

Sexual Abuse

BEAUTY FOR ASHES



ROBERT W. KELLEMAN

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series

I simply love this booklet! There are many ways Christians may respond to the horror of sexual abuse: They may minimize it, telling sufferers to just get over it; or they may exaggerate it, sending sufferers on a lifelong and futile journey of introspection. Or they can point them to the good news that there is a Suffering Savior who loves, welcomes, completely understands, and restores victims. Bob Kelleman knows this good news and the Suffering Savior well. He knows also how to bring the brokenhearted into contact with the living Christ who loves and heals. What a wonderful help *Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes* is!

—**Elyse Fitzpatrick**, counselor with the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship

With biblical wisdom and pastoral sensitivity, Kelleman offers a redemptive vision and pathway in the aftermath of sexual abuse—first by exposing Satan’s attempt to destroy faith, hope, peace, and love through the wickedness of sexual abuse, then by showing how our Redeemer overcomes evil by his transforming grace. *Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes* is a great resource to help the church care for one another with the compassionate and powerful realities of the gospel.

—**Robert K. Cheong**, pastor of care, Sojourn Community Church

The path to healing from the damage of sexual abuse is murky and often lonely for those who walk it. Vistas that reveal progress are rare. Too often the spiritual advice and care victims receive ends up being simplistic or absent. Using an extended case study, Dr. Kelleman provides a realistic and hope-filled roadmap to guide pastors, loved ones, and victims as they explore the damage done by sexual abuse and the journey to renewed vitality. Like actual maps, this booklet may be small, but it contains depth rarely seen in Christian treatments of sexual abuse recovery.

—**Philip G. Monroe**, professor of counseling and psychology, Biblical Seminary; director of Global Trauma Recovery Institute

This booklet will transform heaps of sackcloth and ashes into rows of beautiful garments. Bob skillfully weaves together Tamar’s ancient agony with Ashley’s modern misery to produce a tapestry of suffering and sin ready to receive the precious threads of our Savior’s sympathy, support, and salvation.

—**David Murray**, author of *Christians Get Depressed Too*

The booklet you hold in your hand is a wonderfully gentle blend of the grace and truth found only in Jesus Christ. Whether you are the victim of sexual abuse or a loving friend who wants to minister God's hope to those who have had their hope stolen, you will find the biblical counsel here a great help and encouragement.

—**Paul Tauges**, pastor of Immanuel Bible Church; founder of the *Counseling One Another* blog

Dr. Kellemen's gospel insights are for both the sexually abused and the pastor. For the person who was abused, you will find a clear and caring path and will notice that you are already on it. This will give you hope. For the pastor, the scope of sexual abuse is such that you will be preaching on it, and this booklet opens the story of Tamar in such a way that your sermon series is ready to go with a gospel-centered foundation.

—**Ed Welch**, faculty member of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation; author of *Shame Interrupted*

If you have ever been a victim of sexual abuse, please read this vital booklet. You will experience so much care, so much compassion, so much Scripture, and so much of the good news of the gospel. If you are a pastor or counselor, please read it and learn how to extend that same care, compassion, Scripture, and gospel grace to others. Here is the gospel applied carefully and tenderly to real life.

—**Tim Challies**, pastor of Grace Fellowship Church; author of *The Next Story*

There is an epidemic of sexual abuse, and victims need the kind of hope and healing that only the gospel of Jesus Christ provides. Tragically, most churches and Christians are woefully unprepared to help those who have been abused sexually. In this booklet Dr. Kellemen offers clear, accessible, gospel-based help for the many victims of sexual abuse and teaches us all how to face sexual abuse side by side with Christ.

—**Justin and Lindsey Holcomb**, authors of *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*

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Abuse: Finding Hope in Christ

Anxiety: Anatomy and Cure

Borderline Personality: A Scriptural Perspective

Burnout: Resting in God's Fairness

Cutting: A Healing Response

Depression: The Sun Always Rises

God's Attributes: Rest for Life's Struggles

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Recovering Hope

Sexual Abuse: Beauty for Ashes

Vulnerability: Blessing in the Beatitudes

Brad Hambrick, Series Editor

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ROBERT W. KELLEMEN



P U B L I S H I N G

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Can you picture it? God is wooing us back to himself, drawing us home to his holy and loving heart, to Christ our faithful Savior. All the while Satan is whispering, “You can’t trust him. You can’t trust anyone. You can’t even trust *family!* Don’t be foolish. Trust only yourself!” Evil wins the battle for our soul to the extent that we experience trust in others and in God as dangerous and foolish.

Sexual abuse, especially incestuous sexual abuse—abuse by a relative—shrinks the heart, shrivels the soul. Ashley’s description depicts this powerfully. “I responded to my abuse by erecting a wall around my heart so that I could close the door of trust to God and others. I picture myself slamming the door shut, double-bolting it, bracing my shoulder against it, and trying with all my might to keep God and everybody else out.” She concluded that it was unsafe to open her soul to anyone . . . including God.

In this, Ashley is much like Tamar. In 13:13 she speaks of her “disgrace,” and in 13:20 the text describes her as “desolate.” (We’ll examine both words in more detail later.) Both Hebrew words speak of *relational struggle*: alienation from God, separation from others, and dis-integration from self. Sexual abuse is *relational* abuse that seeks to sever our capacity for mutual connection.

Journey Two: The Damage of Powerlessness—The Attempted Destruction of Hope (2 Sam. 13:2, 11–14)

Satan attempts to destroy faith by the damage of loss of trust, and he attempts to destroy hope by the damage of loss of power. The narrator informs us that the male, Amnon, begins powerless—he’s frustrated because it seems impossible for him to get what he wants. The female, Tamar, begins pure, at peace, and protected—she is the beautiful virgin daughter of the king.

And then the shift occurs. Tamar endures the titanic sinking of everything she had ever known and hoped for.

We read in 13:11 that Amnon “grabbed her.” The Hebrew word pictures laying hold of, seizing, clutching. The author is informing us that this was a violent act of rape. This was a ruthless exercise of power by a man playing God with a woman’s life.

Fighting against Amnon, Tamar cries out in 13:12, “Don’t force me.” She attempts to retain her voice and reclaim her power. In the Hebrew, Tamar speaks one powerful vocative word: “No!” She then confronts her attacker. “You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel” (13:13).

Ignoring her and thinking only of his lusts, Amnon leaves Tamar voiceless and powerless. “But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her” (13:14). He forces himself upon her. “Force” (13:12) means to oppress, humiliate, violate, and abuse. The Old Testament uses the word several times for forced intercourse, violent intrusion—rape. It pictures the victim so intimidated that she cowers in a corner. This is a cruel act of a powerful person overpowering the weak.

Ashley described her sense of powerlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. “While people think I’m oh-so-pleasant, kind, sweet, and nice, the truth is that I live by the motto: ‘Why bother? Why want? Why care?’ I feel better when I feel numb. I look nice because I never exert myself because it’s just not worth it. It only hurts to hope, hurts to dream.”

Ashley told me about going to see the musical *Les Misérables* with Nate. The character she identified with the most was Fantine and the death of hope Fantine’s soul endured. Abandoned by the father of her child and now near death, Fantine looks back on life with regret and looks ahead with hopelessness. She is a picture of what happens when we lose sight of God in the midst of life’s losses and abuses.

Ashley related to her own life the despairing words of Fantine’s song, “I Dreamed a Dream”: “Like Fantine, once I was young and dreamed grand dreams, but my dreams were dashed

and my hope torn to shreds. Like her, my dreams have died and I don't have the strength to weather the storms of life anymore. All my dreams have turned to shame."

These are words that Satan loves to hear. They are the words often on the lips of the sexual abuse victim. "Now life has killed the dream I dreamed."³ These are the words of a Christian who has lost sight of Christ. The sexual abuse victim who despairs of hope does not cry out with the psalmist, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help" (Ps. 121:1 KJV). The despairing sexual abuse victim refuses to believe that help will ever come for a powerless and voiceless person like herself. As Ashley put it, "Life is empty today, and it will never change, only get worse."

Journey Three: The Damage of Shame—The Attempted Destruction of Peace/Shalom (2 Sam. 13:13–17)

The end result of the loss of faith and hope is shame. Tamar verbalizes her shame in 13:13. "What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" Do you hear the desperation in her voice? She feels surrounded by disgrace. Wherever she goes she feels as if all eyes are on her—that everyone knows. And she feels as if there is no place of grace that can remedy her disgrace.

The Hebrew language maintains a twofold use of the word *disgrace*, and both fit the context of sexual abuse. The first use means to feel contempt for oneself, to feel reproach, to feel guilty and filthy. Many sexual abuse victims feel a tremendous amount of false guilt that leads to a sense of worthlessness and soul ugliness.

One way that Ashley conveyed her sense of ugliness and shame was by her inability to make eye contact. She referenced another scene in *Les Misérables*—the opening scene where the convict Jean Valjean and other prisoners are working like slaves.

3. Herbert Kretzmer, "I Dreamed a Dream," *Les Misérables* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1987).

Treated as subhuman, they're singing, "Look down, look down! Don't look 'em in the eye."⁴

Ashley explained. "That's how I feel—so ashamed. I'm convinced that people's eyes can pierce right into my soul and see the pit of evil that I and everyone else want to reject. And though I know it's not true, some days I even wonder if Jesus cares." Instead of being an open recipient of grace, Ashley felt like a black hole of disgrace.

A sexual abuser like Amnon takes delight when his victim feels guilty. This coincides with the second Hebrew use of this word "disgrace"—casting blame on and imputing guilt to another person. We see this clearly in 13:17. "He called his personal servant and said, 'Get this woman out of here and bolt the door after her.'" By putting her out and sending her away, Amnon shouts the message that she had shamefully approached him and that she was guilty of disgraceful conduct and attempted seduction. He bolts the door as if her femininity is dangerous. Amnon's actions are clearly designed to paint Tamar as a filthy harlot.

It is chillingly like the modern-day horror stories of the abuser who attempts to silence his victim with lies like, "Your parents won't want you if they find out what *you* did." "Your mom would stop loving you and give you up for adoption." "The police would arrest *you* for this."

The combined impact of self-contempt and imputed shame partially explains some of the symptoms that Ashley was experiencing. She struggled with chronic low-grade depression and joylessness, which at times turned into full-blown depression and suicidal ideations. She reported that she never enjoyed sex and, in fact, never enjoyed any pleasures. While others saw her as so "together," she often secretly felt like she was "coming unglued, falling apart, near a breakdown." While others appreciated her

4. Kretzmer, "Work Song," *Les Misérables*.

kind spirit, she would say, “I don’t even know this person they’re describing. I’m a stranger to myself.” And “‘Kindness’? That’s just because I’m terrified of anyone ever rejecting me. I’m the stereotypical perfectionistic people-pleaser.”

All of these symptoms reflect the opposite of peace, of biblical shalom. Shalom is much more than the absence of enmity or the cessation of warfare. Shalom is the active, calming presence of harmony—relational harmony. Shalom with God conquers alienation and involves reconciliation and the confidence that through Christ we are accepted in the beloved. Shalom with others conquers separation and involves connection and the confidence that mutual sacrificial love is possible and desirable. Shalom with self conquers dis-integration and involves integration and confidence regarding our identity in Christ and a sense of personal wholeness.

Journey Four: The Damage of Being Used and Feeling Useless—The Attempted Destruction of Love (2 Sam. 13:14–20)

Satan heaps damage on top of damage. In 2 Samuel 13:14, the inspired narrator exposes the damage of being used and feeling useless—the attempted destruction of love. “He raped her.” The Hebrew is brutal. It pictures her lifeless, stiff as a board, frozen like a statue, and left for dead.

Amnon used her and then rejected her. “Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, ‘Get up and get out!’” (13:15). Tamar was used and then abused. She was first regarded, then discarded. Amnon knew nothing about true love. Amnon the rapist, the sexual abuser, is filled with selfishness, acting in unprincipled, self-indulgent self-interest. What Amnon experienced was lust, not love. He gratified his animal passions and then humiliated her further by casting her off like a filthy rag.⁵

5. See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume II—Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 399.

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–TIM CHALLIES, Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church

FROM DISGRACE TO GRACE AND FROM VICTIMS TO VICTORS

Sexual abuse ravages the soul, causing unimaginable distress, damage, and disgrace. It is faced honestly and openly in the Bible—but can the church truly help those who have been sexually abused?

Bob Kellemen says yes, it can; and using the biblical story of Amnon and Tamar, he realistically portrays the damages wrought by sexual abuse and the relevancy of God’s Word to this difficult topic. He then takes us on a journey toward healing, helping sufferers to reclaim beauty from the ashes of abuse and to move from victim to victor.

THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE booklet series by the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) applies the timeless hope of Christ to the unique struggles of modern believers.

“The gospel isn’t just an ethereal idea. It’s not a philosophy, and it’s not static. It moves and shapes and transforms. I am grateful for ABC’s work of letting the gospel bear its weight on these real life sorrows and pains.”

–MATT CHANDLER, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

ROBERT W. KELLEMEN is Executive Director of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, Executive Director of the Center for Church Equipping, and Professor of Counseling and Discipleship at Capital Bible Seminary in Lanham, Maryland.

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