

After an affair, most couples think, “Now what?” Questions abound: Is this salvageable? What do we do? Where do we begin? Will we ever be the same? In *After an Affair*, Michael Gembola offers concrete and soul-healing strategies so that both parties can benefit and grow through a better understanding of themselves and the gospel.

—**John Freeman**, Founder, Harvest USA; Author, *Hide or Seek: When Men Get Real with God About Sex*

Infidelity involves many factors leading up to betrayal. Deceit in behavior and in the heart are the two most obvious. Hidden sins require ruthless and consistent truth-telling as well as the risk of practicing new thinking and habits that will move people forward. Michael, in *After an Affair*, has helped us tremendously by outlining a thirty-one-day guide that invites us to do the deeper work necessary to target these hidden sins.

—**Penny Freeman**, Counselor, ServingLeaders Ministries; Counselor and Trainer, Parakaleo

When we’re in a crisis, we need the hope of the gospel more than ever. But standard devotional guides don’t seem to speak to the elevated emotions and despair we feel. This can make God feel far away when we need to feel him most near. That is why I am so grateful for Michael Gembola’s devotional *After an Affair*. God’s Word is sturdy enough for the most desperate times. This devotional is written so that the person swirling in guilt, shame, and life- and family-altering decisions can know that God will meet them right where they are—as painful and disorienting as that place may be.

—**Brad Hambrick**, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; Author, *Self-Centered Spouse* and *Romantic Conflict*

After an Affair is a tremendous help to anyone who has experienced infidelity in marriage. Michael’s pastoral wisdom and

counseling experience shine as he directs the reader to spiritual food that is often missed but is critical to surviving the wilderness of adultery. I will certainly be recommending and using this resource in my own ministry.

—**Winston Smith**, Rector, St. Anne's Church, Abington, Pennsylvania; Author, *Marriage Matters: Extraordinary Change Through Ordinary Moments*

These devotionals are inviting and compelling. It is as if Michael is a good friend who knows you and knows exactly what you need. He will bring you into the meaningful words of God that give you direction, and he will set your pace so that you persevere with hope. By the end, you may find yourself wishing that a month lasted longer, so that you had more of Michael's helpful counsel to read—fortunately, the thirty-one devotionals here are well worth reading again and again.

—**Ed Welch**, Counselor and Faculty Member, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation; Author, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*

AFTER AN AFFAIR

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

Series Editor

- Addictive Habits: Changing for Good*, by David R. Dunham
After an Affair: Pursuing Restoration, by Michael Scott Gembola
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AFTER AN AFFAIR

PURSUING
RESTORATION

MICHAEL SCOTT GEMBOLA



P U B L I S H I N G

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The names of individuals mentioned in this text have been changed to protect their identity. In some cases a composite character has been created.

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Dedicated to my family

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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.¹ It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Michael speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. I've never met a husband or wife who woke up one day and suddenly decided, "Today I'm

going to commit adultery.” If you have had an affair, it means that you started wandering from God long beforehand. You lost your orientation toward the One who should rule your life. Fundamentally, adultery is a worship problem. You, as an adulterer, are worshipping the wrong things. Here’s where the Word helps: it points you to Christ, who rescues you from your plight and reorients your life. The goal of your time in the Word should be to reconcile yourself with God through Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:14–6:2). It is on that basis—a right relationship with God—that you can deal with the messy, painful, and hard consequences of your adultery.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself how to do battle with adulterous desires.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to dealing with the fallout from adultery. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You’ll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That’s enough for now. Let’s begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

I'M SO SORRY you've had to pick up this book. I would not wish it on anyone. In the days just after the disclosure of an affair, everything is complicated and embarrassing. You feel misunderstood. It's hard not to feel nervous about the next hard conversation. Is separation (or worse) coming? Finances get wrecked. Family and friends are distant. You have God alone to turn to. And maybe He's not too happy with you either. Feels that way, at least.

This book is for people who have been unfaithful to their spouses and who want help. It's for people who want their souls and marriages to be saved.¹ My goal is to help you better understand the God who saves and the kind of life that paves the way for reconciliation with your family, even if you feel little hope that reconciliation will happen. I write primarily out of my experience with counseling Christian men, though the core principles will apply to women too.² My prayer is that you will find these words truly devotional and that you will experience God's closeness and a renewed sense of His calling on your life.

The fact that you've started a devotional suggests that you believe two important things. First, you know that restoration is a process. This conviction is starting you on a thirty-one-day journey that I pray God will keep you on for years to come. Second, you believe there is something in Christian worship and devotion that is key to restoring your marriage. And you're right. Coming clean and coming home to God helps us to come clean and come home to our families, too.

This homecoming to Jesus unfailingly brings abundant life (see John 10:10). But He is much more than a means to an end. At the core of following Jesus is this conviction: there really is a

God, a good Father in heaven, who is deeply worth knowing—even during worst-case life scenarios. Today you may not know whether your dreams of being a family again will come true. You don't know the outcome. But you believe that God is in the picture, and He is active in writing a story—a testimony of His powerful work. Starting to tell this story honestly may *initially* make things worse. But coming to Jesus gets you where you want to go long-term. He alone brings your soul to safety.

God has promised that “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). But I'm sure it doesn't feel that way right now. Consider it this way: God *causes* all things, which means intervening in all things—even in an affair—to work for good. He rips good out of the hands of evil. He takes upside-down things and makes them right-side up. *Even this*. One writer calls affairs “a disorder that leads to a new order.”³ Being honest like never before, and becoming oriented toward the love of God and others, leads to changed character and changed relationships. We're able to enjoy relationships like never before.

None of this is silver lining. There is no upside to infidelity. It brings God's wrath and everyone else's wrath. It's ugly and destructive. Since you already knew that, you are likely asking, *How could I have ever gotten here?* You're asking a good question—one that I hope you'll hold on to for a long time. The best way to avoid falling again is to understand what got you there and to make changes. This process requires new insights and efforts over the long haul to keep you on the right path. This will be the hardest thing you have ever done. But I promise you it is worth it.

Although God can instantaneously change us, His Spirit typically works through our gradual efforts in community and guided by His Word. You can think of the process as a struggle to find rest. It's like fighting insomnia in that it requires learning, changing habits, and then waiting. You can't do any one thing to force yourself to fall asleep immediately and get the rest you need. Similarly, after adultery, coming to a place of spiritual rest

means finding new insights, acting on them, and waiting. It's a process that requires more patience than you've ever had to exercise before.

I wish I could offer you something faster than incremental steps. But God's people have often faced wilderness—long walks over long periods of time in hard conditions. Being different *over time* will be the only reliable indicator that you have really changed. If your marriage and life as a Christian are ever to thrive again, you have to be different—deeply and observably different—for a long time.

There is an important principle to remember as you begin this journey: *the normal progress of Christian growth is a process of gaining new insights and taking steps of action.* Gaining new insight is extremely difficult. It can cost us dearly. “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Prov. 4:7 NIV). I will ask you to see things from perspectives you haven't yet considered—and to trust me that right now you don't see all that you need to see. Gaining new insight and a new understanding of God, others, and yourself must be a top priority.

I will first invite you to see God as the gracious, loving healer, in all the ways that He shines through the face of Jesus Christ (see Col. 1:15–18). I will also ask you to look with fresh eyes to see your spouse and to see the hurt caused by the affair. This is a miserable, painful, bad-tasting medicine, and I don't believe there is a way to add sugar or to make it taste anything other than awful. It's like chemotherapy. You will get nauseated and unbearably weary, but it's your best shot at surviving.

I invite you not just to gain insight and understanding but also to act. There will be some questions for reflection throughout, as well as tasks. Actions both change you and show that you have changed. Keep in mind 2 Peter 1:5–9 as a model of the action and insight required of you: “Make every effort [i.e., take action] to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and

to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge [i.e., insight] of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins” (NIV)

In the time leading up to, during, and sometimes long after infidelity, we experience nearsightedness and some degree of blindness regarding our Christian identity. We lose sight of and forget our family identity as the ones “cleansed from their past sins.” And losing sight of this is still a danger for you, as you seek to move forward from infidelity. So remember, throughout all the hard work, that God cleanses people from their sins through Jesus. We must keep this before our eyes: He alone makes us clean, and we cannot save ourselves. And yet, the more deeply we know Jesus, the more productive and effective our hard work is. Out of the confidence that we belong to Him and have His love, we make every effort.

Forming a new pattern of life requires continual conscious effort, but it becomes more natural. After much hard work and reliance on the grace of God, you wake up one day realizing that you have been walking in a very different direction. What once felt impossible is becoming reflexive. You more naturally love what God loves. You more readily walk in step with the Spirit. These will be the moments when you sense that the Good Shepherd is leading you out of the valley of the shadow of death to green grass and waters of rest, and that you are excited to walk with Him. Let’s take the first step.

STARTING WELL

When infidelity first comes to light, you may feel a mix of energy and discouragement. You want to try to make things better, but since the weight of it all can be so heavy, it's vital for us to start with words of hope. So we look to Christ as our healer, our only judge, and the one who ultimately will vindicate us. It's a long process, so you must find partners in the fight for your soul and your marriage. There are many obstacles, both outside and inside you. You may face conflicts with others and their expectations of your progress. You may grow weary and resentful of the process. Pace yourself for the road ahead, but don't give up dreaming that it leads somewhere truly good.

DAY 1

Faithful in Hope

What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat. . . . The faithful have been swept from the land; not one upright person remains. . . . But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me. Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light. (Mic. 7:1, 2, 7–8 NIV)

MY DAD LIKES to go blueberry picking. He calls it his Saturday-morning therapy. I've gone with him before, and I see why he likes it. It isn't really fun late in the season, though, when all the bushes are picked over. It's a frustrating experience. You don't see much that is good.

When you look out on your life, perhaps what you see is this but much worse: empty bushes everywhere (see Mic. 7:1)—a picture of the devastation and bleakness that sin leaves in its wake.

The fact that you picked up this devotional means that you're the one saying, "As for me, I watch in hope for the Lord." Though you have fallen, you hope that in God's time you will rise.

We have a powerful enemy. He loves to see us fall. He would love for sin to be the end of us all. He'd love to gloat over us, especially when we sit in a dark place. If you feel trapped in a dark place as you're sitting here reading, remember this: while you sit in your dark holding cell outside the courtroom, inside the Lord Himself pleads your case.

Our enemy is our adversary in court. He wants us on the stand so that he can accuse us of everything and throw the book at us. "Has God not said _____?" He knows the Bible well, and he uses it to tempt us to failures in the first place, then toward

despair after our failures. A job well done for him is a fallen saint discouraged. Is he getting to you? Do you feel hopeless?

You have the best Lawyer there is. And He begs the Judge for mercy on your behalf.

Reflect: What is your darkness? What dark thoughts and circumstances do you face today? Do you find yourself wanting to defend yourself from the accusations you face?

Act: Pray. Invite God to plead your case for you, and invite Him to give you the hope of light for as long as your darkness persists.

DAY 2

Faithfully Hopeless

To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame. . . . To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him. . . . We do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. (Dan. 9:7, 9, 18–19)

SOMETIMES WHAT HURTS the most is the feeling that there is no way out of the mess you are in. Sometimes we have only ourselves to thank for being in it, and we feel very little hope. In the Bible we see pictures of God's people in these kinds of situations, and surprisingly, we see them asking for things that seem almost too bold to ask. They have almost no hope—they even have every indication from God that they stand under judgment. And yet they come seeking Him anyway.

In the passage above, Daniel not only confesses and grieves—he also makes a bold request. He's saying, "Although we are responsible for the breakdown in our relationship with you, we are your people. We bear your name. We have not earned anything from you, and we are not in a place of deserving something that we can demand from you. But please, do something. If not for us, then at least for Your own sake—it has to be an embarrassment to You that the people who belong to You in a special way are the ones in ruin."

This is the kind of relationship that God invites us to have with Him. We can ask for great things, even when we believe that we have no reason to expect good things. Daniel felt that the Word of God itself was saying "no deliverance" for seventy years (see Dan. 9:2). But his response was to *ask anyway*. He saw the devastation of sin, and he grieved, confessed, and asked boldly

for healing. This is a strong kind of hope—for Daniel, and for us today.

Reflect: Is your “hope gauge” registering any activity? When do you notice it flagging?

Reflect: Do you struggle with feeling unworthy to ask God for what is on your heart (e.g., forgiveness or reconciliation with family)?

Act: Turn to the Lord and pray. Be honest about the messiness of your life—and then, even if you feel hopeless, ask for help. Let Daniel’s prayer become your own: “God, please do something.”

DAY 3

Knowing the Healer

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:16–17 NIV)

MANY YEARS AGO, after I had been working the same tutoring job for a while, a coworker suggested that I ask for a raise. It was a great idea, I’m sure—but I didn’t ask. I was embarrassed to ask. I had often been late filling out and turning in my time sheets. I wanted to look like I deserved the raise, so I felt like I needed to be better for a little while before asking.

Have you ever felt that impulse? It happens in many areas of life. People who are dealing with alcohol or sex addictions will always want a few days of being clean before admitting to someone that they’ve had a fall. They—and we—usually treat God the same way. We want a few days of being clean before we pray again. But the old hymn warns us, “If you tarry till you’re better, you will never come at all.”¹

I believe that we hesitate because we have a hard time accepting that God is genuinely, meaningfully merciful. If you are like me, you will not want to come to God until you feel clean. But that’s the very reason why we have to come to God. He is the one who will wash us and make us clean.

When Jesus wants to wash the disciples’ feet, Peter protests, “No—I should be the one washing your feet.” And Jesus says, “Unless you let me wash your feet, you have no part of me” (see John 13:6–8).² Jesus has to say it almost with harshness, because

it is so important. Shame and embarrassment are that bad. They really could keep you from Jesus.

We can't shrink back in shame. But we do have to know that we're dirty and sick. Only then can we be cleaned and cured.

Going to the doctor makes sense only if you are not well. Jesus didn't come to help people who thought they had their act together and felt no sense of need. He came for the sick—for sinners who are coughing and dirty, who are walking into the ER without health insurance. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick," Jesus says. And He calls the sick to the health of repentance. Who do sinners find pursuing them? This Great Physician is not a distant, sterile doctor in a white coat but one who is "not ashamed to call [us] brothers" (Heb. 2:11).

Reflect: Have you started the conversation with God yet? If not, what kinds of things do you think are holding you back?

Reflect: Are people telling you that you aren't taking things seriously enough or that you sound like you're minimizing or blame-shifting? Consider whether you feel yet that you need the Great Physician.