

No Longer Alone

RISING ABOVE CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

by

SALLIE CULBRETH

NAVPRESS 

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humbled and inspired me. Finally, I am so very grateful to you for having the courage to pick this book up. I hope when you finish it you are changed and growing.

Foreword

If you are reading this book, you have probably experienced sexual abuse as a child. You are looking for hope, understanding, and healing. Sallie has been there. And when she courageously entered the path to healing, she discovered another was there before her and with her, Someone who truly understands the suffering, the agony, the questions, and the darkness. Through this book, she desires to take you by the hand along that path and introduce you to the One who truly knows and understands.

I have listened to hundreds who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Some have lived through one shattering instance, and others have lived through abuse that spanned decades. All have been damaged by it. They have been wounded because abuse is evil, and whenever evil touches the life of a child, damage occurs. Sometimes there is damage to the body, but always there is damage to the mind, the heart, and the soul of the child. Adults who have been victims of abuse want to understand, they want truth—about themselves and about the abuse—and they want hope. They want hope for freedom from the tentacles of abuse, hope for healing from the damage, and hope for healthy relationships with people and with God. They always want to know where God was when they were being abused.

In this book, Sallie will take you to the One who gives freedom, is truth, and will fill you with hope. He is also the One who knows and understands. His name is Jesus. The prophet Isaiah tells us that Jesus himself carried *our* griefs and our sorrows (see Isaiah 53:4). We are

told he was despised, betrayed, abandoned, oppressed, crushed, and afflicted. Do those words feel familiar to you? Do they describe your experience of abuse? You see, Jesus not only experienced those things himself; He knows your experiences too. He also calls abuse evil and hates the lies it burned in your heart and mind. He wants you free. He says he came to set the prisoners free, to heal the brokenhearted, and to rebuild the ruins (see Isaiah 61:1-4).

It is my prayer that you will say yes to Sallie's invitation to come and see this God-man who weeps with you and for you. Listen and learn of him. He hates abuse, for he has told us he hates all that is evil. He is the Master Healer and can touch your heart and mind like no one else can. Yes, the road seems slow and the way long. Yes, there will be times of great pain in the healing process. A festering wound cannot be healed unless it is first opened up and then cleaned out. Such care, no matter how loving, will hurt. Without that care, death will set in. Come; learn of him. Let his suffering teach you about yours. His pain led to life, and if you follow him through your own suffering, listening to his voice speaking to you, then your pain will lead to life as well. That which was meant to be evil and soul-deadening and life-crippling will instead result in life! Walking the road with the Man of Sorrows *always* leads to resurrection!

DIANE LANGBERG, PHD
PSYCHOLOGIST

P R E F A C E

Shattered

A child's world shatters when he or she is abused. Victims' sense of goodness and safety are altered forever. They enter a personal holocaust. Everything changes. They lose themselves and will never really know who they might have been had they not known abuse. Perhaps you are one of those shattered children. You view your body, your sexuality, and your spirituality with a different set of eyes. Evil has touched you. If you give it power and permission, it will continue to victimize you.

I believe there is something unbelievably wicked and enormous in scope behind every act of abuse—*beyond* every act of abuse. The ultimate manifestation from this wicked touch is spiritual despair. Hopelessness and emptiness can become so deeply planted in a victim's heart that the shattered child can grow into a self-defeated, walled-in, hollow shell of a human. The results? Broken self. Broken relationships with people. Broken relationship with God.

Isn't it amazing that the most intimate act between people—sexual expression—is used as a weapon that can destroy the mind, body, spirit, and relationships of developing human beings? Sex was meant to be an act of celebration, covenant, and respect. It was intended to be the closest experience we have to understanding what the Scriptures refer to as “being one” (Ephesians 5:31-32). In reality, sex is sadly misused. Abuse's young victims first learn that intimacy is painful and that sexual union can create spiritual brokenness.

God knows the power of sex. It was his gift, offered for us to know and enjoy passionate expression. When the apostle Paul wanted to communicate how close our relationship with God could be, he cited the intimate relationship between marriage partners as his example (see Ephesians 5:22-33). When sex is used as a weapon to exploit rather than as a gift to give and receive, our sense of spiritual wholeness fragments into isolated, unhealthy pieces. Along with all of the other turmoil it creates, our connection with God also splinters. I am convinced this is the larger purpose of evil—to obstruct our pursuit of God and our ability to attain spiritual vitality.

This book is about reconnecting. It's a book of parallels between abuse survivors—people I have encountered over the years—and the epic, definitive story of abuse, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. These parallels are woven together for you to consider the life of Christ, perhaps in ways you never have before. Please be aware that I have taken great liberties to re-create the experiences of Christ—his thoughts and feelings, his complex relationships, and his words. This is not intended to be an accurate historical treatment of the life of Christ or a theological study; it is a tapestry made up of stories of suffering and sorrow mutually experienced by both deity and flesh. I hope my adaptation helps you see familiar stories through fresh eyes. If you are not familiar with the life of Christ, I would encourage you to read the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the Bible. If you are familiar with these accounts, you might be surprised by how they read once you've finished this book.

Between the lines, behind the stories of Jesus, are the complexities of life that are the human experience. God was with us for a while. That's what *Immanuel* means: "God with us." Conversations took place—with his mother, his followers, his friends, and his adversaries—that are not known to us but most certainly occurred. People talk, touch, laugh, cry, rage, act, and react. Jesus did too. Precious little is known about the myriad of details that made up all of Christ's time here. One thing is clear: Jesus was the voice of God. He clarified,

explaining and reexplaining to help us understand God's extravagant love and ferocious Creator-parent passion for us.

Christ experienced no shortcuts in his journey to the Cross. He intimately understands suffering and injustice. The full impact of betrayal, pain, disappointment, and despair climaxes at that moment when Jesus—the Son of God, Immanuel—howls his heart-wrenching question, one that haunts every person who has ever suffered: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). The anguish of that cry is not diminished by his identity. It is a legitimate question—one that even *God-with-us* needed to ask when facing such a shattered world as ours.

It is in the totality of Christ's life that the subtext of God's voice is heard. This subtext is extrapolated and embellished based on what we know about the historic, cultural, and human events of his time. Yes, words have been put in his mouth that are not precisely known and yet are not beyond the realm of possibility. Imagination beckons us to hear God's voice as he invites us to follow him beyond abuse:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

The journey toward freedom rests in identification and understanding. Although abuse brutally pummels isolation into the mind and spirit of its victims, the Cross, with equal brutality, rips open and dismantles that very isolation. If you are willing to listen, in this book you will hear the story of Christ begin with a gentle invitation to “come to me.” As you join him on his journey, you will notice that the volume of his invitation grows into a resounding promise of unflinching clarity that says, “You are not alone.”

Author's Note

Many of these stories are composites of several survivors' experiences, including my own. The names and details of these stories have been modified to protect the identities of these courageous abuse survivors.

At the end of each chapter, I have included questions and prompts for self-reflection or perhaps even a group discussion. It might be helpful for you to keep a journal—where the additional space will allow you to record whatever insights occur—as you read, reflect, and respond.

Some people find great comfort from Scripture as they address the damage from abuse; others are just not there yet. As I hope you'll discover through this book, God gets it. God is not sitting up in heaven with a mallet waiting to play Whac-A-Mole with you if you aren't doing what the saint in the next pew is doing. So do what *you* have to do to nurture your heart, mind, and body. This is not an easy read. Set it down often. Build in self-care, rest, and joy as you read this.

However, I encourage you to sit with Christ throughout this book. I hope you learn to comfort each other, because you really do have so very much in common.

THE INVITATION

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

— JESUS (MATTHEW 11:28-30)

Setup and Betrayal

The Voice of Candy

I loved him. I totally trusted him. I was such an idiot! So naive. I adored him, and he set me up, betrayed my trust. Oh yeah, looking back, it's easy to see how it happened. I wasn't wanted and I certainly wasn't cherished as a child—as children should be. In fact, growing up I was reminded over and over that my existence was an inconvenience. My mother and father often joked in front of me that it was too bad abortion was illegal when they found out I was on the way! Can you believe that? I wasn't wanted. I was a burden. I was in the way. I was stupid and ugly and fat. A lifetime of bitter tears can never change that. My pathetic excuse for parents is just one layer of my personal tragedy.

When I was home, I was not welcome. Even now it breaks my heart to acknowledge that. When I didn't show up, no one noticed. No one *ever* noticed me. Well, no one except my Uncle Roy, my mother's stepbrother. He lived a block away from our apartment in Chicago. Sometimes my parents would sort of forget I was outside playing and lock me out. I was just a little kid! So when they did, I'd go to Uncle Roy's. He was a few years younger than my mother and was always nice to me—at least nicer to me than my parents were.

When I started kindergarten, I spent more and more time with him. His apartment became my home away from home. We hung out together. He wasn't married. His friends were there as much as I was.

Young men. Cute men. Like Uncle Roy, they took time to listen to me, to comment on my hair or clothes or pictures that I drew at school.

By third grade, I was always at Uncle Roy's and knew all his friends really well. His friends were my friends, too. I liked it there. I preferred his apartment to that of my parents. No one at home seemed to care where I was. My parents never asked questions. I was invisible—invisible, that is, to everyone except Uncle Roy and his friends. His was the one place on earth where I mattered to someone.

One Friday night when I was in fifth grade, Uncle Roy asked me to spend the weekend at his apartment. I was eleven years old. I called my mother to ask if I could, but before I could even get the whole question out, she yelled at me for interrupting her TV show. "If he wants you, he can have you!" she said before slamming down the receiver. That kind of rejection was normal. Mother's words rolled over me, almost without wounding me that time. Almost. I turned away from the phone, from her neglect, and with a big grin announced that I could stay the whole weekend.

Pizza and movies were the agenda for that night. That's what Uncle Roy—my refuge, my best friend—told me. "Why don't you go change into your pj's," he suggested. I didn't want to miss a thing, so I hurried to change. When I came back into the living room, Uncle Roy and his friends, Jack and Sergio, were drinking beer. They offered one to me, and I jumped at the chance. "Sure!" I said, feeling so special, so included. It didn't take long until they started smoking marijuana. They offered some of that to me too. "Sure!" I said. Before long, I felt very strange, very loopy.

(Even as I tell this story, I float above myself, just like that drink and toke made me feel way back then. I have run back to that feeling again and again over the years. It has almost destroyed my life. Too many inebriated days and nights to count.)

The movies they had? Pornography. I watched with the wide-eyed innocence of a child. Uncle Roy patted his lap and told me to sit. And just as I had done for years, I climbed into his lap. Remember, I loved

him and I knew he loved me, too. I would have done anything for him. Anything. The lights were out. I felt dizzy, strange. I am ashamed now to admit this, but the movie excited me. It excited Uncle Roy, too.

Before I knew what was happening, he started to take off my pajamas. I got scared and told him to stop. He didn't. Jack and Sergio moved closer to me, to us, at that point. It felt like the movie we were watching left the TV and filled the room until we all became part of it. Jack and Sergio helped him take off my pajamas and held me down. Uncle Roy took off his pants and raped me while his friends watched. Their eyes went from the TV screen to me and then back. It hurt like fire and knives inside me. When Uncle Roy was done, Jack and Sergio made me do stuff to them, but I don't want to talk about it right now.

Before the weekend was over, Uncle Roy, Jack, and Sergio had all raped me. Beer, weed, and porn were what they fed me that weekend and have been a steady part of my diet ever since. On Monday morning, Uncle Roy woke me up, fixed breakfast, and drove me to school. We all acted as if nothing had happened. The secret was sealed in my heart to fester for the next twenty years.

Jack and Sergio sat in the backseat. "You're so pretty," Uncle Roy said, touching my head, stroking my hair. "You're a real woman now," Sergio whispered, leaning over the seat. "You know, Candy," Jack said, "you're way too sexy for your age, hard to resist, you know?" He made it clear that I was the one who had tempted them. As an eleven-year-old child, I believed that if we hadn't had so much to drink or had so much weed or seen so much porn, they could have controlled themselves. Yeah, right. I was enjoying their attention yet terrified by it too. Then the car stopped in front of my elementary school. Uncle Roy kissed me—kissed me on the mouth as a boyfriend would—before I got out of the car. "I love you, Candy," he told me. No one had ever said "I love you" to me before.

Through the years since then, I've come to believe that love hurts. At the same time, to *not* be loved hurts more.

Jesus, do you know what it's like to be set up and betrayed?

The Voice of Jesus

I knew the moment I called their names they would betray me. I did not come as an observer; I came as a participant. Relationships are what made my setup and betrayal possible. I knew they would use me, abandon me, sell me out, but I called their names anyway. I could do no less. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, Thaddaeus, Judas (the brother of James), Simon, and Judas Iscariot.

One by one, they came into my life and brought with them the passion, joy, and community I hungered for. They became my friends: my inner circle who loved me, who vowed to always stand by me, and who let power go to their heads. There they were, ready, willing, and able to enter into a relationship with me.

I had other relationships too. Before I chose the Twelve, I chose my family. I chose them before I was born, and despite all that we did to prepare them for my arrival, they were confused by me. My advent altered them and their world forever. They struggled with the events that brought about my birth, barely comprehending what was happening to them. My stepfather, Joseph, could have walked away from my mother. Any other man might have ended the engagement, might have even had her executed, but Joseph was not just any other man: He was chosen. This remarkable man remained true to my mother, assured by one of my messengers that she, too, was chosen. Together they embarked on a journey that would alter history.

My birth could not have come at a more inconvenient time for my parents. Away from home, with no familiar comforts, my mother gave birth to me. Stars and shepherds, angels and kings-with-gifts—all acknowledged my arrival. For my parents, it was overwhelming. My mother would not talk about it. She kept the entire experience sealed in her heart. With one amazing development after another, she held it in and prayed. Even when I was in her womb, I heard her prayers.

I complicated their lives. Rumors of my questionable paternity, of

Mary's morality, of Joseph's apparent unwillingness to exert his rights estranged them from their family and friends. A death sentence was put on my life almost from the beginning. My presence was perceived to be such a threat that dozens of babies were slaughtered in hopes that I would be killed too. My parents were forced to escape with me to Egypt—a foreign country—where we lived until it was safe enough to return home.

Life in our hometown went on without us. Our extended families went on. My parents' friends went on. We went on, but in ways no one would ever fully understand. You see, we were unlike any other family.

When I was still very young, we left Egypt to return to Nazareth, my parents' hometown. They would never really have a normal life again. People talked—talked about my mother, about my father, about our family, and about me. Still we settled back into our community and tried to be a normal family, even though we had to function under extraordinary circumstances.

My parents seemed to forget who I was from time to time. The year I turned twelve, we made our annual journey to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. In one more year, according to our laws, I would be considered an adult. This year, however, I was recognized as a “son of the law” and began my formal religious instruction. I was trained in fasting and public worship. I also became an apprentice for my stepfather's trade of carpentry.

As always, we traveled to Jerusalem in a caravan of family and friends. This year, when I arrived at the temple, I felt the full weight of my identity and purpose. I loved Jerusalem. Loved the sights, sounds, and smells. Most of all, I loved the house of God. Because I was older, I was able to engage in deeper, lengthy discussions with our religious leaders. These conversations opened up a meaningful, rich relationship between me and my community of faith that would be ongoing for the rest of my life on earth.

I struggled to keep the perspective of my family in mind as I

grew. After this particular Passover, they departed to go home, but I remained at the temple listening to the teachers and asking questions. When my parents found me three days later, I saw the panicked look on their faces. I recognized their limitations and perspectives. I gently reminded them of my identity and then excused myself from the teachers to return home. For the next few years, I remained with my parents in our parent-child relationship. My brothers and sisters grew up under my shadow. I was the brother that humiliated them because our community never fully acknowledged me as legitimate. I know it must have been difficult for them, especially when people made comments about our family. My brothers openly expressed their concerns about me. They thought I was unstable and were frequently hateful toward me.

When the time finally came for my life's work to be revealed, I was about thirty years old. My cousin John baptized me. Before the year was up, those who'd watched me grow reacted with surprising hostility toward me. A few tried to kill me. It broke my heart to know that my community—the place where I had played, grew, learned, and lived—could turn on me like that. I could almost understand strangers treating me that way, but the rejection by my own family and friends was very difficult. My lifelong relationships became the sources of wounding and pain.

Even my mother, who knew better than anyone who I was, could not overcome her own fears, her own plans, and her own ideas of who and what I should be. She pressured me to perform because she knew what I was capable of: miracles. For example, at a wedding in Cana, she asked me to salvage a catering crisis. When I challenged her agenda, she bypassed me, went to the servers, and implied that I could do something about the problem. She ignored who I was and focused on what I could do as if I were destined to be some kind of traveling magic show. Our relationship was obviously unique. Yes, I turned the water into wine, but for reasons that my mother did not understand. I did it to reveal the Father in me. With all she and I had been through

together, our relationship would always remain a struggle. You see, I was not hers—she was mine.

As more and more people became followers, stronger accusations were hurled against me. It troubled my brothers and mother so much that they said I was literally out of my mind. Later, when my teachings became difficult, my followers began to drop away. My brothers noticed this and taunted my claims and my public teaching.

Perhaps most painful of all was my religious community. At first accepting, they grew to despise and blame me. Many of the same teachers who recognized my abilities when I was twelve years old were the ones who later plotted to kill me. My teachers and spiritual leaders had become my enemies. The place on earth that I loved (the temple) and those who were entrusted with the faith (the teachers and priests) brought enormous sorrow to me. I remember standing over Jerusalem shortly before my death, weeping with such angst and distress that I thought my heart would burst. My relationships with this place and these leaders crushed me. This was not just a random location on the earth; it was a site of great significance to me. These leaders were not part of an isolated, remote institution; they were the epicenter of my entire being.

And then there were my twelve disciples. Flawed. Struggling. Precious to me. I poured myself into them for more than three years, yet I knew . . . I knew they would all scatter when catastrophe struck. I knew their weaknesses and strengths better than they did. I knew Peter would deny me. I knew Thomas would doubt me. I knew John's love was strong enough to stay, but only at a distance. I knew Judas Iscariot would sell me out. I knew it from the beginning, but it still hurt when the events actually unfolded.

These men were not cruel strangers; they were my intimate friends who betrayed me. And Judas—his betrayal was the worst of all. He took what he knew, knew *of me*, and turned it against me. He knew my personal habits, my words, and my passions. He knew me, yet I wasn't enough for him. His agenda was his, not mine. Toward the end, he

challenged my values and my identity. It ate at him until he brought about my demise. I warned him. I gave him an opportunity to change his mind, but he didn't.

He used our relationship to set me up. My value to him was reduced to what he could get from me: money and fleeting power. For a brief moment, he had a large army wielding swords and clubs under his tiny command, with full authority given to him by the religious leaders. Filled with smug self-importance, he led the crowd as the one in charge. Because of our relationship, he abused our intimacy that night.

I knew he was coming. I sensed it early in the day, but I stayed focused on my mission. I was in a holy place when he arrived—in a tranquil garden in solitary prayer with my heavenly Father. Suddenly, this man who knew my heart shattered my place of refuge and peace. The crowd was wild but still under his control. Then, as if time became thick with sludge, the next few moments slithered through the garden until we were face-to-face. The violence and rage were deafening.

I stood. He stood. The years of friendship and love rolled back and forth between us. I was covered in bloody beads of sweat. And then Judas Iscariot did the unthinkable: He leaned toward me, called me “Rabbi,” and kissed me. His betrayal was complete. He had broken my heart.

A kiss, the sign of affection and love, instead became an act of betrayal, hurt, and death. Love hurts.

Yes, I know what it's like to be set up and betrayed.

SELF-REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Abuse does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs in a context—the context of relationship or trust, the context of neglect or loneliness. Neither Candy nor Jesus was mishandled by strangers. What their abusers knew about them was used against them. What were the relational, circumstantial, and emotional contexts of your abuse? What did your abusers know about you and your circumstances that made your setup and betrayal possible?
- Jesus was ultimately betrayed with a kiss from a trusted friend. A kiss symbolizes love, affection, and intimacy. Love, affection, and intimacy are valid needs, yet they were exploited to betray both Candy and Jesus. Because these needs are often used as part of the setup, victims can develop a love-hate relationship with their abusers. In what ways did your abuser take advantage of your needs of love, affection, and intimacy? How do you react now when you have those needs?
- How would you have tried to comfort Candy when she was a girl? How would you comfort her now?
- What would you like to say to Jesus about his experiences with setup and betrayal?