

~~Rid of My Dis~~grace

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb
with Stephanie R. Hurter**

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INTRODUCTION

Current statistics indicate that one in four women and one in six men have experienced sexual abuse. Society and the shame associated with sexual abuse often work together to cause victims to remain silent about their experience. Sadly, the church has also struggled with responding well and has therefore not always been a place of healing.

With the introduction of books such as *Rid of My Disgrace (ROMD)*, the church is being offered an opportunity to reexamine what it means to care for sexual abuse victims. This workbook is meant to provide a useful structure for victims who want to explore the issues raised in the book in a deeper, more intentional manner. Because we believe that God has designed us as communal creatures, we have designed this workbook for use in the context of a support group. For those interested in learning how to start or lead one of these groups, we recommend that you read through the associated leader's resource.

* * *

Dr. Diane Langberg has summarized the horrific nature of abuse as leaving victims feeling voiceless, powerless, and distrustful of relationships.¹ Our desire in providing this guide is to help you hear God's voice affirming your great worth, see his power active in restoring and healing your life, and find his grace empowering you to move toward community in the body of Christ. We pray that through prayerful self-reflection and the support of a *ROMD* group you will rediscover the hope of the gospel and the God behind that gospel who "calls you by name" (Isaiah 43:1).

DEFINITIONS

Most people think sexual abuse is limited to rape. However, sexual abuse can take many forms: psychological and verbal abuse, physical intimidation, inappropriate viewing and touching, as well as physical assault. Anyone who has experienced any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent was not freely given or obtained and was accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threats, deception, or abuse of authority is a survivor of sexual abuse and should know that hope and help are available to address the ramifications of such horrific behavior committed against you.

GROUP FORMAT

Rid of My Disgrace: Small Group Discussion Guide is designed to facilitate a support group where individuals can come together, hear a short meditation focused on applying the gospel to their experience, and share openly about the abuse and trauma experienced. Group meditations are based on, *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*. For those in need of particular counseling or direction, the leaders are happy to suggest venues where specialized counseling can occur.

Much like other support groups (Al-Anon, AA, etc.), the goal is not to “fix” people, but to offer a community where hurting Christians can come together and support one another by listening, grieving, and offering comfort.

Each meeting follows the same format: At the start of every meeting, the group recites a psalm together and then the leader reads a five-minute meditation that serves as the foundation for our conversation. After the introduction, we spend approximately 45 minutes discussing questions and sharing personal stories related to the topic. You are welcome and encouraged to share from your own story during these small group times—this could be by retelling from your past or from something that happened today. However, you are not required

to share and we welcome you to listen until you feel comfortable speaking.

COMMITMENTS

We ask all participants to commit to the following when joining a group:

1. Keep the names of the others in the group in confidence.
2. Do not discuss the content of the meeting outside of the group.
3. Commit to attend as many of the eight weeks as possible and to let the group coordinator(s) know when you will not be able to attend.
4. Speak respectfully of others as they share.
5. Avoid “cross talk.” This does not mean we don’t talk about the cross of Christ. Rather, it refers to speaking across the table at another participant. Cross talk has two elements to it. First, it occurs when two individuals engage in conversation excluding all others. It also occurs when one person seeks to tell another person what they should do in a particular situation. We know that sometimes people may be eager to share with others how they were helped, but in this group format we want to allow the participants to feel the freedom to share without fear they will be told “how to be fixed.”

GROUP GUIDE

Every participant is encouraged to engage with the group and the recommended resources according to their comfort level. The discussion guide consists of weekly at-home activities and group activities. The at-home activities include a reading suggestion from *Rid of My Disgrace* and questions to further reflect on the reading and provide an opportunity for self-reflection. While you are welcome to work through all suggested questions, we recognize that these are difficult

topics to cover and so encourage you to be patient with yourself and go at a pace that seems best for you. We encourage you to make this guide your own—use the wide margins to take notes or write responses to the suggested questions.

Rid of My Disgrace Small Group Discussion Guide is designed to be repeated as many times as you want, and so see the questions, activities, and readings in the guide as options to be pursued, as you feel ready and able.

ACTIVITIES

We strongly encourage all participants to adopt the practice of journaling at least once a week. Suggested journaling topics are provided with each week's lesson. Journal writing is intended to be free-form writing for a specific period of time. The best way to do this is to set a timer for a specific amount of time (usually 15–20 minutes) and during that time to write nonstop everything that comes to mind. Don't stop writing and don't censor what you write. No need to worry about grammar, punctuation, or spelling. The goal is to write uncritically—even if all you can think to write about is how you can't think of anything to write. As you do this more often, you will have more to say and you will find that this becomes a healing process. This type of journaling helps push people beyond typical filters of saying and thinking what you think you "should" and really listening and learning what is going on inside. It also will help you learn to separate out your voice, the abuser's voice, and God's voice in your mind, which often are confused as a result of abuse.²

Not only do we encourage you to tell your story, but we also encourage you to write about how you feel after you tell your story. After we share about such a deeply personal and painful experience we can often experience fear or other strong emotions. Reflect on how you feel after you have written. How do you feel about yourself? How do you feel about others in your life related to this experience? Are you

afraid something will happen as a result of writing down the truth of your experience?

Another healing activity, especially if you are an artistic person, is to draw, paint, or make collages as a way to express your feelings or emotions. Feel free to bring your journal and/or art to the group meeting if you would like to share something from it.

As you write, draw, or spend time in quiet reflection, we encourage you to continually ask God to reveal what is true. This truth could be about the extent to which you have been wounded by your experience of abuse, your perception of yourself, and/or your belief about God. God welcomes you to ask and promises that he will lead you in paths of truth.

IN CONCLUSION

We meet together not because we believe we can heal ourselves or each other. Instead, we believe that Christ has chosen the body as a means of helping one another to discover his healing.

We meet together not to discover a particular pattern or method for healing. Instead, we seek a relationship with the Healer.

We know that Christ is the Savior who always sought out the hurting, alienated, and shamed individuals. He was the one who sought out the outcasts. Even more importantly, he has sought *you* and called *you* to himself. And he does this already knowing the deep dark places inside you that bring you such pain. He knows and he calls you to himself to be washed clean, made pure, and loved in a way that is beyond comprehension. We invite you to join us in knowing this grace-filled God and experiencing what it means to be rid of your disgrace.

WEEK

1

DISGRACE

The journey toward healing from sexual abuse starts with putting words to our disgrace. It begins with acknowledging the severe wrong done to us and opening ourselves up to accept God's redeeming, hope-inducing grace.

Applying Grace *at home*

READING ASSIGNMENT

Chapter one of *Rid of My Disgrace*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1: Use your own words to define *grace* and *disgrace*. How have you experienced each in your life?

2: How have people in your life responded to your story of abuse? How did their response make you feel? Has this impacted how you relate to others?

3: On page 21, the authors unpack Christ's suffering. How does the knowledge of Christ's suffering impact your view of your suffering?

4: Read back through Tamar's story. Replace names in the story to make it more personal. List the emotions you feel as you read this story as your own.

5: Read through your list of emotions from above and find psalms or other Scripture passages that respond to those emotions. For example, if you wrote, "I feel dirty," then you may want to write down John 15:3, "Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

JOURNALING

This week write about moments in your life that exemplify experiences of feeling disgrace and grace. You may want to try writing your own psalm (Psalm 6 is a good psalm to imitate). Or you may want to create art that expresses your feelings about your experiences.

PRAYER

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities, which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts, which may assault and hurt the soul. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.³

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

Jeremiah 17:14

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed;
save me, and I shall be saved,
for you are my praise.

Sharing Grace *at support group*

WELCOME

If you are here, sexual abuse has touched your life in some way. We are grateful you are here and want to emphasize that your life is intended for more than shame, guilt, and pain.

The abuse you experienced does not define you. It is part of your story, but not the end. What happened to you was not your fault. You are not to blame. You did not ask for it or deserve it. You are not worthless because of it. You were sinned against. You should not be silenced.

We meet together to share our stories and through sharing our experiences to learn how God offers us healing from our past and hope for our future.

We request that you do not share with others outside this group the names of those who attend and that everything stated in these meetings remain confidential.

We ask that you refrain from commenting on other people's story, offering counsel and advice, or participating in any type of "cross-talk."

Please respect others by keeping your sharing to three to five minutes.

PSALM 6

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;

heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.

My soul also is greatly troubled.

I am weary with my moaning;

every night I flood my bed with tears;

I drench my couch with my weeping.

My eye wastes away because of grief;

it grows weak because of all my foes.

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Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
The LORD has heard my plea;
the LORD accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.

PERSONAL GOALS

Write down one thing you hope to get out of the next eight meetings.

Write down one thing you promise to do during the next eight meetings. (For example: I commit to journaling weekly to process what occurs in group.)

MEDITATION (*RID OF MY DISGRACE*, CHAPTER ONE)

During this session we will discuss what it means to be a victim of sexual abuse. Let's begin by defining our terms. The term *sexual*

assault encompasses a large number of sexual behaviors—physical, verbal, and psychological—that violate the agency and well-being of an individual. Sexual abuse is any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.

Can you identify with feeling violated, intimidated, and manipulated? Do you feel disgraced? Sadly, for many of us, disgrace increases when others refuse to hear our story. The refusals of others to speak about sexual abuse or to listen to victims tell their story is a refusal to offer grace and healing. We are gathered here to say to your feelings of disgrace: **God offers grace.**

Reading others' stories of disgrace often helps us process our own story. Second Samuel 13 recounts the sexual assault of one of King David's daughters, Tamar. The story begins with David's son, Amnon, plotting to rape his sister. Listen to Samuel as he recounts the horrific event:

So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand." Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him." So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. . . . And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." She answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame?" . . . But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Get up! Go!” . . . And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went. And her brother Absalom said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart.” . . . When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. (2 Samuel 13:6–21)

Tamar’s experience included manipulation, force, violence, negation of her will, emotional trauma, debilitating loss of sense of self, display of grief and mourning, crushing shame, forced silence, and prolonged social isolation. Further, compounding the pain, her brother Absalom told her to be silent and her father, David, felt anger but did nothing.

How does this story make you feel? Are your palms sweaty? Is your heart racing? Do you feel numb? Amnon’s rape and the response of Tamar’s family is *wrong* and we should react to it. God does.

In verse 13, Tamar puts words to the anguish experienced by abuse victims when she asks, “Where could I get rid of my disgrace?” God answers, not by rational explanation, but through relationship with his Son, *Jesus Christ*. Christ enters into your sense of disgrace knowing what it feels like to be shamed and mocked, to be disbelieved and lied about, and ultimately to be left alone. To those whose life has been filled with disgrace, **Christ offers to enter your pain and shame not merely to empathize, but to radically free you.** We understand that moving from disgrace to grace is a process and so hope the next eight weeks will offer all here the blessing of experiencing what it means to be met by the suffering servant, the God of all grace.

As we share tonight, feel free to draw from the readings in *ROMD* or from the questions listed in the workbook.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT OURSELVES?

- What words would you use to describe your experience of feeling disgraced?

- Where have you gone or what have you done to try to get rid of your disgrace?

WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT HOW WE RELATE TO OTHERS?

- How have others heightened your experience of disgrace?

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- Do you often feel alone or misunderstood by others because of your past experience? How does this affect how you approach friendships in the church?

WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT GOD?

- What does it teach us about God that he included the story of Tamar in Scripture?

- What does it mean that Jesus Christ took your disgrace?

BENEDICTION

2 Corinthians 13:11–14

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you . . .

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.