

FROM  
*Broken Vows*  
TO  
Healed  
*Hearts*

SEEKING GOD AFTER DIVORCE THROUGH  
COMMUNITY, SCRIPTURE, AND JOURNALING

..... LEADER'S GUIDE .....

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Publications

*“We weren’t created to be independent, autonomous, or self-sufficient. . . .  
Our lives were designed to be community projects.”*

PAUL DAVID TRIPP,

*Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy*

The healing process after divorce is long, slow, and painful, but it can also become liberating and joyful. Throughout my divorce, I have needed other women who had gone through or were going through similar journeys to validate my feelings, buoy me emotionally, reveal my blind spots, and provide hope for recovery. My healing journey has been a community project.

Your community might consist of you and a girlfriend or a few women from your church. You could commit to meeting together for mutual support without designating one particular leader. As you open your hearts to God’s touch, He will richly bless your friendships and bring healing.

God could also be calling you to lead a group of women through this journey, even if you have never led a group before. Being the group leader doesn’t mean you have to have it all figured out or be completely done with your own healing. It doesn’t mean you have to be a professional counselor, biblical scholar, or teacher. You won’t be perfect or have all the answers.

If you have a heart for other hurting women and you want to offer a venue for the healing power and love of God to work in community, you can lead a group. Being a leader means being willing to say, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isa. 6:8).

I don’t have a degree in counseling or communication—and I’m actually an introvert—but I’ve had the privilege of leading many women’s small group Bible studies, most recently using this material. The following information doesn’t cover all that could be said about small group dynamics or Bible study discussion, of course. I focus more on the special needs, opportunities, and dynamics I’ve experienced in leading several groups through *From Broken Vows to Healed Hearts*.

## **Finding Women**

Unfortunately, divorce is quite prevalent today, even among Christians, so it is not difficult to find women or friends of friends who are separated, recently divorced, or still hurting years after their divorce. You can advertise through a church bulletin or website, but simply by word of mouth and personal invitation may be the best ways to find your group members.

Another woman you may want to find is a coleader. Perhaps she will lead with you from the beginning, or she may emerge from within the group. Ask God for His promptings and wisdom in choosing a coleader.

## **First Individual Contact**

Often the women who contacted me about my group weren’t sure if it was right for them, depending on where they were in the separation or divorce process or how accustomed they were to group Bible studies. I would listen, ask a few questions, explain the goals and procedures of the group, and then sometimes offer to meet for coffee for further conversation. Meeting in person ahead of time helps women feel more comfortable joining a group of strangers at a very emotionally devastating time in life. It also helps you to know their particular story or needs, and whether they are a good fit for the group.

Not everybody who expresses interest will join or stay in the group. Sometimes a woman would express

eagerness to join and promise to be at the next meeting, but then I'd never hear from her again. Responses like this may frustrate you or make you wonder what you're doing wrong. Don't take it personally. Unless you feel nudged otherwise by the Holy Spirit, I recommend making two "touches" (email, text, or phone call) and then leaving it up to them to contact you if they are interested. You are not responsible for getting them to come, but you can pray, be available to talk, and trust that God will bring the people He wants together.

### **First Group Contact**

As with any support group, spend time during the first session promoting the advantages of meeting together for this healing journey, especially when isolation has such a strong pull. Hopefully very early on, women will experience these benefits:

- Diminished feelings of being all alone
- Feelings of normalcy as they experience similar thoughts, emotions, and difficulties as others in the group
- Support and acceptance from others
- Fulfillment in sometimes shifting their focus to others' needs
- Opportunities to hear and see God's love and power in answered prayer
- More of God's love through the love of others

For this to occur, group members need to feel safe. Be sure to cover group guidelines (see appendix A in the book), especially regarding confidentiality and acceptance.

Also be aware that some women may have a very close relationship with God while others may be seeking God for the first time or after a long absence. Our desperation during divorce has a way of activating our need for God. As a leader, you may have the gift of becoming part of this silver lining in their divorce experience, pointing hurting women toward the God of all comfort. Have extra Bibles ready and remember that your group may have a diverse range of Bible knowledge.

### **Group Sharing Dynamics**

Hurting women often need to talk. Creating an atmosphere of safety and acceptance will quickly bond the members of your group. (Be sure to have a box of tissues handy.) You can also build community by creating a private Facebook page, sharing prayer requests, committing to praying for one other person throughout the week, contacting a secret partner with a word of encouragement, or having a fun night out.

I have some cautionary advice, however, about sharing time. As with any group, some members are naturally more talkative than others and may unwittingly monopolize the conversation, especially when they're emotionally distraught. This makes it difficult for quieter women to find the pauses and promptings they need to share. Certainly someone may have had a hard week and need to share more, but in general, protect equal sharing opportunities. Here are some strategies:

- Remind the whole group of the value and need to hear each person who wants to share. (Again, see appendix A in the book.)
- Directly address the speaker, thanking them for sharing and confirming their need for prayer—maybe even praying at the moment—and then move on.
- Directly ask one individual to share (but always give permission to pass).

- Set a timer when you want everybody to answer a question. This has worked well for me in 12-step groups.
- Ask everybody to write down whatever is weighing heavily on their minds, place it in a bowl, and pray over it. This works especially well at the very beginning or if time is short.
- Share briefly in twos or threes, depending on the size of your group.

One very important piece of cautionary advice is to be prepared to steer away from (ex-)husband bashing. Although speaking truth against abuse, adultery, abandonment, or any other mistreatment is certainly justified and has its place, allowing too much focus on the negatives that the women in your group have no power to fix can lead to being stuck in a victim mentality. You are gathering together to focus on yourselves and to share how you are coping, healing, and growing. This shift in thinking is where the power to thrive lies.

Another reason to avoid (ex-)husband bashing lies in the truth that we are all sinners. We have all made mistakes in our marriages and mistreated our spouses. Men do not have a corner on sin, even the sin of adultery. Be sensitive that you may have a woman in the group who has committed adultery herself, and she may not return if she feels judged.

### **Covering the Material**

As a group facilitator, you can decide or discuss with the group what your goals are as a community. One of my top goals was to share what God was teaching us through our devotional journaling time. Keeping in mind that not everyone is able to do the homework each week, here are some ideas for sharing:

- Ask the group to share one insight from their journaling or reading in *From Broken Vows to Healed Hearts* that week.
- Read one of the devotionals out loud. Ask one of the journaling questions, or simply ask which sentence in the devotional most resonates with them.
- Ask a group member to share which day's devotional touched them that week and why. (Consider asking ahead of time for the following week.)
- Begin each meeting by reading that week's letter from God as an opening prayer. Have the group share their responses to the letter.
- Read the Psalm of the week out loud. Briefly discuss how it relates to the topic of the week.
- Have one or two group members read out loud the verse that meant the most to them from the devotionals that week and briefly explain how it impacted them.

### **Bible Study**

Studying the Word of God brings much-needed hope and comfort during this tumultuous time. As a leader, your role is not to preach or have all the answers but to facilitate a discussion on Bible passages so your group can discover together what the Bible has to say. Preface your study time by explaining to group members that the studies offer an opportunity for deeper reflection on God's character and role in our lives. Each person will have distinct, valuable insights and does not need to strive to match anyone else's insights.

The passages and questions have been provided for you. In general, the questions guide members from observation (What does it say?) to interpretation (What does it mean?) to application (What does it mean to me?). You can read them as they are or modify, delete, or add to them to fit your own style. Suggestions for each specific passage are provided at the end of this study guide.

Keep in mind these helpful hints:

- *Prepare well.* Read and reread the passage throughout the week, asking God to teach you and prepare the hearts of the women in the group.
- *Stick to the passage listed.* This leads to more in-depth study and allows everybody to participate equally regardless of their familiarity with the Bible.
- *Begin the study with prayer and then read the passage out loud.* Ask group members to pray and read as they feel comfortable. (Some people do not like to read out loud, and others may be very uncomfortable praying in front of group members.)
- *Don't be afraid of silence.* Silence usually means people are reading, thinking, or deciding what they want to share. Resist the temptation to answer the question yourself; instead, wait. After waiting, you can rephrase the question or direct them to look at particular verses.
- *Encourage more than one answer.* When people first begin to answer, they may look to you to see if they have given the “right” answer. Appreciate and acknowledge their answers and then ask questions like, “Would anybody else like to add to that?” or “Any other thoughts?” As the group members get more comfortable with each other, they will bounce off each other’s comments.
- *Be prepared to deal with tangents.* Tangents inevitably emerge in any group discussion, and they may even be Spirit-led. Often, however, one of your important tasks as a facilitator is to get the group back on topic to complete the study on time. Statements such as “That’s a great point, but in getting back to our study . . .” or “That makes me think about the verse in the passage where it says . . .” will help your group get back on track. Most group members easily accept redirection, and all members welcome ending on time.
- *End with a takeaway.* Allow time for members to share how the truths in the passage can help them in the weeks ahead.
- *Close in prayer.* Share prayer requests as time allows. Also (or instead of, if you’re short on time) have each woman write down her request on a piece of paper and put them in a bowl for other members to draw one and pray for throughout the week.

### **Maintain Healthy Boundaries**

As the group becomes closer, women will share very personal and intense emotions. Divorce recovery is a very needy time of life with heavy burdens. These burdens are not for you, the leader, to carry. You can easily get caught up in ministering to others, and you may start to do for them what they need to do for themselves, especially if you have codependent tendencies as I do. Remember that you are part of a community, and as a community, you all minister to each other; it’s not solely up to the leader. Also, just because someone in the group asks for help doesn’t mean you’re responsible to give it. At times, it may be best that you don’t. God’s plan may be for somebody else to serve her—somebody who is better equipped or simply needs to experience the blessing of serving. Certainly you will often provide support, but you also need to establish and practice healthy boundaries. Pray for discernment and follow God’s voice above all others.

### **Rely on God**

As a leader, you may be tempted to depend too much on your own limited knowledge or power. Paradoxically, you may also feel completely inadequate to do the task God has called you to do. Either way, depending on Him is absolutely essential.

To increase your dependence on God, here are a few things you can do:

- Recognize that God has developed many of your experiences, abilities, and desires to be used today in this study.
- Pray for wisdom and discernment.
- Pray for protection from the enemy’s attacks. Ask others to pray for protection as you lead and for your group as well.
- Release the burdens of your group and the work of healing to the Holy Spirit. You are the facilitator; God is the healer.
- Above all, walk closely with God, abiding in Him.

*Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you. (Isa. 12:4–6)*

## Helpful Tips for Weekly Bible Study

### ..... WEEK 1: RUTH 1 .....

Naomi experienced great tragedy, the loss of her husband and, years later, the loss of both her sons. Note how she has become bitter in her sorrow and repeatedly claims that God has brought this misfortune upon her. This is how she *feels*, of course, and while this may be a common and natural response, it doesn’t convey a biblical truth. Naomi’s suffering is a natural part of this fallen world, not a deliberate punishment from God. While Naomi grapples with painful suffering, we also see God’s provision through faithful Ruth. Be sure to encourage the group to read how the story ends or summarize it briefly to show how God redeems Naomi’s life and restores her to joy.

### ..... WEEK 2: 1 KINGS 19 .....

Share about how tenderly God treats Elijah. Even though Elijah has retreated to a cave after performing several extraordinary miracles, God feeds him and lets him rest. However, God doesn’t let Elijah remain in the cave; He urges him to return to his work as a prophet. He asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” implying this is not the place where God wants Elijah to be. Elijah doesn’t directly answer the question, even the second time, indicating he most likely doesn’t understand the question. We may have also retreated in our fear, pain, or depression, but God tenderly prompts us to return to the life to which He has called us. The Lord appearing to Elijah in a “gentle whisper” shows God’s willingness to deal with us gently when we are broken. Encourage your group to recognize how God is always at work in our lives, often in gentle, understated ways.

### ..... WEEK 3: LUKE 8:40–48 AND JOHN 8:1–11 .....

I love how Jesus’s words and actions toward these women communicated their worth. Jesus took the time to stop and engage with the bleeding woman, not letting her slip away unnoticed. For the woman caught in adultery, in the midst of her public humiliation, Jesus protects her, forgives her, and challenges her to live a better life. These women mattered, and Jesus was there in their loneliest and lowest moments. Direct discussion toward how Jesus treats your group members in their desperate moments.

..... WEEK 4: PSALM 23 .....

Knowledge of shepherding adds depth and insight to this beautiful psalm. If you have time, read a book or search online to better understand the metaphor of God as our shepherd. You may have heard that sheep are “stupid,” but I prefer the term “needy.” They can fall down or even lay down and then not be able to get back up on their own. If this happens, the shepherd has to find them and set them right on their feet, or they will die. Other parts of the psalm also highlight our neediness and God’s provision: the shepherd uses a rod to fend off predators that would attack the sheep and uses a staff to draw them close to himself when they need comfort or he’s concerned about them. This is a great reminder of God’s tender yet powerful care!

..... WEEK 5: NEHEMIAH 4; 6:15–16 .....

The rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls is a perfect metaphor for rebuilding our lives after divorce. The Israelites faced physical threats from their enemies and internal threats and fears from their own people. Nehemiah didn’t just pray; he took action, and God helped him complete the walls in fifty-two days. Ask about what opposition the women in your group fear. Ask in what spiritual and practical ways they can face that opposition. Encourage an honest discussion of what makes us afraid to move forward, and develop one practical step they can take this week to do so.

..... WEEK 6: JOHN 4:1–30, 39–42 .....

This is a long passage to get through in one meeting. Be careful not to get too sidetracked with unpacking the culturally complicated dialog, and focus instead on how Jesus treats a woman who is a Samaritan (half Jewish) and whose relationships have been repeatedly broken (she’s had five husbands and is currently living with a man). He recognizes that her past is part of who she is, but He doesn’t berate her about it. Instead of focusing on who she is and what she has done, He focuses on who He is and what He can offer her.

..... WEEK 7: GENESIS 45:1–15 .....

A lot happens to Joseph, which is summarized in the book, but you can also encourage your group members to read through Joseph’s story ahead of time, beginning in Genesis 37, to get a fuller picture of all that Joseph suffered at the hands of others. Forgiveness will be the most difficult topic for many women in the group, so knowing that Joseph is thirty-nine years old at this point in his journey may be helpful. After walking with God for many years and perhaps struggling with anger and bitterness, Joseph recognizes that “it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (v. 5). (Of course, this doesn’t mean God planned our divorces for higher purposes; it simply means He knew they would happen, and He can bring good from them.) Remind the women in your group that forgiveness is a process to be worked on for our own sakes.

..... WEEK 8: LUKE 9:1–6, 10–17 .....

This is a familiar miracle for some of the women in the group. Encourage them to read it with fresh eyes, trying to find new insights to apply to their current situations. They may notice that the disciples see limited resources and want to avoid dealing with the situation by sending the crowd away. Jesus asks them to bring Him what they do have, and He miraculously blesses their resources. Encourage the women in your group to identify their current resources, and pray for God to multiply what they already have in miraculous ways.

..... WEEK 9: MULTIPLE VERSES .....

This is the only study with multiple verses instead of one passage. During your preparation, read the surrounding verses to be familiar with the context. Encourage group members to take notes in their journals or

on a piece of paper about the new identity God speaks over them in each verse. Each woman could read a verse or two and share the impact of that identity in her current situation.

..... WEEK 10: PSALM 139 .....

This well-known passage offers insight into the depth of God's knowledge of who we are, including all of our current feelings and circumstances. Often women feel rejected and anything but beautiful during this time, so discussing verse 14 about being fearfully and wonderfully made can be particularly encouraging. In part of this psalm, David vents his anger against his enemies and then invites God to search his heart. Discuss the idea of being completely open with God, even in our dark places.

..... WEEK 11: 1 PETER 1:1-9 .....

Even after reading about all the benefits we have in Christ, women in the group may still struggle with feeling joyful. This is perfectly acceptable, of course, and you may need to guard against group members only offering up superficial, automatic Christian answers. Discuss the difference between joy and happiness. Encourage honest answers and questions regarding the correlation between trials and joy.

..... WEEK 12: JOHN 15:1-17 .....

Walking close to Jesus—abiding in Him—is the goal of this book, and of our lives, from beginning to end. This passage says Jesus is the vine, and we must remain connected to Him to bear fruit in our lives. The pruning of the branches is God cutting away unwanted parts of our lives so we can be more fruitful for Him. The cutting off of branches may refer to those who were never true believers in the first place. While you don't want to get sidetracked into a debate about whether or not we can lose our salvation, you could ask the women if they feel confident about their connection to Jesus. (See appendix B in the book for a sample salvation prayer.) Either way, focus on this metaphor of the growth process as a comfort and hope for the future.

## Final Thoughts

May God richly bless you and protect you as you heal together in community. I would love to hear your stories of how God has been healing your hearts and giving you a ministry to help heal others. Please visit my website at [rebeccamitchellauthor.com](http://rebeccamitchellauthor.com).

*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Eph. 1:17-19).*