you enter a room and a space. Be intentional to bring the presence of Christ to this group, a non-anxious presence looking to love and serve others.



WEEK 1 | PART 1

Introduction

WHO? This is designed for anyone who has any level of sexual past who has recognized that it is impacting – and will continue to impact – their life unless it is dealt with. It is for those who had to endure sexual trauma through no fault of their own. It is for those who thought what you were doing was “no big deal” or that “everyone else was doing it,” but now you have baggage you didn’t expect. It is for those who knew and really wanted to do the right thing, but couldn’t seem to get it right, and now you live with the shame of wrong choices.

WHY? The purpose of this group is so that we can experience healing and freedom that can only come from Christ. It is very common that when people become believers, they are told they are a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. This of course is all true. However, this implies that they should bury their past sexual experiences, never to think of them again. Too often people do not actually know how to effectively do this, and are very much struggling with shame, identity in Christ and walking in freedom.

WHAT? This will be a four-week-long small group of no more than four people of the same gender. You will come together weekly to walk through specific steps in sharing your stories and finding healing through a Biblical framework. You will look at why you need to do this, and how neuroscience and the Bible both support this reality. You will understand that your shame is impacting you negatively, and what you need to do to overcome that. You will come to see that God is in your story, and that He cares about what you have experienced. Finally, you will find that God is sovereign, and that there is purpose in what you have experienced and how He can use that experience to bring healing to others. The end goal is that by walking through this together as a group, you will find understanding and peace in God’s sovereignty and living life in freedom and healing that Christ desires for us.

HOW? An ideal environment of healing would look like:

Barbara Wilson, in her book *The Invisible Bond: How to Break Free from Your Sexual Past*, suggests these ground rules for a group:

- *Confidentiality* – an absolute necessity. What is said in the group stays in the group.
- *Commitment* to meet together regularly. Attendance is necessary for everyone’s growth.
- *Freedom* to allow feelings and emotions to emerge openly without judgment or problem-solving from others in the group. To suggest that someone

'shouldn't feel this way' negates their feelings. You can affirm the way a person feels whether you believe they are right or wrong.

- *Participation* by everyone. Be sensitive to those who dominate and those who hesitate in sharing. Try to foster a balance between the voices of all present (Wilson, 194).

To those, I would add:

- *Private setting*, free from distractions and interruptions. A public place will not work for this group.
- *Knowing what is ok to share and what you shouldn't share*. A good rule of thumb is to share honestly, but without the details that would paint a clear image in someone's mind. Examples of what this looks like will be given when the time comes.
- *Same gender group*, no more than four people.

Group expectations:

- *No minimizing other people and their stories*. When someone shares their story, that is not the time for you to jump in with your own experience.
- *No comparing*. Your story is your story; someone else's story is their story. Don't compare experiences and label them as "worse," "more traumatic," "higher in number," etc.
- *Full participation*. Commit to coming to all of the four meetings and commit to doing the homework. You can expect one reflection session per week and one interaction with the Bible per week that you could do in your devotional time.
- *Stay on pace*. No peeking ahead.

This time and group will ideally be a safe space where you can safely share the parts of your story that are holding you back from walking in freedom and experiencing the life that God has for you.

What can you expect from the next 4 weeks?

- that you will share things you have never shared before
- that you will be wrecked by your shame and not want to walk into it
- that you will feel things that maybe you have been avoiding
- that you will experience freedom that you have been looking for
- that you will recognize that God has been in your story, ALL of it, the good and the bad

- that you will be enabled to help bring freedom and healing to others

A word of warning: As you dig into your past, you are going to want to bail on this process. When it comes to your turn to share, it will feel like a HUGE hurdle to spit these things out of your mouth. Everything inside of you will tell you that it is a terrible idea. You may also feel like you are moving backward, and not forward. *That is normal.* You are encouraged to push through the discomfort and to take a risk. It's a huge part of the healing process.

DISCLAIMER: If you have been the victim of a traumatic assault, rape, or abuse situation, the next best step for you would be to see a licensed professional counselor who can help you. This group may not be the best place for you to find the healing that you need and deserve.



WEEK 1 | PART 2

Why You Need This

(AND HOW THE BIBLE AND
SCIENCE CAN HELP YOU SEE
THE NEED)

One person: pray that the Holy Spirit would work to show people what they need to see in order to experience healing and freedom in Christ.

READ *the following together as a group, perhaps taking turns reading each section aloud. Feel free to interject with comments and questions.*

YOU NEED THIS. Who are the people in this room? You are in this room because you have experienced something sexual in your past that is still affecting you today. That is normal. There are so many people just like you who have not been equipped to deal with this well. You are probably used to thinking that you are the only one who:

- has experienced what you have experienced
- is still struggling with it somehow
- has consequences from your sexual past
- struggles to believe that God can really forgive you for the things you have done.

It's time for you to stop living in bondage to your past. As a believer, Christ has offered you forgiveness and freedom that are both yours for the taking. In case you're thinking *it is what it is, I can just get over it eventually*, here are some reasons why it would be beneficial for you to start this journey now and not later:

YOU NEED HEALING NOW BECAUSE:

- Christ wants you to walk in freedom...
 - by being more like him
 - so that you can glorify him
 - because your past sin that you haven't dealt with is overflowing into present sin
 - by not believing lies so that you can more fully see the way Christ sees you
- Your past affects (not defines) your present and future through...
 - memories/dreams/flashbacks
 - addictive behaviors: porn, social media, Netflix, other numbing behaviors
 - personality changes: passivity or dominance in how you act around others

- struggles with sex in marriage
- It is affecting your current relationships due to your...
 - isolating
 - insecurities/seeking approval/people-pleasing/neediness
 - lack of trust
 - bitterness
- It is affecting your daily rhythms due to your...
 - anxiety
 - distraction
 - numbing behaviors that are time wasting

DISCUSS as a group which points from above stood out to you that you can see in your life.

How do you know if you have already processed and healed from a past sexual experience as opposed to avoiding it? If your immediate response to a sexual flashback or memory is shame, pushing it away, avoidance, distraction, or any other negative emotion or response, you haven't dealt with it and experienced forgiveness and healing. In contrast, if when you have a memory, you can calmly and peacefully respond in knowing that the experience does not define you, that your identity is in Christ, and trust that God is sovereign over your life, you likely have experienced healing and freedom.

Do you tend to have any of the above reactions when you have a memory from your past?

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON BIBLICAL HEALING

Redefining the Bible in your story is a crucial part of the healing process. In light of your sexual past, you have probably been told one of these things:

- The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- You are a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- You have been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20)
- Forget what lies behind you, strive toward what lies ahead (Philippians 3:13)

All of these things are true. If they are true, why do they not seem to be helping? What often happens is that these verses are used with a "slap a Bible verse

on it” mentality. Just memorize it, and eventually you will believe it. Rather than slapping a verse on your past, instead, what if you were to seek to find healing and empathy in the Word?

The Bible was written for us to interact with, to learn from, and to be able to understand the greatest love story ever written. There is so much more to it than simply memorizing it.

DISCUSS *What verse have you had the tendency to slap onto your sexual past? Has it worked for you in a way that wasn't a temporary fix? Did it bring long-term healing?*

WHY SHOULD YOU DO THIS?

READ each of these points out loud:

1. Telling your story actually changes the way you understand it.

“You construct your understanding of the world and your place in it through the lens of your own story. And the manner and context in which you reflect on your story (in your mind) or tell your story (to others) become part of the fabric of the narrative itself. In other words, the process of reflecting on and telling others your story, and the way you experience others hearing it, actually shapes the story *and the very neural correlates, or networks, it represents*. Additionally, we weave together our individual stories into the fabric that becomes the larger, more inclusive story of our community” (Curt Thompson, *The Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices that can Transform Your Life and Relationships*, Page 77).

We all have a narrative, or our way of understanding our own stories. Often, our narratives are wrong, and our telling of our stories to others helps to re-write the narratives that we have into proper narratives.

2. Ignoring what is going on inside of you will keep you from being healed.

Curt Thompson writes that there is a tendency to “dismiss emotional states to which you really should attend or ignore what your deepest inner self is trying to tell you. In fact, when you dis-integrate in this way, you may be ignoring what God is trying to tell you, running from parts of you that he wants to heal and parts of him that he longs to have known by you” (Thompson, page 41).

People often have the response to immediately push away a memory or flashback of their sexual past. What if in doing this, you are ignoring what God is trying to show you so that you could experience His healing?

3. God often requires us to return to our pain so that we can heal.

God knows what He is doing, and He created us with the capacity to experience mind-blowing, spirit-crushing, devastating pain. This pain can overwhelm our lives, or we can invite Him in to help us find the joy and hope which is available to us in the midst of our pain.

“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

4. We need to face our shame in order to heal.

It is helpful for us to name what it is that is causing us to feel shame. This allows us to acknowledge what has caused pain and will also lead us to work not to repeat the behavior. Practically speaking, this is what confession and repentance looks like in the Christian faith, but “too often the fear of feeling fear and shame all over again causes us to avoid the discipline of confession and forego the liberty of forgiveness” (Thompson, page 225).

Then, pay attention to this next part, because it is a bit neuroscience-complicated, yet crucial:

“Yet it is only when we allow ourselves to be known, when we allow for intimacy, that we permit another person to use all of his or her nonverbal power to activate those parts of our right hemisphere that represent emotional states that are too painful for us to bear in the absence of another brain” (Thompson, page 225).

This literally means that when you talk about your shame to another person, your brain experiences a healing that can only take place when another person is present. You cannot do this alone. Healing must happen in the context of community.

There are a few important steps here that are part of the healing process: naming what has happened, acknowledging the way you feel about it, committing to turn from that behavior, and allowing yourself to be known by someone else.

5. Christ wants you to embrace your suffering.

1 Peter 4:1-2 says, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.”

Christ did not avoid suffering; He embraced it, knowing that it would lead to your knowing its healing power.

DISCUSS *Which point did you most resonate with? What did you learn?*

REFLECT Take a few minutes to individually answer the following. Afterwards, discuss each answer as a group.

1. When I think about my sexual past, I feel: (circle 3-5 words)

Amazed	Proud	Sad	Self-conscious	Jealous
Foolish	Anxious	Bored	Motivated	Terrified
Disdained	Content	Hurt	Overwhelmed	Worried
Inspired	Loving	Joy	Embarrassed	Excited
Shocked	Grieving	Scared	Comfortable	Angry
Envious	Satisfied	Happy	Frustrated	Trapped
Tense	Depressed	Lonely	Disgusted	Energetic
Resentful	Peaceful	Bitter	Irritated	Miserable
Confused	Inadequate	Silly	Lost	Stupid
Relieved	Ashamed	Suspicious	Nervous	Worthless
Annoyed				

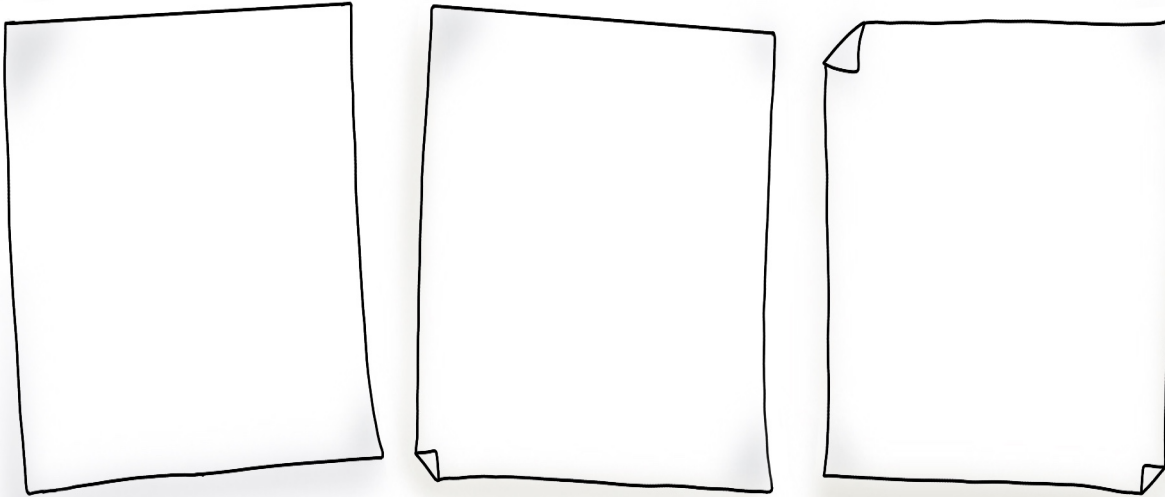
NOTE: Oatmeal words are words that people tend to use, but we want to eliminate from our vocabulary because they don't actually describe what we feel. Using these words tend to hide what it is that we are actually feeling or enable us to avoid our emotions. These are words like: nice, fine, okay, whatever, interesting, cool, it is what it is, good.

2. Why did you choose each of the words you did?

3. How does naming your emotions about your past and talking about it impact you? What does it tell you about where you are in the healing process?

4. How does knowing what other people circled and why impact you?
5. The obstacles preventing me from sharing openly and honestly about my past are: (circle all that apply)
- a. I am the only one who experienced/did these things
 - b. No one else will understand
 - c. I am ashamed of what I have done
 - d. I am still dealing with the consequences of what I have done
 - e. I am afraid people will view me differently or judge me
 - f. I am afraid I will have to view me differently
 - g. I should be over it by now
 - h. I will be removed from my leadership position
 - i. If I say it out loud, it will make it real
 - j. If I talk about it, it will bring back pain and other negative feelings
 - k. Fear of the unknown

6. What do you need to give yourself permission for during this time? Write it in the boxes below (e.g., I give myself permission to cry; I give myself permission to feel).

Three hand-drawn rectangular boxes are arranged horizontally. The first box on the left is a simple rectangle. The second box in the middle is a rectangle with small folded corners at the top and bottom. The third box on the right is a rectangle with a folded top-left corner and a folded bottom-right corner.

HOMEWORK *On your own, read Psalm 130 (which can be found on the next page). After reading the whole thing, read it again slowly, verse by verse, reflecting on how each verse applies or speaks to your personal story. Next time, you will discuss what parts of the verse impacted you the most and what you sensed that God perhaps wanted you to know, believe, understand or do.*

Psalm 130

My Soul Waits for the Lord

A Song of Ascents.

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!

2 O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

8 And he will redeem Israel

from all his iniquities.



WEEK 2

*Shame and
Vulnerability*

One person: pray that the Holy Spirit would work to show people what they need to see in order to experience healing and freedom in Christ.

Review the expectations for the group.

- *Confidentiality* – an absolute necessity. What is said in the group stays in the group.
- *Commitment* to meet together regularly. Attendance is necessary for everyone's growth.
- *Freedom* to allow feelings and emotions to emerge openly without judgment or problem-solving from others in the group. To suggest that someone 'shouldn't feel this way' negates their feelings. You can affirm the way a person feels, whether you believe they are right or wrong.
- *Participation* by everyone. Be sensitive to those who dominate and those who hesitate in sharing. Try to foster a balance between the voices of all present.
- *Knowing what is ok to share and what you shouldn't share*. A good rule of thumb is to share honestly, but without the details that would paint a clear image in someone's mind. Examples of what this looks like will be given when the time comes.
- *No minimizing other people and their stories*. When someone shares their story, that is not the time for you to jump in with your own experience.
- *No comparing*. Your story is your story; someone else's story is their story. Don't compare experiences and label them as "worse," "more traumatic," "higher in number," etc.
- *Full participation*. Commit to coming to all of the four meetings and commit to doing the homework. You can expect one reflection session per week, and one interaction with the Bible per week that you could do in your devotional time.

Review the permission slips that you wrote for yourself the first week.

DISCUSS Take a few moments to review Psalm 130. Each person can respond to the following questions:

- What verse stuck out to you the most? Why?
- Which verse speaks most to your personal story?
- What did you sense God inviting you to know, believe, understand, or do?

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GUILT AND SHAME?

GUILT is the feeling you have when you believe “I have done something bad.” With guilt, you may feel remorse or responsibility for something that you did wrong. It is related to a specific action that you did. Guilt helps you take ownership of your behaviors and reverse them. Guilt can help you move forward in healing. Often, the Holy Spirit will use guilt to convict you in such a way that you are motivated to change. Paul talks about a godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:11).

SHAME is the feeling you have when you believe “I *am* bad.” With shame, you may feel unworthy or inadequate as a person. It is related to your behavior or yourself, often related to how other people think of you. Shame keeps you stuck in your past. The only antidote (remedy) for shame is empathy. Shame is often used by the enemy to rob you of your identity in Christ and keep you away from believing that God has forgiven you. Shame can look like aggression, isolation, and hiding. One of the things that makes shame so difficult to deal with is its silence. By its very nature, shame seeks to hide itself. These are some of the thoughts that might happen in your mind:

- “These people aren’t going to understand. Nobody else deals with this.”
- “If I say it out loud, it will make it real.”
- “They are going to judge me.”
- “If they knew, they would look at me differently.”

DISCUSS *Take a few minutes for each person to share whether they feel more guilt or more shame about their sexual past.*

How do you know which one you are feeling? It is ok if you still aren’t sure at this point; as you continue in this process, you will be able to better recognize which one it is that you are feeling.

WHAT IS VULNERABILITY? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE VULNERABLE?

According to Brené Brown, “the definition of vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our most accurate measure of courage.”

Uncertainty: Vulnerability brings uncertainty because you don’t know how other people are going to react or respond or think about you.

Risk: Vulnerability brings risk because you are taking a chance on being judged, rejected, shamed, or criticized.

Emotional exposure: Vulnerability brings emotional exposure because you are exposing what it is that you are actually feeling, and perhaps even showing those emotions in the moment as you share your story.

As you looked at earlier, the only antidote, or remedy, to shame is empathy. That means that the only thing that will help you deal with your shame is for you to share your story with someone else. The only way they can understand is if they know. It will be impossible for you to get out of feeling shame about your sexual past if you never share about it with anyone.

REFLECT *Have each person write down their answer to these questions, and then share with the group.*

What makes you feel uncertain/unsafe/hesitant about sharing your sexual past with this group?

What is the risk in sharing about your past with this group? What do you have to lose?

What emotional exposure would you face if you were to share about your past with this group?

It is normal to feel anxious about the unknown, especially when it involves what others think about you. Sometimes it is helpful to ask yourself, “What is the worst-case scenario?” This helps turn anxieties into concerns that you can look at and address if need be. What is the worst thing that could happen if you were to share about your past with this group?

SO, IN A NUTSHELL:

Shame is destroying you. The antidote to shame is empathy. You can't receive empathy without sharing. You need to share.

REFLECT *Take a few minutes to individually bring to mind a sexual experience that you have had. This may feel strange to you, because most people try to just push away and ignore memories when they come. Take this opportunity, in a safe space with others, to actually remember this experience. Try to write your thoughts and feelings if possible.*

NOTE: What is the difference between being vulnerable and over-sharing? Being vulnerable requires that you say what actually happened (as opposed to implying it). Use the correct words, say the actual things that took place. Avoid telling a packaged, G-rated, generic version of the story. Remember, this is a safe group. This is your opportunity to tell that story that maybe you have never told anyone before. Over-sharing would be telling your story with so much detail that it paints a clear picture of what happened in the minds of the others. You can be open and honest without being so explicit and graphic that you sound like an X-rated romance novel.

1. Call to mind the first sexual experience that you have had that stirs up the strongest feelings of shame. Give it a name that you can recognize it with here.
2. Next, try to remember what happened. This may take a few minutes of putting yourself back in the scene. You don't have to write it down. After you have remembered, list as many words as you can that you feel, think, or believe that relate to the experience.
3. Ask God to help you see that you are feeling shame that He does not want you to feel. You may also need to ask God to show you any past feelings of pride or

arrogance. Pray that He would help you to have the courage that you need to be able to share about your experience with the group.

SHARE (*Read all of this before the first person shares*):

Each person can take a turn sharing about the experience that they reflected on. Try to tell the story of what happened in 3-5 minutes. Often, people don't want to make eye contact when telling their story, and that is ok. But when you are finished, try to look at the people around you.

Keep in mind:

- Don't interrupt.
- Don't ask questions. This is their story, told in the way they need it to be told. Your questions for clarification or curiosity are not as important here.
- You might feel tempted to comfort them or try to make them feel better. Resist this temptation.

When the person is done sharing their story, the leader of the group can respond by saying,

- "Thank you for trusting us with your story."
- Then ask, "Can anyone else in the group relate to what they experienced and how it made them feel?" If you can relate to what someone has shared, tell them specifically how you can relate to them. For example: "I can relate to you feeling like there was nothing else you could do in the situation, so you had to just go with it" or "I can relate to feeling really confused afterward."

NOTE: *This is not a time for them to share their version of the story, only to point out that other people can understand. This is also not a time to negate their emotions, by saying things like, "You shouldn't feel stupid," etc.*

- Then ask, "Who would like to share next?"

The next person can share their story, with the leader following it with the above responses.

REFLECT *After all the stories have been shared, have each person take a minute to reflect on how they are currently feeling. Circle the words that you can resonate with:*

Amazed	Proud	Sad	Self-conscious	Jealous
Foolish	Anxious	Bored	Motivated	Terrified
Disdained	Content	Hurt	Overwhelmed	Worried
Inspired	Loving	Joy	Embarrassed	Excited
Shocked	Grieving	Scared	Comfortable	Angry
Envious	Satisfied	Happy	Frustrated	Trapped
Tense	Depressed	Lonely	Disgusted	Energetic
Resentful	Peaceful	Bitter	Irritated	Miserable
Confused	Inadequate	Silly	Lost	Stupid
Relieved	Ashamed	Suspicious	Nervous	Worthless
Annoyed				

DISCUSS *Is this feeling any different than how you felt before sharing your story? If so, how? How did it impact you to hear everyone else's stories?*

If there is still time remaining, each person can take a few minutes to think through another story, then take turns sharing them, following the process you did the first time.

After you have finished sharing the stories, one person can go back and read what they were afraid of in sharing. Then each person can affirm something about them that they saw in their sharing. Do this with each person.

You have taken courageous steps in being vulnerable today, and that is going to lead you down a path toward freedom and healing. If it doesn't feel like that is close yet, take heart, be patient, and ask God to help you see that this is part of the journey.

HOMEWORK *Repeat the exercise you did earlier with 2 other experiences.*

1. Call to mind 2 other sexual experiences that you have had that stir up the strongest feelings of shame. You don't have to write down what happened, just give each of them a name that you can identify them with.

2. With each experience, try to remember what happened. This may take a few minutes of putting yourself back in the scene. You don't have to write it down. After you have remembered, list as many words as you can that you feel, think, or believe that relate to the experience.

3. Ask God to help you see that you are feeling shame that He does not want you to feel. Pray that He would help you to have the courage that you need to be able to share about one of your experiences with the group or someone else another time this week.

4. Do you see any themes of feelings or other thoughts or patterns that run between the different experiences?

To end your time, listen to “Psalm 130” by Shane and Shane.

Also, for homework in your devotional time, read Isaiah 43:16-21, which can be found on the next page. After reading the whole thing, read it again slowly, verse by verse, reflecting on how each verse applies or speaks to your personal story. Next time, you will discuss what parts of the verse impacted you the most and what you sensed that God perhaps wanted you to know, believe, understand or do.

Isaiah 43

16 Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
17 who brings forth chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
18 “Remember not the former things,
 nor consider the things of old.
19 Behold, I am doing a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild beasts will honor me,
 the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.



WEEK 3

God is in
Your Story

One person: pray that the Holy Spirit would work to show people what they need to see in order to experience healing and freedom in Christ.

DISCUSS Take a few moments to review Isaiah 43:16-21. Each person can respond to the following questions:

- What verse stuck out to you the most? Why?
- Which verse speaks most to your personal story?
- What did you sense God inviting you to know, believe, understand, or do?

READ the following quotes:

“Everyone has a story. But no one is telling it. That all changed when I began to tell my story. . . . What keeps us silent? . . . Why can’t we be honest? And why now, when I open up, do others feel comfortable doing the same? I’ve discovered that keeping secrets is Satan’s idea, and being open and honest is God’s. . . . Keeping secrets isolates us from God and others and leaves us at the mercy of Satan’s condemnation, which further seals our silence, convincing us that we must never share our secret. Telling our stories breaks the grip of the secret, diffusing its power” (Barbara Wilson, *The Invisible Bond*, pg 19).

“God does wait for us to be real about our shame so he can meet us in it and then rewrite our narratives” (Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, pg 230).

Consider this: Most people push away a memory when they have one, assuming that it is the enemy using their sexual past to make them feel shame or be disconnected from God. Have you ever considered that maybe God is bringing the story to your mind because He wants you to experience healing and forgiveness and freedom?

DISCUSS What is your reaction to the above quotes?

As you learned before, everyone has a narrative, or an understood story they believe, about their lives. Unfortunately, these narratives are often wrong. The stories we are part of affect how we interact with others and who we are. It is important for you to dig deep into your story and to know who you are and how you have been shaped by your experiences and to be vulnerable about that.

Everyone also has a narrative about God. Your ideas and images of God are at the center of everything, determining every aspect and question of your life. If your narrative about God is wrong, it can have serious consequences on your emotional and spiritual health. People tend to have false narratives about God that they didn't even realize they had until someone else points them out. You get these narratives early on, and you spend years reinforcing them, so that when you move into adulthood, it is really hard to change them.

Here are some common examples of False Narratives that people have about God:

- God is an angry judge, waiting to punish. (38% of American Christians view God this way.)
- God is wrath.
- God couldn't possibly forgive me for some of the things I have done. I can't even forgive myself.
- I am garbage . . . a rotten sinner . . . I am not enough.
- I am alone. I am scared. I have only my own resources to rely on.

You can know who you are only in relation to how you know God. Who you believe God to be determines how you view yourself. The only place to find your genuine identity is in your relationship with God. You were made to run on the love of God, and you are only half alive when you are running on self-worth and other people's opinions. In order to run on the love of God, it is crucial that you keep absorbing God's love every day.

REFLECT *Circle the three that most describe how you believe God views you. Cross out the three that least describe how you believe God views you. Don't try to give the right answers.*

GOD:

- Is glad I was born
- Is disappointed in my behavior
- Keeps remembering that big thing that I did wrong
- Is eager to see me fulfill my ambitions
- Wants me to straighten up
- Wants me to feel guilty
- Remembers the last thing I did wrong
- Wishes I'd do more to help people
- Longs for me to pay more attention to spiritual things
- Wishes I'd read the Bible more

- Lavishes love on me
- Can't get enough of me because He delights in me
- Feels compassion for me
- Wants me to feel obligated to do good things
- Is glad to walk with me every moment
- Is disappointed in my life
- Other:

Ask God right now, "What do you think of me?" See what honestly comes to you. Write down anything that you see, sense, hear, or feel.

What do your answers show you about what you really believe about God?

After considering your answers to your beliefs about God above, write in 2-3 sentences the narrative that you have about God and how he feels about you and views you.

Write in 2-3 sentences the narrative (the story that you believe about yourself and your experiences) that you brought to this group the first day you met regarding your sexual past.

What do you see when you line the two narratives up together? Does one feed into the other?

What needs to change about your narrative about God so that you can have a better narrative about yourself?

What is the invitation for you, something you can incorporate into your life or practice, so that you can start making steps toward adopting the new narrative about God?

DISCUSS *Each person share their answers to the above questions.*

What did you realize about how you view your story, God, and how you believe that He views you?

Make no mistake. God is patient and loving and kind. He is not rude and pushy, and not easily irritated. He keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil, always trusts and always has hope that perseveres. The voice of God will be pure, kind, peaceable, gentle, never harsh, never sarcastic, full of mercy, always inviting you to come to Him. Why do people doubt God's love? Because they have never experienced this kind of love on earth.

REFLECT *Think about one of the three experiences from your sexual past that you reflected upon last week. After considering a true and Biblical narrative about God, think about what God thinks about you now, even though you experienced what you did. Take a moment to really ponder this. Perhaps it would be helpful to you to imagine Jesus' face looking at you now. What does His face look like? What would He say to you that He desperately wants you to know? (If Jesus's face or words that you imagine don't match the paragraph about God being patient and kind, something is off!)*

SHARE Each person share with the group what their experience was with the last exercise and questions that followed.

MOVING TOWARD FORGIVENESS

The next step in the healing journey is understanding and believing that God is a God who forgives. Your past story will be a story where you can see God in it because it will no longer be a story of shame, but a story of redemption and forgiveness, healing and restoration! That is something to be excited about, to be proud of. You can have a past that you don't look at in shame, but look at with your head held high because your God is THAT big and THAT loving.

You will do the forgiveness process on your own, but first it is important to understand why forgiveness is possible: *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8). This means, in his abundant love for each of us, he sent Christ to die for us, so we would be forgiven and saved. God never intended for you to get it all right. In fact, He knew you wouldn't get it right. Perfection is not a requirement. You weren't forgiven based on getting things right. You are forgiven based on Christ alone.

All that is required of you is confession and repentance. It is helpful to take an inventory of your sexual history so that you have an understanding and full grasp of what it is that you are confessing. You will do this as your homework for this week. After you write your inventory, you will use that as the foundation for your confession to God. Know that *"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). This is the crazy part: *"Their sin and lawless acts I will remember no more"* (Hebrews 10:17). It doesn't say that he will *forget* your sin. It says that He will *remember no more*. God is not a forgetful God; let's give Him more credit than that. But if you confess your sin to Him, He will choose to remember it no more.

If God forgives you, then you can have the freedom to be able to forgive yourself: *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death"* (Romans 8:1-2). That means you no longer need to have self-condemnation. He has set you free.

HOMEWORK In your devotional time, read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, which you can find on the next page. After reading it, replace each "love" with "God." You may find it helpful to cross things out and write and reflect in the space around the verses.

1 Corinthians 13

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. **7** Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

How does this change the way you view God?

How does this change the way that you believe God views you?

For your homework, you will also be taking an inventory of your sexual past. Before doing that, read Psalm 32:3-5 as an invitation and as an encouragement not to keep your past in hiding anymore:

“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:3-5).

Notice that the next blank page is divided into sections of ages: 0-12, 13-17, 18+. Write a word or phrase that represents any intimate or sexual experience that you have had at any level underneath the appropriate age heading. This can include any use of pornography. The word you write might be a person’s name or maybe a place. Any word or phrase that helps you identify and name the incident. Just write them as they come, it doesn’t necessarily have to be chronological.

0-12

13-17

18+

After you have finished, take a deep breath. You have just done hard work. You might want to review the basis and explanation of why it is that God forgives by reading the paragraphs and verses above from the group time. Then, confess it all to God in whatever way of prayer that is most comfortable for you. A sample prayer follows, but feel free to adapt it as you need.

“Jesus, I ask your Holy Spirit to help me now remember, confess, and renounce my sexual sins. [Pause. Listen. Remember. Confess and renounce.] Lord Jesus, I ask your forgiveness for every act of sexual sin. You promised that if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). I ask you to cleanse me of my sexual sins now; cleanse my body, my soul, and my spirit, cleanse my heart and mind and will, cleanse my sexuality. Thank you for forgiving me and cleansing me. I receive your forgiveness and cleansing. I renounce every claim I have given Satan to my life or sexuality through my sexual sins. Those claims are now broken by the cross and blood of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:13–15)” (<https://wildatheart.org/prayer/prayer-sexual-healing>).

You might not feel any different after doing this. Or you might feel radically different. How you feel right now in this moment isn't the important part. What is important is that you have taken a step of obedience by confessing your sins to God and receiving His forgiveness. Remember, your sins are forgiven when you acknowledge them before God.

After you do this, on the next page, write a letter to yourself at the age where you are most struggling to forgive yourself. If, for example, you are particularly struggling with the things you did at age 16, you could write a letter to the 16-year-old you, from the current you, telling her/him what you wish you knew, and telling her/him that you forgive her/him.

Along with forgiving yourself, it is also important to forgive other people who have been involved in your sexual past. Forgiveness is a choice that you get to make. While it may be hard, especially if someone has hurt or harmed you, it will be incredibly freeing to release that person to God and His judgment. You may wish to use the following prayer as a steppingstone toward forgiving yourself and your forgiveness of others.

“Lord Jesus, I thank you for offering me total and complete forgiveness. I receive that forgiveness now. I choose to forgive myself for all of my sexual wrongdoing. I also choose to forgive those who have harmed me sexually. [Be specific here; name those people and forgive them.] I release them to you, Jesus. I release all my anger and judgment toward them. The Cross is enough. Come, Lord Jesus, into the pain they caused me, and heal me with your love” (<https://wildatheart.org/prayer/prayer-sexual-healing>).



WEEK 4

God Can Use Your
Wilderness Story for
His Glory

One person: pray that the Holy Spirit would work to show people what they need to see in order to experience healing and freedom in Christ.

Each person can take turns answering the following questions about their homework, writing their sexual inventory, their confession and forgiveness experience, and their personal letter:

- How was your experience of writing your sexual history as an inventory?
- In an effort toward vulnerability, is there anything else that you feel you need to share with the group?
- What impact did confessing all your sins to God have on you?
- How was forgiving yourself and others?
- If you are interested in doing so, you can read part of the letter you wrote to yourself. How did writing this letter affect you?

DISCUSS *When you think of the wilderness, what comes to mind?*

READ *the following.*

1. God leads people *to* the wilderness.

Often, we are so focused on getting *out* of the wilderness that we miss out on what God has for us *in* the wilderness. There are many ways you have likely tried to get out of the wilderness of your sexual past. Avoiding, forgetting, pretending like it didn't happen, not being open about it with others, numbing, the list can go on...

Have you ever considered that in the Bible, God actually leads people *to* the wilderness? The Israelites (Ex. 15:22-18:27), Elijah (1 Kings 19), David (1 Sam. 23:14-29), Jacob (Gen 32:22-31), even Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11). Now, why would He do that? Because He wanted them, and wants you, to experience Him and come to know Him in deeper ways through the time spent in the wilderness. Not only does God lead people *to* the wilderness, but He also *provides* for them *in* the wilderness. For the Israelites, He gave manna, water out of rocks, and a lifetime supply of quail. For Elijah, He provided meat and bread through ravens, and for David, safety.

2. God reveals Himself to people in the wilderness.

The wilderness is the place where God tends to show up. Maybe it's because you are at the end of your rope, so you are more desperate for Him. Maybe it's because there are less distractions there, so you are able to actually hear Him. Whatever the reason, there is a *with-ness* of God in the wilderness. Psalm 23:4 says that even though you may walk through the darkest valley, He is *with you*.

When Hagar ran away (into the wilderness both literally and figuratively), it is there that God revealed Himself to her as the one who sees (Gen. 16:13). It was in the wilderness that God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 6:3).

3. The wilderness is only for a season.

God doesn't lead you to the wilderness and just dump you there. He allows you to stay for as long as is needed for His purpose in you to be accomplished.

He allowed the Israelites to stay long enough so that they could become a nation, receive the law, have to depend on God's provision and witness miracles of manna, water-in-rocks, quail, and the parting of the Red Sea. He used their wilderness time to develop a system of elders and leadership. He dealt with sin in serious ways. What should have been a 13-day journey to the promised land took 40 years to accomplish His purposes for His glory and their sanctification. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness is what actually prepared Him for His ministry.

DISCUSS *Do you have any responses or reactions to the readings about the wilderness?*

REFLECT *Take a few minutes to answer the following questions:*

Is it possible that you have been so focused on getting *out* of the wilderness that you haven't considered the possibility that God led you *to* the wilderness? How or why?

How has God provided for you in the wilderness of your sexual past?

How has God revealed himself to you in the wilderness, perhaps even in ways you didn't notice before?

How might God have intended your wilderness to be used for your sanctification (your growing in holiness and being set apart from the world)?

How might God intend your wilderness to be used for His glory? What ministry could your wilderness prepare you for?

DISCUSS Take turns answering each of the above questions.

LISTEN to Beautiful Eulogy's song, "Sovereign," together as a group. The lyrics are below for you to better hear what is being said. Have a pen ready, and mark any lines that impact you, perhaps because they surprised you, moved you, made you question, etc.

Sovereign (Beautiful Eulogy)

You are who You are
And You will never fail to be who You are
Always on time, always in control
Every knee should bow, you are Lord of all

Sovereign, sovereign

From the skies to the seas and everything that lies in between
Everything that exists in the universe is dispersed by His decree
He's infinitely supreme and orchestrates all things
The One who sits in the Heavens and laughs and does whatever He pleases
Who governs the governments, and establishes kings
The Prince of Peace who proceeds over prophets, presidents, and priests
Who guides the plans of man, but lets that man choose freely
While simultaneously exercising divine sovereignty
Who intervenes on the will of man and causes for man to believe
Who appeases the wrath of God that brings peace to His enemies
The Lord over lords and the King over all earthly kings
The pervasive power of God displayed through His mighty deeds

The God of our destiny, the Author and Finisher of faith
With the power to persuade man, and sway souls for God's sake
The ultimate source of authority who rules with mercy and grace
But man reduces this attribute to foolish debate

You are who You are
And You will never fail to be who You are
Always on time, always in control
Every knee should bow, you are Lord of all

Sovereign, sovereign
Uh, Who does majesty, glory, and power belong to?
Who is righteous in all His ways and never wrong?
Who is God? Sovereign
Who is awesome?
Who do all men depend on for life and breath?
The author of life and death
The often overlooked but still He's all-seeing, all-knowing
Holding all creation in its place, the God of wrath and grace
The one who could crush every idol man would rather chase
And leads men to the narrow gate, through these crooked paths we navigate
This world exists cause You've commanded it
So is Your hand in it?
Or have you handed it over to man and turned away and abandoned it?
Did you try your best and then left man to handle the rest?
Will your plans find success or should we second guess
When world leaders are deceivers, eager to puff their chests?
Is life a game of chess? Do you have these kings in check?
With so much evil how can we believe you're good?
But I finally understood when I saw that man nailed to wood.

DISCUSS *How did the song lyrics impact you in relations to your story?*

Spend the last few minutes reflecting on what God has done in the lives of the others in your group. Write each person's name and write a sentence or two about how you have seen them grow or change over the past four weeks. You could also write how you see God using their story for His glory and His purposes now or in the future. Be specific. This will be a great encouragement to them.

SHARE *The group can now take turns encouraging one person at a time.*

IN CLOSING . . .

We learn by reflecting on experience, not just by experience. You have had experiences that have impacted you. These past four weeks have given you opportunities to reflect on some of those experiences with others who are safe and can relate to you. The invitation for you moving forward is to continue to reflect on your experiences, to tell your story to others who are safe, to change your narrative (your understanding of your story), and to see how you can partner with God in using your story for a bigger purpose.

You have done hard work, and it is work that is holy and sanctifying, forming you more into who Christ is and into who He wants you to be: His daughter or son who knows they are loved, valued, worth dying for, forgiven, set free, and empowered to bring healing and freedom to others who have their own journeys that need to be walked through.

“That is why I believe that faithfully telling and listening to our stories is one of the single most important things we can do as followers of Jesus. Storytelling inevitably engages our memories — both the speakers’ and the hearers’ — and so opens the door to a different future” (Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, page 81).

WHAT NOW?

Continue your journey toward healing and freedom, intentionally choosing the path of vulnerability with your story. Know that your vulnerability will invite others to be vulnerable, which will be the first steps of their own healing journey. Remember the wilderness and trust God in the process with your story. Consider how you could partner with God to bring healing to others, starting with facilitating a group with people who need it. Does the leadership of your ministry need to hear that this is an area of struggle for many people? *Perhaps you could be involved in casting vision for others to experience freedom in Christ.*

If you feel that this time has opened up hurts and memories that you feel unable to process alone or with a group like this, perhaps you could consider talking with a counselor who could help you.

FINAL WORDS

“May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).

Bibliography

Thomson, Curt. *Anatomy of the Soul: surprising connections between neuroscience and spiritual practices that can transform your life and relationships*. Tyndale Momentum, 2015.

Wilson, Barbara. *The Invisible Bond: how to break free from your sexual past*. Multnomah, 2010.

Recommended Reading

Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices that can Transform Your Life and Relationships, Curt Thompson

The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe about Ourselves, Curt Thompson

The Invisible Bond: How to Break Free from Your Sexual Past, Barbara Wilson

Kiss Me Again: Restoring Lost Intimacy in Marriage, Barbara Wilson

Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, Brené Brown

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, Brené Brown

The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World, Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu