

## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding Trauma

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Following my attack, I did what many people do after experiencing big “T” Trauma: I dissociated from the trauma as a survival response. Dissociation is a search for a sense of normality because the truth is too difficult to face. But this survival technique detaches a person from reality. If we do not process the reality of the trauma, its effects remain fully intact, stored silently in the brain until something triggers the stored memory.

Our first step in “going beyond survival” is to correctly name the things that keep us stuck in mere survival mode.

Trauma is a highly charged response to any distressing event that exceeds what we think of as a normal human experience. Trauma involves loss, pain, shock, and often, devastating alterations to future plans, expectations, and goals. As I mentioned in the introduction, trauma falls into two categories: big “T” Trauma and little “t” trauma. Both have a similar impact on us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Memories associated with strong emotions are stored in a little part of our brain called the *amygdala*. It isn’t a part of our brain that we access consciously. Our strong emotional memories hide in the amygdala until something reminds this

## SURVIVAL MODE

part of our brain of the past trauma. When this happens, the amygdala dumps the stored emotions into our system, along with adrenaline and other chemicals and hormones that attend those emotions. This is what we call *triggering*. It can result in flashbacks, nightmares, sudden emotional changes, hypervigilance, and more.

## NO ONE IS IMMUNE

I avoided processing my trauma for more than three decades before I was triggered and my amygdala unleashed the full emotional impact of my trauma. By then I had been working with other trauma survivors for many years and had seen the effects of PTSD every day with my clients. As I said, I thought my understanding of trauma made me immune to ever experiencing it myself . . .

Until the day I received a phone call from a detective at my alma mater.

In an instant, I experienced a flood of emotions I recognized from thirty-five years earlier. It was like I was eighteen years old again. Terror flooded my body. It was as if that box of memories I had stored on a shelf in my mind had been flung open, and the memories were scattered before me like well-preserved photographs. I relived every detail of that morning—what I had worn, the sound of my attacker's voice, even the smell in the room.

I began to have nightmares and night terrors and found it difficult to control my emotions. I cried easily, and I couldn't concentrate on small tasks. I learned quickly that I was not immune to PTSD. I had simply delayed the experience.

## GRIEF IS UNPREDICTABLE

The pain and suffering that follow trauma can make survival feel like a life sentence. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross researched grief and gave us the first model for the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We tend to think of the stages of grief in relation to the issue of death and dying, but these same stages are present when we suffer any significant loss. Trauma always in-

volves loss of some kind, and loss inevitably leads to a season of grief. (More on this in chapter 2.)

From the conversation Barry and I had the day after the slaying of the pear tree, it's clear I had bounced from denial to anger. As for Barry, was he stuck in denial as he predicted the tree would live and thrive? Or was it hopeful optimism? Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference.

*Trauma always involves loss of some kind,  
and loss inevitably leads to a season of grief.*

The stages of grief are not clean, uniform, or orderly. We don't really progress from one stage to the next. Instead, we bounce around between the different stages like a steel ball in a pinball machine. One minute the world seems good and whole. We believe life will go on and our hopes and dreams will be fulfilled. The next minute we are angry and lashing out at anyone who crosses our path. Often we don't even know what we are angry about.

Each of us who has experienced trauma has a unique story. We often compare our story with others' in an effort to comfort ourselves. We tell ourselves our story is less significant than someone else's to minimize our trauma. Or, conversely, we believe our trauma is so much worse that no one can possibly understand.

I encourage you to embrace your story and your need for healing. Just as each person grieves differently, each path to healing will differ—but there is a path forward for every one of us.

I found a Christian forensic psychologist who worked with me for several months. Processing the long-ignored trauma was not easy. I also told my adult children and my husband about the attack. I allowed my family and friends to support

me. And I asked God to reveal how my trauma could somehow be used for His purposes.

These steps taught me some helpful and some not-so-helpful things along the way. Perhaps most significantly, I learned that healing is possible, even when this world offers no happy ending.

### WHEN THE BIBLE ISN'T HELPFUL

Don't most of us start life blissfully unaware that bad events could be lurking in our future? We live life with reckless abandon, excited for what the future might hold. Unfortunately, sooner or later, we all suffer trauma and loss. It often takes us by surprise, as though we thought we'd be the first human being to live a life uncomplicated by negative events.

Some people pull individual verses from the Bible and deduce that, if we do right by God, we will never experience bad things. For example, Proverbs 1:33 says, "Whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."

Let's not forget that Proverbs comes only two books after Job, where we learn that bad things *do* happen to good people. Job was a righteous and blameless man, yet he experienced the loss of his wealth, his children perishing in a natural disaster, severe physical illness, loss of reputation, the rejection of his friends, a lack of support from his wife, depression, and a whole host of other significant traumatic events. But how can the above proverb be true if the faithful are not immune to trauma?

When Solomon wrote that proverb, he wasn't talking about being righteous and blameless—he was talking about wisdom. The point he was making was that listening to wisdom creates a safer, less fearful future.

What Scripture does say about trauma is this: "In this world you *will* have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). These are the words of

Jesus, who was no stranger to trauma. He spoke this truth to His disciples, knowing full well they were about to experience the world-altering trauma of losing their friend in an unexpected, brutal tragedy. Jesus knew His friends would experience grief, derision, and persecution. Some would even be imprisoned, tortured, and killed. He told them they would suffer for a time but that their grief would one day turn to joy.

Knowing He was about to suffer the biggest big “T” Trauma of all and knowing His friends would not be able or willing to walk through that trauma with Him, Jesus reassured them, “Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me” (John 16:32).

## NOTHING IS TOO BIG TO HANDLE . . . *FOR GOD*

We often hear people say, “God won’t give us more than we can handle.” Some even believe this is a quote from the Bible. That statement isn’t in the Bible. A lovely thought, but untrue. And unrealistic. We’re constantly confronted with more than we can handle . . . on our own.

The true promise is this: There’s nothing God can’t handle. Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing is too difficult for Him (Jeremiah 32:17). What we will not face is a trial, challenge, or sorrow that is too much for *Him*.

*The true promise is this: There’s nothing God can’t handle.*

Sometimes we experience trauma that far exceeds what we are humanly capable of handling. I did. Maybe you have, or you currently are. In those times, we cry out to the Lord and ask Him to carry us through; we ask Him to help us survive. The promise from God is not that bad things won’t happen. It is that He will never leave us to deal with those things by ourselves. God is always with us.

## SURVIVAL MODE

Listen to the psalmist's words in Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." When we are broken and crushed like my little pear tree, the Lord is there to comfort, encourage, strengthen, and heal us.

Survival was the first priority for the pear tree, but it was not the endgame. The same is true for us. We will see that *it is not enough to simply survive*. God wants much more for us than that.



### Questions for Reflection

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1. Have you ever experienced big "T" Trauma? If you feel comfortable, jot down a sentence or two that describes that event.
2. If you're able, list two or three times in life when you have experienced little "t" trauma.

*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

**JOHN 16:33**

## CHAPTER 2

# *When Dreams Die*

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*A*s mentioned in chapter 1, trauma always involves loss. Often trauma involves the loss of our most precious expectations for the future. Just as I had expectations that my pear tree would be the first to blossom in the spring and the last to drop its brightly colored leaves in the fall, we all have expectations for bright and beautiful things in our future.

In marriage, we may have plans to raise a family, travel, settle into a certain community, retire to a new location, grow old with our partner by our side, and so on. The trauma of divorce or a spouse's death brings these expectations to a grinding halt. A person is forced to reevaluate his or her goals and dreams for the future. When a spouse dies or a divorce takes place, vision for the future is lost. This is a loss that must be grieved before we can find hope in planning for a new future vision.

### WHEN FUTURE DREAMS MUST CHANGE

As a therapist, I often talk with clients who are grieving the loss of an expected future. One of the most profound of such losses is the loss of a child. What parent doesn't begin to dream the minute he or she discovers a new child will be joining the family . . . or even before? We think about what our child will look like, how this little person will change the family, how intelligent our daughter will be,

what kind of adult our son will grow into. We imagine ways this new human being might change the world, or at least our own world.

When a young life ends, what is a parent to do with all the expectations and dreams that were so acutely alive?

While I have not experienced the loss of a child myself, I have walked with parents on their grief journeys. My observations are simply that—observations. Many parents have expressed that the loss of a child is like a sudden, violent, head-on collision. The family is riding along, enjoying the view, when suddenly they hit a solid brick wall and everything comes to a devastating stop.

More than one grieving parent has told me, in both my professional and personal worlds, that losing a child makes ordinary life an offense. Have you heard or seen something like this? “How dare people carry on as if nothing earth-shattering happened in our family? Their worlds are still spinning. Mine stopped. Changed forever. They’re going to work, to the gym, to church . . . and my life has come to a standstill. I know I shouldn’t hold it against the non-grieving, but I can’t help it.”

Parents like this are clearly in the mire of the depression and anger phases of grief. Their expectations for their child and for the future of their family have been shattered. They can’t imagine an alternative picture.

### WHEN DOES FOREVER END?

My dear friends Dawn and Larry have experienced the loss of not one but two of their children. Dawn and Larry are kind, loving people who open their hearts and home to many. Although they both had been brought up in churchgoing families, each had difficult experiences growing up that resulted in a lack of understanding the true character of God. Both had rejected the idea of a loving God. They believed they could enjoy life and success without the baggage of religion.

After a few years of marriage, Dawn gave birth to Melissa, a beautiful little girl who



from an early age had an uncanny sense of humor. When they discovered they were pregnant with baby number two, it seemed their expectations for having a happy family were well on their way to coming true.

After a healthy pregnancy, Dawn went into labor. The birth process progressed smoothly as the parents eagerly waited to greet their son, whom they had already named Daniel. But as soon as Daniel was born, he was whisked away. Something was terribly wrong.

The doctor quietly explained that a serious heart defect had been detected. Though a team of doctors worked diligently to save Daniel's life, he lived only three days.

After losing Daniel, Dawn and Larry were surrounded with support. Their needs were met consistently. Financial help arrived that just covered their deficits—no more, no less. It was undeniable that God was aware of their needs and was intervening to care for them.

Over the months that followed, Dawn felt an urgency to learn all she could about God. It wasn't long before she made a commitment to Him. She and Larry continued to grieve and struggled to understand each other's ways of grieving. This took a toll on their marriage and ultimately resulted in Dawn's spiraling into deep depression.

Dawn and Larry eventually gave birth to a second son, Nathan. Balancing the grief of losing Daniel and the joy of adding Nathan to the family created a unique combination of conflicting feelings. Larry became interested in knowing more about God, hoping also to make sense of this dichotomy of emotions. After months of study and prayer, he realized that some mysteries in life will never be understood by human beings. He longed to believe in a God who understood his pain, and soon he committed his life to Jesus.

Although life was not always easy, the family knew they were never alone. Nathan

studied music in college and became the director of technology arts in a large church. Melissa completed her studies to be a nurse, but health issues began to plague her as she struggled to complete her twelve-hour shifts.

When Melissa entered her thirties, her health issues became more severe. Soon she was no longer able to work. She was losing the ability to walk and the strength to navigate her surroundings. Eventually she was diagnosed with myositis, a rare disease that attacked her muscles and organs. By the time Melissa was thirty-seven, the disease had become more than her body could bear, and she passed away.

After Melissa died, her mom found these words written on Melissa's bathroom mirror: *Lord, give me the faith to have hope*. Though fear of the unknown had challenged her resolve at times, Melissa knew there *was* hope, even if her body did not remain alive.

Dawn and Larry had now lost a second child. Through the years, they had grown close to Jesus and developed tremendous faith. But this did not give them immunity from the grief process. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance were still a part of their journey.

I once asked Dawn and Larry if grieving Daniel was different from grieving Melissa. Dawn's face lit up with a tender smile. "Oh, yes! So very different." She went on to say that she and Larry had grown apart after losing Daniel. They were both drowning in their individual grief and unable to face their loss as a couple. She described the unbearable depression that followed and the hopelessness she experienced. Because Dawn and Larry had no knowledge of or belief in heaven when they lost Daniel, the hopelessness they experienced was debilitating. Processing Daniel's loss was chaotic, with no "true north" to focus on in the process.

Melissa's death triggered the hopeless emotions that had been associated with Daniel's passing, but Dawn and Larry's definition of *forever* had since changed.

When Daniel passed, they believed they would grieve his loss forever. Lacking faith in God at that time, *forever* to them meant the rest of their lives followed by . . . nothing. No future, no hope, nothing. But with Melissa's passing years later, now as believers in Jesus, Dawn and Larry understood that they would *not* grieve forever. One day they would be reunited with their children in heaven and enjoy an *eternal forever* that would far exceed the number of days they'd missed with their children in this lifetime. Dawn and Larry found themselves reprocessing the grief related to Daniel's death, now in a healthier way, while also processing the loss of Melissa.

Because Dawn and Larry now shared the same faith and belief in eternal life, they were able to support one another in grief. They did not pull away from each other like they had when Daniel died. They focused on Jesus, prayed together, and reassured each other as they processed the loss of both children.

The couple found great assurance in knowing that Daniel and Melissa are free of pain, free of depression, and thriving in the presence of Jesus. Dawn said, "Our grief is still devastating, but we find comfort knowing we will see both Melissa and Daniel again one day. We cling to that hope and rejoice for both Melissa and Daniel."

Understanding and believing that this life is temporary and that we have hope for eternal life shifts our perception of forever. While this belief doesn't remove our grief, it adds hope to the journey. Our dreams for the future are not limited to this life we are living on earth. We can dream beyond life as we know it.

## CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

First Thessalonians 4:13–14 says, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep [who have died], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (ESV).

These verses clearly state that grief is different for the believer. Grief without Jesus is hopeless, but with Jesus the perspective shifts and hope abounds.

When trauma steals our future dreams, there is still hope! God will not give us more than *He* can handle. God is working within both Dawn and Larry to re-frame the hopeless emotions of Daniel's death, infusing in them the hope they have clung to since Melissa passed.

*Grief without Jesus is hopeless, but with Jesus the perspective shifts and hope abounds.*

The loss of a child is just one example of trauma that causes us to lose future plans and visions. This is an example of a big “T” Trauma that is life-altering, but many forms of trauma change our expectations for the future.

Divorce, the loss of a job, conflict that undermines our reputation, a debilitating injury . . . whatever the circumstance, our perspective can have an enormous impact on how well we navigate healing from destroyed expectations. For Larry and Dawn, the hope of eternity in heaven didn't eliminate their grief and remove the trauma, but it softened the blow.

First John 3:20 says, “If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” In Job 37:23 we find these words: “We cannot imagine the power of the Almighty; but even though he is just and righteous, he does not destroy us” (NLT). These two verses and many others in the Bible tell us that God knows everything and has complete power. Trusting in a God who is all-knowing and all-powerful is such a comfort. God's view of everything is much larger than the view from our personal vantage point. When we lose a job, God knows what is waiting for us in the future. When we face divorce, God still promises that He has a plan for us. When reputations are tarnished and damaged,

God still knows who we are and loves us without condition. Learning to trust God changes our perspective on literally everything.

His vision is complete. His provision is limitless. His plans will be fulfilled. His love is unchanging.



## *Questions for Reflection*

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1. What are your personal thoughts on eternity?
2. How might an eternal perspective change the way in which you process trauma that threatens future expectations?

*This is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.*

**1 JOHN 2:25 (ESV)**