

Finding Hope: Helping a Sexual Abuse Survivor Reframe Her Story



by CECELIA BERNHARDT

It was a scene I have come to know well. Sally and I had met many times and there was a sense of trust between us.¹ She now sat across from me staring off into space—her hands shaking, hesitant to speak. After a few minutes, she confided in a hoarse whisper, “I was sexually abused by my brother.” My heart sank, and I was filled with compassion for her. I comforted Sally by acknowledging her pain and affirming the courage that it took for her to share her childhood abuse with me. My second response, though I kept it to myself, was anger. I was angry against the heinous act that had brought great suffering to Sally for the twenty years she had endured between her abuse and our conversation. My responses were only a shadow of what Sally had faced and would continue to face as we worked together to help her address the wounds left by the abuse. Could there be hope for healing and growth for Sally after all that she had suffered?

1. My interactions with Sally have been cited from interactions with multiple counselees over the years. Sally is not the name of an actual counselee.

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This may sound like a question with an obvious answer. But in my years of working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I have found that the answer varies among survivors and the counselors who work with them. When suffering has been so deep and impactful, many do

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not believe that survivors can experience true healing and growth in this world. They believe that the best they can do is come to grips with the particular consequences that have unfolded and accept a diminished life.

But is a diminished life what we find in Scripture?

No, not at all. Scripture reveals a caring God who invites us to live lives of hope and change. There is real sin and suffering to be faced—we can't deny that reality.

But in his Word, God supplies a metanarrative for all of us where he brings life from death, meaning out of suffering, and healing from the evils of sin. It explains what has happened so far in the world (creation, fall, redemption) and what will happen at the end (consummation).

In short, though God created a good world, evil entered it through Adam and Eve's disobedience. But God intervened immediately with a plan to overcome the evil through the offspring of the woman—Jesus. His voluntary death reversed the power of sin and death, making it possible for us to look forward to living eternally in a renewed Eden with no more suffering or sorrow. Though we live in the time in between where we are “not yet” safe from evil, we “already” have resurrection power at work within us. It is this hope and this power that enables us to overcome evil's direct impact on us even now, as we wait for his final promises to be realized.

But for survivors of childhood sexual abuse to find healing in the present, they must see that their life story is set within God's deeper and grander story. This realization changes the meaning of the suffering they have endured. It opens their hearts to receive God's presence and care for them in the present, and it enables them to hope for peace and glory in the end. As biblical counselors, we have the opportunity to help

them see that healing and growth are possible for them *now* as their story unfolds.

Over many decades of ministry, I have developed a way to help survivors grasp these realities.² I will not be able to discuss the full process of counseling here; instead, I will focus on the most basic and important parts of it.³ Helping survivors wrestle with the question “what is the true and full story of who I am?” gives them room to both acknowledge the deep impact of their abuse and to reduce its impact on their future. This happens in three steps: (1) slowing down to consider their experience of abuse and how it may still impact them, (2) viewing the abuse as only one chapter of their life story, and then (3) exploring how their life story is woven into God’s overarching narrative of redemption. We will begin, however, with a definition of abuse and a discussion of its impacts on victims.

How Childhood Sexual Abuse Impacts a Survivor

Childhood sexual abuse occurs in “any interaction between a child and an adult (or another [older] child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer.”⁴ The offense includes not only physical interactions such as fondling a child’s genitals, penetration, rape, sodomy, or the perpetrator asking the child to touch them, but also includes any exploitation which forces, tricks, entices, threatens, or pressures a child to participate in noncontact acts such as viewing pornography or describing sexual activity for the stimulation of another.⁵ Sexual abuse is an extreme expression of evil where the perpetrator uses

2. I will use the term *survivor* in this article to describe women who suffered sexual abuse as children but who are now adults. I have chosen to do this because 95% of my counseling of survivors has been with women. Men, of course, are victims of abuse as well, with similar consequences, and the basic premises described here will also be helpful to them.

3. A CCEF course will be offered in 2024 that will cover the full process of counseling survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

4. “Sexual Abuse,” National Child Traumatic Stress Network, March 22, 2023, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/sexual-abuse>.

5. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 718.

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