

*when it's
trauma*

An 8-Session
Small Group
Study Guide

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When It's Trauma
Making Your Church a Refuge for Sufferers
An 8-Session Small Group Study Guide

Using selections from *When It's Trauma: A Biblical Guide to Understanding Trauma and Walking Faithfully with Sufferers* by Darby Strickland

Our churches are filled with people who have known anxiety, grief, abuse, shame, betrayal, and more. These people don't need experts as much as they need a safe place and steady, Christlike friends. This eight-week study will help your group provide that kind of shelter. We'll learn to slow down, show up, practice lament, and take the first wise steps to care for those in need. Along the way, we'll notice the good gifts God has already placed in our church and learn how to walk with one another rather than walking away. Above all, we'll keep our eyes on Jesus, our wounded healer, who draws near to the brokenhearted and teaches his church to do the same.

You'll walk away with

- a listening posture that mirrors Jesus's nearness and lets you stay fully present without trying to fix the other person.
- a simple way to pray that brings real comfort and hope.
- an understanding of who in your church is best suited to address different needs and a plan bringing sufferers to them.
- a practice of noticing bodily and verbal cues that signal distress and responding gently.
- a reflex for noticing and naming evidence of grace.

Weekly preparation. For each session, you will read about 15 pages of *When It's Trauma* ahead of time. Come with an expectant heart to discuss the material and how you and your church can grow in care. Our Savior delights to meet us in the mess and make our ordinary care an instrument of his extraordinary grace.

Session 1

The Terrain of Trauma

Before the session: Read “Introduction,” pages 9–14; “Terrain of Trauma,” pages 15–24

Aim: Adjust your posture and language based on a biblical framework of trauma.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 53:3; Matthew 11:28–30

Discuss:

- In what ways do we (or people we’re walking with) feel “exiled” right now—for example, displaced in body, story, or worship—and what would help our group feel like a home on the hardest days?
- The chapter says trauma is known by its impact more than by the event itself. How have we seen trauma disrupt someone’s safety, identity, connection, or faith?
- Healing isn’t linear. What would it look like for us to offer someone a patient, non-fixing presence this week—communicating “we’re with you” rather than “hurry up”?
- People can experience the same crisis very differently. How can we avoid making assumptions? How can we make sure we listen to a person’s unique story at their pace?

Between sessions: Notice one person’s pain and practice a 3×3 presence response.

- ☐ Pray for the person for **3 minutes**.
- ☐ Send a **3-sentence text** (or note) naming what you see, making a concrete offer of help, or reminding the person that you’re with them.
- ☐ Take **3 minutes** to schedule a follow-up (for example, a phone call, a quiet visit, or a meal).

Notes:

Session 2

Seeing and Drawing Near

Before the session: Read Chapter 1: “Seeing and Drawing Near,” pages 27–39

Aim: Learn how to be a steady presence that mirrors Jesus.

Scripture: Psalm 23:4; Luke 10:33–35

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 39, as well as the following:

- What keeps you from drawing near to suffering people?
- What does embodied presence look and sound like?

Practice: Divide into groups of 3. Take it in turns to spend two minutes sharing a difficult moment while one person listens silently and the other observes the listener’s posture. No one should offer advice. Afterward, debrief. At what points did you feel the urge to “fix”? What aspects of embodied presence were helpful?

Between sessions: Do a 10-minute check-in with someone. Ask two open-ended questions and offer no advice.

Notes:

Session 3

Listening and Lamenting

Before the session: Read Chapter 2: “Listening and Lamenting,” pages 41–54

Aim: Learn the gift of lament.

Scripture: Psalm 13 or Psalm 88 (pick one)

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 54, as well as the following:

- Why do churches avoid lament?
- How can lament deepen hope?

Practice: Write a 4-line lament (Address → Complaint → Request → Trust-whisper). If it’s easier for you, fill in the blanks below. If you are comfortable with doing so, share your lament with the group.

- **Address:** “Dear Jesus, you are _____, and you are with me.”
- **Complaint:** “I feel _____ because _____.”
- **Request:** “Please _____ today.”
- **Trust-whisper:** “I know you _____ and won’t leave me.”

Between sessions: Practice a 3x3 presence response or do a 10-minute check-in with someone.

Notes:

Session 4

Safety and Stabilizing

Before the session: Read Chapter 3: “Laying the Foundations for Effective Care,” pages 55–73

Aim: Understand an overview of trauma care and learn to prioritize safety, to pace care wisely, and to stabilize a sufferer before beginning the deep work.

Scripture: Proverbs 31:8–9; James 1:27

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 73, as well as the following:

- What belongs in a first conversation?
- What are our reporting obligations?¹

Practice: Familiarize yourself with the people in your church community who are able to help in a crisis, review the refuge plan (appendix C, pages 275–80), and the referral chart on page 299.

Between sessions: Practice a 3x3 presence response or do a 10-minute check-in with someone.

Notes:

¹ Make sure you know your state’s mandated-reporting rules before going into this session. Identify local hotlines and referral partners ahead of time.

Session 5

Faith Questions

Before the session: Read Chapter 6: “Faith Questions,” pages 131–54 (you are free to skip the sections “Assess for Faith Questions” and “How to Help”)

Aim: Reframe doubt as *part* of biblical faith, not its opposite.

Scripture: Psalm 139:1–12; Isaiah 61:1–4

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 154

Between sessions: Identify one faith question you’re carrying and turn it into a prayer that ends with the promise from a particular passage of Scripture that is helpful. If it helps, use this simple template:

- **Address:** “Dear Father / Dear Jesus . . .”
- **Complaint:** “My question is _____, and it makes me feel _____.”
- **Request:** “Please _____.”
- **Trust-whisper:** “I will cling to _____.”

Notes:

Session 6

Relational Hypervigilance

Before the session: Read Chapter 7: “Relational Hypervigilance,” pages 155–78 (you are free to skip the sections “Assess for Relational Hypervigilance” and “How to Help”)

Aim: Recognize that relational vigilance (hypervigilance) is a God-given survival response to harm; learn how to build trust with a hypervigilant person.

Scripture: Psalm 121; Philippians 4:5–7

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on pages 177–78

Between sessions: To learn how to better care for people who struggle to trust, notice which people in your life make you feel comfortable and seen. How do they do that?

Notes:

Session 7

Restoration Is Slow and Sacred

Before the session: Read Chapter 10: “The Sacred Work of Restoration,” pages 229–39

Aim: Learn to see and celebrate “small mercies” while remembering to worship before rebuilding.

Scripture: Ezra 3:1–6; Nehemiah 4:6

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 239

Practice: Notice and name 3 quiet evidences of graces you see in others who are suffering.

Between sessions: Continue to look for evidences of grace in the life of someone you know. Write a brief note of encouragement (2–3 sentences), and give it to them.

Notes:

Session 8

Whole-Church Refuge and Our Wounded Savior

Before the session: Read Chapter 11: “Building Together,” pages 241–51; “Conclusion: By His Wounds We Are Healed,” pages 253–62

Aim: Learn that healing is communal and Christ-anchored. We build—and are being built—together. Christ welcomes the wounded; his scars are our refuge and future.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28; 1 Peter 2:5

Discuss: Discuss the reflection questions on page 251, as well as the following:

- What would it look like for our group to offer others a gentle welcome?
- How do Christ’s wounds and resurrection reshape what feels possible?

Practice: Each member names one small way to bear another’s burden this month (pray for them, offer presence, make a meal, provide childcare).

Notes:

Personal Reflection

Identity

In Christ, I am a living stone that is _____ (chosen, seen, needed, forgiven, etc.). Today I most need to remember _____.

Placement

Where has the Lord *set* me right now (home, church, work)? One place I resist belonging is _____. Why?

Mortar

What grace or truth keeps me joined to others when I want to pull away (e.g., Ps. 23:4; Matt. 11:28–30; 1 Peter 2:10)? I will cling to _____.

Load-bearing

Who tends to rest on me? What weight have I been carrying alone? What would it look like for me to invite help this week?

Cracks and repair

Where do I feel fatigue, fear, shame, or bitterness? One gentle step toward repair is _____ (confession, rest, asking for help, laying a boundary, lament).

Blessing to offer

As a priestly stone, one small spiritual sacrifice I can offer this week is _____ (intercede for _____, deliver a meal, sit in silence with _____, send a note).

Connection move

One person in this “wall” toward whom I could move with presence is _____.