

INTRODUCTION

He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.

Psalm 147:3

My imagination has been captivated by the Japanese art of kintsugi ever since I heard about it. Kintsugi is the practice of mending broken pottery with gold-dusted lacquer, which results in a beautiful piece of pottery. Makoto Fujimura, a contemporary artist, relates the kintsugi art of mending to our faith journeys. The Western world, he says, pursues perfection. We want to fix things, make them look as if they'd never been broken. But Japanese aesthetics values the fractures and fissures that remain—even going so far in the mending process as to accentuate them.¹ I've never thought of a broken vessel as beautiful before—not until I saw it represented through kintsugi.

My experience with sex has been bittersweet—some of it good, some of it okay, and some of it painful. I've witnessed the goodness of sex when stewarded faithfully and the destructive nature of it when wielded selfishly. I've been wounded by it, and I have wounded others with it. I have seen and experienced its power to love, care, and restore as well as its power to steal, kill, and destroy.

I am a broken vessel that needs to be mended.

Sex is one of God's good gifts, and yet sin—ours and others'—has tainted our perspective and experiences of it, which means we need to be mended. This is a book for the sexually broken. And that is *all* of us! We all have ways in which our sexuality is fractured—wheth-

er the fractures are emotional, physical, relational, or they are in our understanding and application of the truth of God's Word. This book is for those who weren't virgins when they married and those who were. Those who are happily single and those who are deeply lonely and long to be married. Those who have not always been faithful to their husbands and those who have. Those who have never seen pornography and those for whom it seems a constant struggle. Those who lacked the security and care of parents in their formative years and those whose childhood was idyllic with loving, attentive parents. Those who are happily married to their spouse and those who feel unseen, ignored or unloved by their spouse. Those who have been married but now feel the sting of loss through death or divorce. Those who love and enjoy God's good gift of sex and those who do not.

Because of the curse of sin, we are all cracked vessels in need of the Father's skillful mending. So as we begin this journey, I would like to ask you to be open-minded and curious about what God may have for you. Your story may not be one of struggle or hurt or even confusion around sex and sexuality, but maybe God wants to give you a more robust, biblical perspective of sex. Or perhaps he wants to help you understand how to talk about sex with others in ways that don't increase their fractures and fissures. Or maybe your story is deeply painful and you're not sure this is a journey you're ready to take, but maybe God is gently leading you to take the next step toward freedom. Maybe he wants to mend parental wounds that have defined how you view yourself and led you to seek comfort in pornography or masturbation. Maybe he wants to begin mending the cracks from years of abuse. Or maybe he wants to take you through another phase of the mending process so that you are more equipped to love and lead others on the path of healing.

Wherever you are in the process, whatever your story, you need to be mended.

And the good news is that God is in the mending business. This is a journey of mending. Not of us trying to fix ourselves or clean ourselves

up. It is a journey of us bringing the broken pieces—heart, mind, body, and soul—to the Master Potter and allowing him to put us back together in a way that is truly breathtaking, in a way that shouts of his glorious craftsmanship and that makes all of creation sing his praises. What if the jagged edges, the scars, and the cracks point to God and bring him glory in a way that wouldn't happen without their existence?

It's not easy to view our brokenness, whether through our own sinful choices or the wounds others have inflicted on us, as having the potential to be beautiful. We want to fix, hide, or cover over our fractures and fissures—presenting ourselves to the world as if we were never broken. But God, in his goodness, wants to mend and display them as evidence of his grace and kindness toward us (Ephesians 4:2-7). As Fujimura says, even Christ's wounds are “still with him in post-resurrection glory, and, therefore, we can assume that all we go through—even the fractures we go through—remain in some way to glorify...”²

However, like all worthwhile endeavors, mending is a slow process.

It's what Fujimura calls slow art. It happens over time, with great intentionality and attention to detail. Layer by layer, piece by piece, the artist reveals his masterpiece. It is good work. It is holy work! And it is work that God will continue in you throughout your entire life, until one day the full picture comes into view. And what the Lord has created will be breathtakingly beautiful.

Come to him and be mended.

ONE WOMAN'S STORY

The Fracture of Rejection

I grew up with a biblical understanding of sex and would even say I had a healthy view of sex prior to marriage. However, just weeks into our marriage, I quickly realized that sexual intimacy for us was not at all what I expected it to be.

We initially struggled because of physical pain that I experienced, which we later found out was due to ovarian cysts and probable endometriosis. The crazy part was, despite my pain, I still wanted sex more often than my husband did. We were only a couple months into our marriage, and days would go by without mention of sex, and sometimes weeks would pass without even attempting intimacy. Of all the challenging things I felt prepared for heading into marriage, this was certainly not one of them!

I was deeply hurt by my husband's lack of pursuit towards me physically. The less he pursued, the more I craved emotional and physical affirmation from him. And then sometimes, I just wanted sex—but he did not. I not only felt rejected many times over, but this also created insecurities for me and even made me question my femininity as I felt like I was “the guy” in our relationship. It felt like my sex drive and desire to connect with him physically were a nuisance and an inconvenience rather than a delight and joy. I believed sex was supposed to bring strength to our marriage and help build intimacy, but it seemed like all it did was tear us apart. It was so difficult for us that a couple years into marriage I thought, “it would be better if sex just didn't exist.”

A wise couple that we met with told us that our sex life should be unique to us and we couldn't compare it to anyone else's. I wrestled with this for a long time because as much as I knew that they had spoken truth to us, all I could do was compare myself to everyone else. My thoughts spiraled constantly: “Why do I have to have a high sex drive?” “He should be excited to have a wife interested in sex, but instead he just doesn't care.” “I'm trying to

be physically available for him, but it doesn't seem to mean anything to him."

This was the battle for years before I finally saw what God had been trying to expose in me the whole time. I realized that I had started believing that I deserved sex—along with all the things I thought it could give me—since it was in the context of marriage. I wasn't trusting in Jesus to meet my needs. I had also assumed that to love my husband well obviously meant having sex with him frequently. I didn't actually consider the fact that having sex might not be the most loving thing in every situation. In fact, not having sex with him, while still affirming who he was as a man, was the most loving and affirming thing that I could do for him.

We are over four years into this struggle, and sex is still not easy for us. We would both agree that I typically want sex more often than he does, but we have learned to be vulnerable with each other and to have honest conversations. The rejection I initially felt from my husband was legitimately painful and still stings sometimes, but God used it to expose my own sin and bring tremendous healing for us both in ways we didn't know we needed.

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FACING OUR FRACTURES

Evil hates the beauty of sex, and because it cannot abolish its existence, it works to corrupt its essence.

Jay Stringer, *Unwanted*

How do you begin a book on sex—a topic that is deeply personal and often loaded with confusion, frustration, tension, guilt, shame, fear, and pain? Engaging the topic of sex is not for the faint-hearted, especially in the church. It requires vulnerability and courage. So this is a journey we will not take lightly, but it is a journey worth taking. As we allow Jesus to reveal the fractured parts of our sexual stories, he will usher in the healing, freedom, and hope that can only be found in him. I know this to be true because I have seen him do this in my life and in the lives of many others.

My first introduction to sex was around nine or ten years old when I discovered a family member's *Playboy* magazines in plain view in the bathroom. Those images began to shape how I thought about myself as a woman, about sex, and about men. It was at that same age and in that same family member's house that I began viewing adult films late at night after everyone went to bed and experimenting with masturbation and penetration. Culture was my teacher; it disciplined me on what it was to be a woman, what sex was, and how to engage it. And as a result, my understanding and experience of sex was broken and tainted by sin.

Sex is good, but our relationship with it is often complicated. Even if you have not experienced any type of sexual trauma and you firmly believe God is good and gives good gifts, sometimes it can still be hard to believe that sex is a good gift from God. The problem for many of us is that our stories have shaped how we view and experience sex. So before we go any further, I want to ask you to take some time to reflect on your story. What is your first memory of becoming aware of your body and your sexuality? When were you first introduced to sex or sexual content? Did your parents discuss sex with you as a young woman or did they leave you to discover it on your own? How did they discuss it with you? These early foundations often play an integral and ongoing role in our sexuality as adults.

I've walked alongside women for many years—ten years of that in a formal ministry setting. What I have discovered is that we are all sexually broken and in need of hope and healing. In the last ten years, I have seen pornography, same-sex attraction and same-sex experiences, masturbation, abuse, the pressure to send nude pictures, and gender confusion in young girls as early as elementary school. The college-aged women I have worked with have struggled with pornography, masturbation, same-sex attraction, sexual assault, pre-marital sex, and abortions. The single women I've walked alongside have dealt with loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted, masturbation as a form of dealing with unmet desires for sex, pornography, fears of never having sex, wondering how far is too far, and wrestling with sexual temptation well into their adult years. I've talked with married women who were abused when they were younger and struggle to be intimate with their husbands, those who were taught that sex is dirty and can't bring themselves to have sex after they're married, women who are ambivalent and disinterested in sex, those who are overwhelmed and frustrated with their husband's physical desire, and also with women who wish their husbands would pursue and initiate sex with them. I've walked alongside women who have had affairs and women whose husbands had affairs; women who have issues with pornography and women whose husbands have issues with pornography. I've counseled

women who indulged their husband's sexual fantasies to invite others into their sex life—whether through pornography or in real life. I've talked with women who were raised in the church, have a biblical view of sex, enjoy a relatively normal sex life with their husbands, and yet still experience moderate tension within their marriage from time to time over frequency of sex and availability to their husbands.

The point is that we are all in need of God's mending in our lives. Some of you understand that all too well. Whether you grapple with the shame of a past abortion, pre-marital sex, a season of promiscuity, or an addiction to pornography, there is hope and healing to be found in Christ. Some of you, however, may feel like you don't have any issues in this area that need addressing. You may have been a virgin when you married your husband and have a satisfying sex life. But, remember, every aspect of creation has been fractured and tainted by sin, including sex. So whether sin and brokenness present themselves as underlying negative thoughts, selfishness, pride, self-righteousness, physical challenges, misunderstanding or misapplication of God's Word, or in a variety of other ways, be open to what God has for you as well.

We can't go much further without addressing the topic of abuse and sexual assault. Most research states that one in three women and one in four men have experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime—mostly at the hands of those they knew and trusted, people who were supposed to love and protect them.¹ Others have experienced the brutality of sexual assault whether by a stranger or someone they knew. And abuse within the church is an all too common reality for both men and women. Far too many have experienced abuse by respected members or pastoral staff in their churches only to be met with silence, unbelief, or to have the church turn a blind eye to their requests for help. Others have been silenced, ignored, or encouraged to forgive their abusers when discussing it with pastors, small groups, or other church staff.

If sexual abuse in any form is part of your story, you need to know that the abuse was not your fault! God hates abuse; he is angry and grieves over your suffering. And he will ultimately see to it that justice is done. I acknowledge that engaging this topic will be hard and may

trigger painful memories, fear, and trauma responses. There may be times you need to put the book down and walk away. If you are reading it alone, it may be good to have someone you can talk to after you read. A counselor, trusted friend, or mentor may be helpful as you process. You may even find that you are not ready to read this book at all, and that is okay. The journey of healing and freedom in Christ is incremental and lifelong—you do not have to tackle it all at once.

Regardless of where you find yourself, what your experience or struggle is, the goal of this study is to help us acknowledge the ways our understanding and experience of sex are fractured and to reframe our understanding around God's Word in a way that will bring healing and freedom in this area of our lives.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

While the church is often quiet regarding sex, the Bible doesn't shy away from it at all—in both its glory and its brokenness. The pages of Scripture are filled with adultery, promiscuity, sexual assault, incest, manipulation, and both men and women leveraging their sexual power to dominate or diminish the worth of another. While all of that is on full display within the stories of God's people, the church's messages seem to primarily circle around a few key ideas:

"If you're a single woman, don't have sex."

"If you're a married woman, sex is your marital duty and give it generously."

"Good girls don't."

"Guard your heart."

"Dress modestly so you don't cause your brother to stumble."

"Guys, stop looking at porn."

"Men desire sex, but women don't."

There may be measures of truth in these messages, but they are woefully inadequate to disciple believers toward having a biblical understanding of God's gift of sex and helping them faithfully steward their sexuality in our highly sexualized culture. When porn and

masturbation are addressed solely as a men's struggle, women who are also struggling with the same thing feel further isolated, ashamed, and alone. When "good girls don't" is the primary message, women who remain virgins until they are married struggle with making the transition from "off-limits" to "engage and enjoy." What happens for the young woman who has been taught her whole life that waiting for marriage guarantees she will have a wonderful, fulfilling sex life only to find out that sex for her is incredibly painful and difficult to enjoy? Or that her husband has physical challenges that make sex difficult or lackluster? How do our messages to young girls contribute to them seeing sex as something dirty and perverted to be guarded against, rather than a good, God-given desire to experience within its proper context? If the only vision given to single women is "don't have sex," then what are they to think about and do with their legitimate desires for intimate connection?

The church's silence and inadequate messages have led to generations of men and women who are not only in bondage to sin, shame, and suffering, but they also lack any spiritual power that paints a more compelling vision than that of the culture. Where the church has been silent and created a leadership gap, the culture has stepped in to fill the void. Messages from the culture are loud, clear, and frequent:

"Sex is good."

"Sex is to be desired and enjoyed."

"Sex shouldn't have boundaries."

"Sex isn't special enough to save it for marriage."

"Sex is a right."

"Losing your virginity is a badge of honor."

Our culture teaches us that sexual pleasure is your right and that you are entitled to pursue it in any way you choose, unhindered by religious rules and old-fashioned belief systems. In our sex-saturated society, virginity is an oddity; it is something to be lost, not cherished. If you believe in any governing standard where sex and sexuality are concerned, you risk being labeled a bigot, a hate-monger, or a prude. Our society has placed so much emphasis on self-discovery through

sexual expression, in fact, that it has become synonymous with a person's very identity.

But at the same time, culture treats sex as if it is not special. It's not seen as something to be reserved or preserved or protected. Sex is a commodity—it's been devalued and removed from the context that actually makes it special. It can be had anywhere, anytime, and with anyone you please. Sexual partners are a dime a dozen. Sex is cheap, fun entertainment. No commitment required. No strings attached. It is simply no big deal.

The messages from both the church and the culture that influence our beliefs and understanding about sex make it a hard topic to navigate faithfully. I know this to be true in my own life. Most of what I learned about sex I learned through culture and peers. The only message I remember hearing from the church or other believers was "sex is for marriage." But as a young girl navigating an increasingly sexualized world and the onslaught of teenage hormones, that single message wasn't substantive enough to help me resist when temptation knocked at my door.

SEXUAL SIN IS NOT JUST A MEN'S ISSUE

For many years, sexual sin has been perceived predominantly as a men's issue, especially within the church. Men are often challenged about the topics of fidelity, lust, pornography, and the like—while women have long flown under the radar, being challenged by the church mostly on the issue of modesty. Even in the entertainment industry, men are often portrayed as sexual aggressors or perverts—the ones who can't withstand temptation, though that trend is changing. As a result, many women have a faulty theology of sex and sexuality.

This is problematic because women are also sexual beings. You cannot deny or repress it. To do so would be to deny how God made you. While that may look different according to each woman, sexuality is part of your God-given design. You were created as a woman. You are genetically coded as a female, which includes your reproductive

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systems, your hormonal makeup, your anatomy, and even your brain. Neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine states in her book *The Female Brain* that while ninety-nine percent of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same, the one percent variation between the sexes influences every single cell in your body. It affects everything from the nerves that register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions.² That means you think, feel, understand, and process situations as a woman.

But we must not confuse femininity (being a woman) with how we express or live out our femininity. There are many legitimate expressions of womanhood. Some women may love to cook, while others may struggle to boil water. Some may enjoy the latest fashions, and others may stay on top of the latest sports stats. Some women find enjoyment in a good play or the ballet, while others prefer to go hunting. The point is that what you do or do not do, what you like or do not like, or how you dress or style your hair does not make you more or less of a woman. Whether you are more athletic or more academic—more likely to design a skyscraper, a dress, or a weekly schedule for your family—you are inherently, distinctly female.

Your feminine sexuality encompasses your genetic makeup and distinctiveness as a woman, as well as how you express yourself as one. It fuels both who you are naturally and how you function in the world around you. Feminine sexuality is powerful. It has the potential to bring life and strength to others; it also has the power to manipulate, control, and destroy. Therefore, we must gain an awareness of who we are as sexual beings and learn how to steward our sexuality in a way that honors God and others.

In addition, because the church often only addresses men as having sexual desire to manage, many women wrestle with their own desires—sometimes even wondering if there is something wrong with them because they *do* desire sex. And, when a woman with sexual energy and desire marries a man who does not have the kind of sexual drive she grew up hearing the church discuss, it compounds her shame, iso-

lation, and feelings of rejection. But contrary to what you may or may not have been taught, women do have sexual energy and desires.

Sexual desire is designed by God; it is good and right. He created your body to sense and respond to pleasure. In fact, there are aspects of your feminine body that serve no purpose other than pleasure. If you are a woman who has sexual energy and desire, there is not something *wrong* with you. Some women have more, some have less, and some have none at all. And not every man is consumed by sexual desire. Desire isn't necessarily sinful, but it is complicated.

Finally, we have to learn how to engage our pain and suffering regarding sex and sexuality. I've heard author and therapist Jay Stringer say many times, "If you do not transform your pain, you will transmit it. Always someone else has to suffer because you don't know how to."³ Stewarding our sexuality is a discipleship issue for women, which means it is vital that we learn how to engage this topic, both individually and corporately, with biblical truth, vulnerability, courage, compassion, and empathy.

Whatever season you are in, whatever challenge you are navigating, whatever brokenness and pain you are carrying, I want to acknowledge the courage it takes to read a book like this. Engaging our sin, shame, wounds, brokenness, and suffering is good, but hard work. Working through this study may be disruptive. Take it slow. Give yourself breaks. Read small sections each day, rather than tackling a whole chapter in one day. Allow yourself time to process and address parts of your story you've never engaged before. Be curious and willing to examine parts of your story you may even feel have already been resolved. Use the questions for reflection as tools to guide you in self-reflection, but don't feel tied to them. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you as he reveals the barriers and wounds where he longs to bring freedom and healing.

GOSPEL HOPE

As believers, our identity in Christ is secure. This gives us courage to confront the brokenness and sin in our lives. The Bible is clear that we are sinners, saints, and sufferers, so throughout this study, our hope will be to point you to the right gospel-medicine, whether you are addressing your sin or your suffering.

Without the gospel, without the deep and abiding truth of Scripture, and without the power of the Holy Spirit, there is no hope for change. We need a vision of redeemed sex and sexuality. The truth of Scripture is that sex was God's idea. He created it, and therefore, it is good. As a part of his good creation, he is at work even now redeeming and restoring it. He is busy healing the hurt and pain you suffered at the hands of another. He desires to free you from the bondage of sexual sin. He longs to reveal his goodness and faithfulness to you in your season of singleness. He delights when you take pleasure in his good gift of sex with your husband. He longs to bring you rest, peace, and clarity in your confusion over sexual identity. He wants to help you see sex with your husband as a gift and not a chore. God is ready to speak his truth into this area of our lives.

The hope and encouragement of the gospel in your suffering is this: God took on flesh so that he could identify with you in your suffering. He who created the world, subjected himself to the brokenness of the world. He experienced trauma, abuse, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, grief, loss, and pain. He is not callous or oblivious to your suffering, but he is with you and grieves alongside you. He has promised that a day is coming when all suffering will cease. A day when there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain. A day when everything broken will be made new. And we will dwell with him forever and ever.

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's

curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved.

—Romans 8:18-24a NLT

And the hope and encouragement of the gospel in your struggle with sin is this: regardless of who you are, what you have done, what you struggle with, or whether you tend toward self-righteousness or self-indulgence, God made a provision for your sin through Jesus. Jesus, though fully God, humbled himself by taking on human flesh, becoming fully man. He faced every temptation common to man, and yet he did not sin. Because he was also fully man, he was able to offer himself as a perfect, living, and holy sacrifice on our behalf. On the cross, Jesus took on all of our sins, and as a result, when we look to him with faith and in repentance, God gives us Jesus' righteous standing. Then God raised Jesus from the dead as proof that he had conquered sin and death. God then sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in and among us as proof of our adoption into the family of God. His Spirit is at work in us even now, conforming us to the image and likeness of Christ. He will continue this good work in us until Jesus returns and ushers in his new kingdom, at which time sin, death, and suffering will be conquered once and for all.

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he

also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:31–39 NLT

We have a Savior who identifies with us in our humanity and has provided for us in both our sin and our suffering. This is the foundation of our hope. There is no life God cannot redeem. There is no pain he cannot heal. There is no soul he cannot comfort. The Lord can do miraculous work in our lives. While you may still struggle with sin, temptation, suffering, and pain, there is hope for significant healing, freedom, and life change. And one day, he will bring you finally and fully into his eternal joy, perfect and complete.

Questions for Reflection

1. The messages about sex from both the church and the culture have left their mark on us. How have you been impacted by these messages? Which ones have caused the most damage to your view of sex and sexuality?
2. Each season has its unique challenges in regards to sex and sexuality. Where are you currently struggling and how would you want to see God's mending?
3. Can you identify any gaps in how you understand and interpret the biblical view of sex and sexuality and areas where you need more clarity? What questions do you have about stewarding your sexuality in your particular season of life?
4. What's your biggest fear or concern as you begin this study?

ONE WOMAN'S STORY

The Fracture of Abortion

I grew up in a loving home. However, the very conservative culture left me with a distorted view of sex. It was ingrained in me that sex was bad. So with my first boyfriend, I put the brakes on any time we were close to having sex. Things changed in my mid-20's when my relationship with my college boyfriend ended. I became so jealous of his interactions with other women that I chose to pursue him sexually. We would secretly meet up, have sex, and then go back to our "Christian" way of living. I was self-serving, manipulative, and deceitful.

Eventually, sex and my deceitfulness caught up to me—I became pregnant. In our world, "ideal" Christians didn't live this way, so there was no way I could confess to anyone what we had done. My moral failure caused pride-fueled shame to set in quickly, and I was willing to go to any length to hide my sin from others.

I went to the abortion clinic for the first time by myself. My boyfriend was supportive but never went with me to any of the appointments. I saw my six-week-old baby on the ultrasound, but quickly shut down any emotion that could have been there. The doctor gave me two options: keep the baby, or schedule another appointment to come back and get a pill to terminate the pregnancy. We chose to terminate the pregnancy.

I ended up marrying that boyfriend, and we struggled in our marriage from the onset. I went from wanting to have sex before we were married to not wanting to have sex after we were married. I wanted to feel loved and cared for, but I didn't want to do the work to pursue my husband the way he needed it. Looking back, the shame and trauma from my abortion were really affecting my brain and body, but I had no idea what to do with that, so I continued to hide, both in my marriage and in other relationships. It was better for me to appear that I had it all together as a teacher,

friend, daughter, and wife, than to ever let someone know what I was really like on the inside. How could someone ever love me knowing what I had done? Over the next few years, I gave birth to two healthy, beautiful children, but there was another child that I kept hidden from even my own heart and mind.

A few years into our marriage my husband had an affair, and we both hit rock bottom. We left the toxic environment of our current church, began to attend a healthy church, and started the incredibly messy process of healing, both personally and as a couple. Even with years of professional counseling, I never once mentioned my abortion.

However, God was not done with me. While attending a women's conference at my church, I heard a woman who had an abortion share her life-change story. What? I didn't think people talked about abortions publically. But hearing that woman's bravery and freedom in her story made me think it was finally time to tell mine.

Two days later, I walked into my office at work and told a close friend about my abortion. I had had no idea how much this long-kept secret had been affecting me. I experienced overwhelming sadness, loss of breath, endless tears, but a relief in finally being fully known. And so began the process of healing that includes counseling, mentorship, and biblical community.

As I processed my abortion with my counselor, I felt the urge to go back to the abortion clinic to fully own my experience and get a copy of my file. I desperately wanted to know the date. I could not remember how old I was or even the time of year. My memories of this time in my life were blocked. I wanted closure, and I thought going back to the clinic and getting the date would give me what I needed.

God allowed some time to pass before I went to the clinic. During that time, I continued to struggle with hanging on to what I had done. It was as if I believed that this sin was just too much for God to handle. I struggled for weeks and couldn't let go.

I could not receive his forgiveness. However, in the midst of this struggle, I had a candid conversation with a friend who graciously asked me if my pride was keeping me from allowing God to forgive me. I still remember where I was standing in my driveway outside my home and literally feeling a weight lifted off my shoulders. That was the truth I needed to hear—the missing piece. I got off the phone and the long-term suffering I had experienced from carrying the weight of this sin on my own was lifted. Who am I to think that I know more than God? The weight of not allowing God to forgive me was far more damaging than the sin itself.

Although I still wanted to return to the clinic, my motivation had changed from shame-filled heaviness to genuine curiosity. I did return and was able to re-enter that space. But this time was different. I was going to the clinic fully-known and not in secret.

Honestly, I was not prepared for the conflicting emotions I experienced that day: from the chaos of the angry, yelling protestors to the packed waiting room where the phone was ringing off the hook. As I sat in the waiting room, something unexpected happened to me. My eyes filled with tears as I looked at all of those women and thought of their stories. Why were they there? Was this their first time? Were they scared or being forced to do this? Were they feeling the same sense of shame and guilt I felt over ten years ago? What did they think of the people outside of this building who were trying to get them not to have an abortion? What about the receptionist or nurses? My heart was filled with empathy and compassion, both for myself and for these other women.

After waiting for about ten minutes, I was told that I would have to come back that afternoon to pick up my file. Sigh. Not the answer I was wanting. Later that day, I was told my file had been discarded. I never did get the answer I was going for, but I will never forget that day. It was an important next step in my owning my story. On a day when I should have felt shame, I felt peace. It was a day that created space for healing, redemption, and this

important truth—that Jesus came from a family full of shame. From David, a man after God’s own heart who committed murder and adultery, to Jesus’ mother Mary, who was shamed for having a child out of wedlock. But that same Jesus took my shame upon himself. God has never stopped loving me or my unborn child.

God continues to pursue me and is working to heal my heart. Some days are harder than others. My baby would be a teenager by now and I feel sad that he or she was never able to experience my love or know the love from my husband and children. But, that sweet baby is experiencing the love of my Savior, and so am I.