

FORGIVEN

AND

SET FREE

A Bible Study for Women
Seeking Healing After Abortion

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How Do I Know Where I Need Healing?

Screams of anguish come from Ramah,
Weeping unrestrained;
Rachel weeping for her children,
Uncomforted—
For they are dead.

Matthew 2:18 TLB

Grieving is a normal and healthy response to a major loss through death. It is a painful process but one that helps relieve our sorrow. After an abortion, we may attempt to bury our grief, turn off our emotions, or run from God. It is difficult to face the reality of abortion as a matter of life and death.

The grieving of women following an abortion is similar to the grieving of women who have had a miscarriage. Both move through the stages of grief as seen in psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's classic model.¹ These stages are denial, anger, depression, and acceptance, and

they are not necessarily experienced in a linear fashion, nor does every person experience each stage.

Both groups of women experience guilt, but the source of this guilt is not the same. Women who have had a miscarriage often feel guilty because they don't know what role they played in their child's death. Women who choose abortion often feel guilty because they *do* know what part they played in their child's death, and many will experience "forbidden grief."

Society doesn't allow women who've chosen abortion to grieve like those who've experienced a miscarriage. When a miscarriage occurs, the death of the baby is acknowledged because the child is viewed as having been alive, and rightly so. When abortion is chosen, the humanity of the child is disavowed, and therefore, in this mindset, there is no need to mourn. It's not seen as a loss; it's seen as a choice. But the loss does exist because the life existed. The term "forbidden grief" was coined by Theresa Burke in her book *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion*.² She speaks of secret sorrow that cannot be shared or confronted and how it can impact every aspect of a person's life. Women who choose abortion experience the emotions related to grief but do not have a socially acceptable way to express them, and this can compound their loss.

Women overwhelmingly say they experience relief after having an abortion—the "problem" is solved, and the hope is that life will go back to normal. Relief precedes the first stage of grieving. In this stage we may think, *Thank God, I am not pregnant anymore. All the uncertainty of the previous weeks is now over, and I feel relieved.* But there comes a point in time when the relief of having had the abortion may be overshadowed by the regret that leads to denial. It is difficult to cope with the memories of the abortion experience. It is common to try to deny that the abortion ended the life of a child. You may think, *No, it wasn't a baby at this stage; it was just a blob of tissue. It was just a medical procedure.*

Moving out of denial is a different process for each individual; for some women it may take years, but for others it might only be weeks, if not days. Some women end their denial when they see pictures of fetal development and realize how human their unborn baby was at the time of the abortion. Other women confront their loss when they carry a wanted pregnancy. What was viewed as a blob of tissue is now viewed as a baby. Many of us come to see the truth of our actions when we stop running from God and begin to seek him with all our heart.

My hope and prayer for you is that you will indeed be forgiven and set free. This book is intended to be a safe place for you to process your difficult decision and give yourself permission to acknowledge and grieve the loss of your child. All of this is a process, and we'll walk through it all together.

Many women become angry as they move out of denial. You may think, *The clinic should have told me the truth about fetal development; they should have told me about adoption.* Or, *My parents should not have been so concerned about what others thought.* Or, *God should have stopped me.* In this stage, you may dwell on the ways you have been hurt and influenced by others for the decision to abort, or you may direct that anger inward. This anger often goes unexpressed and may lead to bitterness, interfering with other areas of your life.

In getting rid of this anger, our invitation is to learn to forgive. Forgiving is one of the most difficult steps toward healing, and often we set up conditions that must be met by others before we will truly forgive. You may think, *I'll forgive the father if he shows similar feelings of regret.* Or, *I'll forgive my parents when they show me they care more about me than about what others think.* We finally realize we cannot change our past nor change others. We can, however, change our response to our hurt and anger. We can then choose to forgive unconditionally and make room in our lives for love.

Depression may be another stage of grieving. It may present as experiencing the full weight of one's sadness or as clinical depression that may be longer lasting. Either may require the help of medical

professionals. The role women played in their baby's death can fill them with guilt, shame, self-condemnation, and self-pity. Harmful behaviors such as excessive drug and alcohol use or suicidal tendencies may manifest in this stage. Through these behaviors women attempt to ease the pain of guilt. You may think, *I should have listened to my conscience.* Or, *I should have at least given my baby life.* Or, *I should have stood up to the others around me.*

In moving out of the stage of depression, you are no longer angry with yourself but have accepted responsibility for your decision and now surround yourself with God's loving forgiveness.

The final stage of grieving is acceptance. At this point you have forgiven those who hurt you and accepted God's forgiveness. You have acknowledged all the emotions that accompany grieving and faced them head-on. Your grief is no longer forbidden or hidden. You begin to express gratitude for the growth experienced and often desire to share with others what you have learned. In acceptance, you eagerly watch God as he turns your painful experience into a blessing. You have a deeper understanding of God's plan for your life and see how this painful process of grieving fits into his plan.

The questions in this section are based on the real-life experiences of women who have had abortions. In reading through these questions, be aware of any emotional or physical responses you may have and record them. Answering these questions honestly will put you in touch with areas of your life that have been affected by your abortion, and this honest, nonjudgmental awareness is the first step in your healing process.

1. Do you tend to look at your life in terms of before and after the abortion? Has your self-esteem changed?

2. When abortion is mentioned in public, do you find that you react physically (e.g., tightening your stomach muscles, clenching your jaw, holding your breath)?

3. Do you find yourself avoiding books, magazines, and television programs that deal with the subject of abortion? Do you change the subject in conversations that deal with abortion?

4. Are you affected by physical reminders (babies, pregnant women, baby clothes) of your abortion? Are you uncomfortable around children?

5. Has your attitude toward relationships changed? Do you find yourself avoiding relationships or becoming more dependent in them? Do you have difficulty with intimacy?

6. Are you resentful and unforgiving toward anyone for his or her involvement in your abortion? This might include parents, a boyfriend or husband, doctors or medical staff, friends, or yourself.

7. Do you find yourself rationalizing why you are better off without this child in your life today?

8. If you have children now, do you feel overprotective toward them? Are you unable to bond with the children you have now? If you do not have children, do you fear that you will never be able to have them? Do you fear you may have suffered physical harm because of the abortion?

9. When talking about your abortion, are you overcome with sorrow, anger, or guilt? Have you been able to grow emotionally since then, or do you feel stuck or stopped in time? Do you find yourself repeating harmful patterns?

10. Have you felt a vague sort of emptiness leading to a deep sense of loss? Have you experienced periods of prolonged depression?

11. Did you begin to use drugs and alcohol or increase your intake following your abortion? Do you have suicidal thoughts? Are you denying yourself any basic needs to punish yourself? Do you struggle with eating, whether withholding food or overeating for comfort?

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12. Are you compelled to conceal your abortion from certain people in your life, or are you compelled to tell many people about your abortion experience? Do you find yourself striving to make your career, education, or relationships successful to prove the abortion was the right choice?
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13. Did your relationship with or concept of God change after your abortion? Did it bring you closer to God or turn you away from him?
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After finishing this questionnaire, you may be aware of other areas of your life that have been affected by your abortion. Use the space provided to record these areas.

Journal about your abortion experience. Include how the decision was made and who was involved in the decision-making process. Describe your experience at the clinic and how you felt afterward. If you are comfortable, you may choose to share with your group.

SAMPLE CHAPTER



GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

How Do I Know Where I Need Healing?

Opening Prayer

Pray the following Scripture:

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted. (Matt. 5:4)

Discussion Questions

1. What do you remember about the details of your abortion experience?
2. How were you changed emotionally, physically, or spiritually following your abortion?
3. What areas of your life would you like to see healed?

Closing Prayer