

PRAISE FOR *RECLAIM, RESTORE, AND REBUILD*

Carol has written an honest, sometimes heartbreaking account of families and their encounters with the sexual brokenness of other family members. She is a credible author because of her personal experience as a young wife and mother. But the strength of this curriculum is the strong, specific counsel she gives to these families. She is a teacher who writes with warmth, encouraging instruction, and deep insight. She is a technician who provides tools that individuals, families, and churches can use as they grow in their understanding of the complexity of the situations they face. Each reader will find this curriculum useful as a reference and practical guide for years to come. Ultimately, the emphasis on the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of growth and change and healing will prove to be the highest value of this curriculum.

—Dr. Nancy Heche, author of *The Truth Comes Out*;
co-editor of *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality*

This series has been most beneficial to both JoAnn and me, as well as those within our group. The topics discussed have been just what we needed. The order in which various topics were presented has led our group into a relationship that has allowed each of us to be an encouragement to one another as together we travel this most difficult path. The lessons from this series have brought help and encouragement as we have studied, shared, cried, and prayed together. Each lesson has given us renewed strength, hope, and awareness that our heavenly Father is holding both our hands and those of our children.

—Gordon DeGraffenreid, former college professor

Carol Wagstaff knows firsthand the impact a loved one's sexual brokenness can have on your life. The range of trials and emotions are immense. Without God's help, you will never get past them. Through practical studies that are caring, nurturing, and biblically focused, this book provides a well-paved plan, making way for God to unravel those painful core matters needed for personal healing and wholeness. Anyone who has been affected by a loved one's sexual brokenness and desires a healing pathway will greatly benefit from this invaluable book.

—James E. Phelan, LCSW, Psy.D,
psychotherapist and author of *The Addictions Recovery Workbook:
101 Practical Exercises for Individuals and Groups*

When Christian families hear the announcement “I’m gay” from a loved one, they need immediate direction, reassurance, comfort, and godly wisdom. Nobody is more qualified to provide all four than Carol Wagstaff, who’s been serving such families for decades now. An experienced and widely recognized voice, Carol has synthesized the lessons she’s learned along the way and arranged them in a user-friendly, practical, and biblically sound tool that many families will sincerely thank God for. May this work get into the hands of the thousands upon thousands of families who need it.

—Joe Dallas, speaker;
author of *When Homosexuality Hits Home*,
The Gay Gospel: How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible,
Speaking of Homosexuality: Discussing the Issues with Kindness and Clarity,
and four other books on sexual brokenness;
co-editor of *The Complete Christian Guide to Homosexuality*

I am so thankful for Carol’s honesty and her years of ministry experience, so evident in these pages. The workbook format, with spaces for personal responses, make it much easier to lead small groups. I recommend this book to churches and pastors who are looking for ways to minister to hurting individuals and families.

—Anita M. Worthen,
coauthor of *Someone I Love Is Gay*

It is hard to move forward when you, a friend, or a family member is grieving over sexual brokenness. Many of us don’t know where to begin to heal. As one whose life has been redeemed from the bondage of lesbianism, I am grateful for the compassion and truth that emanate from these pages. Carol’s book has practical resources that will give you, a family member, or your small group the tools that will help you move past the pain and into your purpose.

—Janet Boynes, founder and president,
Janet Boynes Ministries (janetboynesministries.com);
author of *Called Out: A Former Lesbian’s Discovery of Freedom*
and *God & Sexuality: Truth and Relevance Without Compromise*

As Carol’s pastor, I lived through some of her heartbreak and know the pain she endured. It was real! But out of her agonizing experiences and subsequent victories, she wrote a timely book that will help others face life with hope and determination. I am grateful for *Reclaim, Restore, and Rebuild* because for you and me and others, it just might be the instrument that opens the doors to freedom, forgiveness, and healing.

—H. B. London, Pastor to Pastor, Focus on the Family

With courage and honesty, Carol Wagstaff explores the biblical and cultural assumptions behind gender issues from an evangelical perspective. As with her personal story, this study reveals the many anxieties about God's plan for sexuality and its effect on relationships within families and churches. When faced with brokenness, the Word of God provides a road map for readers to walk with faith and grace in every situation. I highly recommend this study on your journey to wholeness.

—Pat Verbal, senior consultant of publishing and ministry resources,
The Christian Institute on Disability at Joni and Friends International Disability Center;
coauthor of *Life in the Balance: Real Families, Real Needs*;
managing editor of *Beyond Suffering Bible*

In *Reclaim, Restore, and Rebuild*, Carol Wagstaff quickly sets the stage for all that will follow in the book when she quotes 2 Timothy 3:16. That verse, taken from the apostle Paul's protégé Timothy, says Christians can learn from everything written in the Bible. As Carol shows in chapter after chapter, biblical characters like Nehemiah endured struggles just as we do. And as they followed God's leading, they overcame those struggles. In this interactive book, Carol helps readers walk alongside them in order to see ways to cope with—and even conquer—some of life's most heartbreaking trials, particularly the trials family members and friends face with a homosexual or transgender loved one.

—Denise Shick, executive director, Living Stones Ministries and Help 4 Families;
author of *My Daddy's Secret* and *Understanding Gender Confusion*

RECLAIM RESTORE —AND— REBUILD

Hope for Families **Impacted by Sexual Brokenness**

10 Studies
for Groups or Individuals
with Leaders Guide

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CAROL L. WAGSTAFF, M.A.

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P R E S S

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Session 5

Denise Shick with Jerry Gramkow, *My Daddy's Secret*, Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008, pp. 11-16. Selected passages reworded with author's permission.

Session 9

Robert's letter, introduction changed to third person, used by permission of Robert Lombardi.

Session 10, leaders guide

“Just Keep Planting” from *Principles for Personal Growth* by Adam Kahn (Bellevue, WA: YouMe Works, 2014, pp. 140-143). Used with the author's permission.

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To the many friends whose lives have touched mine over the last twenty years through this ministry, thank you. You will see your stories in these pages. You have blessed me and taught me so much. I am deeply indebted to you.

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To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for His call to Living Stones Ministries and His faithful healing of my own heart, I shall be forever grateful. You are my King and my Lord.

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INTRODUCTION

“Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers,” wrote Henri Nouwen.

Nouwen, a Dutch priest, prolific writer, and inspirational spiritual guide, knew whereof he spoke because he experienced same-sex attractions throughout his life. Yet no one knew of his struggles until after his death when his personal journals were opened. No evidence was found that he ever broke his vow of chastity. To God’s glory, he was able to live above his woundedness and channel his life into a fruitful ministry to others.

Is it possible that this is God’s plan for each of us who have been wounded? Are we, like Nouwen, called to become wounded healers? How can we take life’s deepest wounds and turn them into ministry? Let me encourage you by sharing my journey.

My Story

As the daughter of a holiness minister, my mind and heart were immersed in church as far back as I can remember. A sensitive child, I accepted Jesus as my Savior at an early age and felt God’s call to missions. In my childish mind, salvation depended on how well one kept the church rules. I strove to please God, my parents, and others, playing the role of a perfect little girl. My devotion and subsequent perfectionistic behavior earned me the name Goodie Two Shoes from my peers.

My Christian-college years provided wonderful friends and a future husband. It was there I met a talented, witty, youth-pastor-to-be. John,* a campus leader, was popular due to his great sense of humor. He also was called to ministry, which matched my heart’s call. I envisioned the

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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two of us accomplishing great things for God. We married shortly after graduation, and I taught school while he attended seminary. While there, a beautiful son was born to us.

After his ministerial training, John accepted an invitation to serve as a youth pastor in a growing church. The senior pastor referred to him as Pied Piper because the teens adored him. Together we loved and nurtured young men and women. To the outside world, we were the perfect couple.

Behind closed doors, our relationship was strained. Intimacy was difficult, and we sought counseling with three different therapists over a four-year period. John never admitted he struggled with same-sex attraction. Dr. Hatten*, our last counselor, finally gave up, stating he could no longer help us. John told me, "I want to do it myself."

Six months later, John was arrested and jailed. The pastor and a Christian attorney intervened with authorities to release him. That night he came home and told me, "I was arrested for being caught in a homosexual act with a minor." When I asked him if the charge was true, he said, "I wasn't doing anything wrong."

The senior pastor and church leaders tried to help him, but he seemed done with counseling. When he became involved with a handsome college student, the church took action and revoked his position as youth pastor. We were given five days to pack our belongings and leave town.

Respected leaders in the church told me, "Move on with your life. Homosexuals don't change." Our eight-year marriage ended, and I found myself alone with a six-year-old son and \$600 to start over. I felt lifeless inside, like someone had buried me alive. What would I do? Where would I go?

My dreams died, and I was deeply hurt and angry at both my husband and God. Why couldn't John love me? Why didn't God answer my prayers? How could this situation be His will? Ministries to homosexuals were just getting started at that time, but I had not heard of them. Christians did not seem to know how to help people who struggled with these feelings.

Forced to begin a new life as a single mom, I moved to southern California near family. Marrying a "normal man" who could love me and be a father to my son was all I could think about. I failed to acknowledge how weak and vulnerable I was to sin. Dick*, a handsome blonde, well-to-do businessman in my church asked me out; and I was drawn by the security he afforded. A plum ripe for picking, I did not expect the outcome of our first date. Humiliated and ashamed, I could not tell anyone. Marriage seemed to be the only option. But when I approached my pastor about marrying us, he refused. "No, I won't do it. Dick is a womanizer," he said.

Dick worked a temporary job in Washington, DC, at the time, and I called him to tell him the marriage was off. He sought the advice of a pastor in the church he was attending, and the two of them struck a deal. Pastor Jeff* agreed to pay for my flight if he could not talk me into the marriage.

I flew to New Jersey to break up with Dick. "I cannot make another mistake," I told the pastor. "I cannot go through another divorce."

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He replied, “Did God take care of you after your first marriage?”

I had to admit God had.

He responded, “He will take care of you whatever happens.” The next day, Pastor Jeff performed our marriage. I had a knot the size of a grapefruit in my stomach.

My heart and mind were still wounded by the trauma of my first marriage—the break-up, the sudden move, the loss of my home and people we loved. In many ways, I still felt dead inside and did not care about what was happening in my life. Early in our marriage, I succumbed to the attentions of another man. I never thought I was capable of moral failure, but I underestimated the power of sin in my life.

The reality of my own unfaithfulness drove me to God’s Word. How could this happen to me, Goodie Two Shoes? I reminded God, “You made me. You know what is wrong with me.” For one year I read only the Bible, looking for answers. If I tried to do anything else, the Holy Spirit whispered, “If you have time to do that, you have time to read my Word.”

God began to show me who I was apart from Him. The sin of self-pity dominated my life. My contaminated heart was filled with anger and unforgiveness. My critical spirit, judgmental attitudes, perfectionism, and pride only proved I was full of myself and pharisaical arrogance. He disclosed my inclination toward codependency and the worship of people instead of Him.

For the first time, I knew how much I needed God’s grace—His wonderful, marvelous, matchless grace. I poured out my heart, confessed my sins, and asked God to forgive me and renew His spirit within me. He heard my prayer, and my love for God grew day by day as I continued to study the Bible. The power of God’s Word transformed me, and I began a healing journey that continues to this day. My heart overflows with love and gratitude to my Lord.

God was more merciful to me than I deserved. My church invited me to serve as Director of Women’s Ministries. I was especially drawn to sexually abused women, perhaps because of my own experience. Out of that class, I developed a study titled *Called to Be Free*, based on my study of God’s Word and my healing journey. God also prompted me to study the New Age Movement that was peopled by many who identified as homosexuals or lesbians.

Four years into my ministry, Dick stopped attending church and became like a stranger to me. I resigned my position to work on our marriage. My second son was a teenager at the time, and my heart grieved that he felt the discord in our home. When the church invited me to join the staff a year later to work with senior adults, Dick agreed that I should take the job. I accepted it, thinking things were better between us.

Nine months into senior-adult ministry, I discovered Dick was involved with another woman. When I confronted him, he said, “I want to be single again.”

Heartbroken, I saw our marriage of seventeen years dissolved; and I became a single mom for the second time. The timing was particularly painful. Five months before, my first husband, John, had contracted AIDS and died at the age of forty-nine.

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One night I came home from work and fell on my knees, crying out to God over my broken life. How could I, as a Christian woman, have made such a mess of my life? My soul ached for answers. “Please speak to me, Lord. I don’t understand why my life has turned out like this!”

I picked up my Bible and settled into my favorite chair. “Lord,” I said, “I’m not going to stop reading until You speak to me.” When I reached 1 Peter 2:4-5, the words pierced my heart: “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (NIV84). The “living Stone” referred to Jesus, and He was “rejected by men but chosen by God.” Could He understand how my heart and mind ached with rejection and shame? Was it possible that I, too, could be chosen?

The pieces of my life puzzle started fitting together. If I had not endured rejection and deep wounding, I wouldn’t comprehend how individuals and families feel when sexual brokenness invades their lives and homes. God had to break my pride, my haughty attitudes, my holier-than-thou outlook and bring me to a place of humility. My life experiences showed me I was no better than anyone who had committed sin of any kind.

The church was gracious and allowed me to remain in ministry as I continued to seek the Lord’s will for my life. The senior adults whom I served surrounded me with love and encouragement. God blessed me daily and taught me so much! The pain of my life seemed so small compared to the incredible joy and blessing I found in Jesus Christ. Praise filled my heart for the trials and afflictions He brought me through. He used every painful situation to teach me and mature me in my walk with Him.

One morning during my devotional time, God instructed me to resign my position at the church. I had prayed specifically for a year for God’s guidance and wanted to make sure I truly heard His voice. I asked Him to confirm His leading for me; and a month later, He clearly did so. Immediately, I wrote a letter of resignation and delivered it to the church. After living with my decision for a day or so, I began to doubt if I had done the right thing. My oldest son was in college; and while I owned my home, it had a healthy mortgage. How would I support myself?

A few days later, on my way to a prayer meeting, I began to weep—so much so, I didn’t feel I could go in to face my friends. No one knew I had resigned, and there would be questions. Instead, I went to my office and picked up *My Utmost for His Highest*, updated edition by Oswald Chambers. I opened it to a devotional titled “Abraham’s Life of Faith.” This verse caught my eye: “He went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8 NKJV). Chambers went on to say, “Living a life of faith means never knowing where you are being led. But it does mean loving and knowing the One who is leading.” I closed the book, weeping again, but this time with joy.

God confirmed His direction for me, but I still did not know specifics. A few days later, I was on my knees, asking God to show me what I was supposed to do. As I prayed, God brought to mind a memory of a visit to an AIDS hospice in Los Angeles. A friend was deeply concerned for her son, Jim*, who was dying of AIDS. She asked me if I would mind going with her to see

him. In a room full of hurting men, I shared God's love with Jim and the Good News of His willingness to forgive any sins Jim committed, no matter how big or unforgivable they seemed. He received my words and allowed me to pray with him.

I wondered if God was calling me to be a chaplain in an AIDS hospice. I got up from my knees and called the Gay and Lesbian Center in Hollywood, asking if they had any positions open for chaplains in AIDS facilities. I was told I would need to fill out an application for the volunteer chaplain's position. As I hung up the phone, God spoke clearly to me: "I want you to work with parents and family members like yourself who have been devastated by the reality of sexual brokenness in the lives of their loved ones."

I was so excited that God made His will clear to me. My friends who were praying for God's direction were among the first to know. I wrote a letter to my senior adults and read it to them the following Sunday. I still did not know how I was going to start the ministry or what to call it, but God knew. One of the men, a retired judge, approached me after my announcement and said, "Form a nonprofit, and we will support you." Another lady from my Sunday school class told me she did not want me to starve to death, and she mailed me a \$20,000 check. Miracle after miracle occurred, and God continually provided for me as the ministry grew. To God's glory, He provided for me for twenty years and continues to sustain the ministry to this day.

A New Ministry

After ten years of serving on the staff of my church, God led me to begin a ministry for families with homosexual issues. Much of the wounding of my life came out of the failure of my first marriage: death of a dream, painful rejection, hurt, frustration, disappointment. The shame and guilt of two failed marriages plus my own moral failure plagued my mind and heart. I knew the trauma and long-term effects of sexual abuse. Grief was a regular visitor in my home. I watched a youth minister, whom I once deeply loved, succumb to homosexuality and death from AIDS.

God changed my heart and gave me a love for broken people, many of whom had been the target of my judgmental spirit. I learned from a psychologist friend that the key word in the homosexual world is *rejection*. I knew what it was like to be rejected, and I could identify with people who experienced it much more severely than I had. First Peter 2:4-5 fit my life, but it also fit the lives of hurting people whom God dearly loved and who needed Him. God had prepared me in unusual ways for this ministry.

Living Stones Ministries, birthed out of God's Word, defined the purpose for this new ministry. Jesus, the living Stone, was rejected but chosen and precious to God. We, too, are rejected but chosen by God and precious to Him. He desires to take our foolish choices and broken lives and build us into a spiritual house with Himself as our foundation. As we grow and mature in our faith, we become part of His holy priesthood, ministering to the wounded and broken.

God's Lessons

Through my journey, I learned:

- We can and must trust God.
- Because we are Christians does not mean we or our loved ones will not have emotional, psychological, or sexual problems.
- Performing well for the sake of others and doing good things are characteristics of a Christian lifestyle, not a vital relationship with God.
- Our families of origin and life experiences impact how we understand God and assimilate Him into our lives.
- Becoming a Christian is the easy part; working out our salvation from day to day is a lifelong pilgrimage.
- Healing is not an overnight occurrence. It is a journey, one that can take many years.
- The opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality; it is the pursuit of holiness.
- We need not be defined by our past or what tempts us. Our identity is in Christ. First and foremost, we are children of God.
- Peace and victory come when we cast ourselves and all our baggage on God's mercy.

Several years ago, I flew to Chicago to speak at a conference. One overcast afternoon, I visited John's graveside. I knelt on his grave marker and wept, asking God for forgiveness for being so proud, for being so judgmental, for not understanding what he had gone through. The sun broke through the clouds as I got up from my knees—a symbol of God's work in my life.

God has been more faithful and grace-giving than I ever deserved. But He is like that. He doesn't meet us where we ought to have been; He meets us where we are with real love. His grace is greater than any sin we may have committed. Praise His name!

This Book

The book you're holding was written for you. The sessions are drawn from the story of Nehemiah. While Nehemiah lived thousands of years ago, his emotions and behavior are identical to ours. He is an incredible role model because he endured so much, yet was obedient to God and fulfilled God's purposes for his life. His life reminds us that we often do not choose the circumstances God allows in our lives, but we can learn to make the best of them.

As you work through these sessions, you will see yourself and your family with new eyes. It will take courage for you to be honest and open, but growth and freedom come to those who are willing to open themselves to new truths. It is important to be receptive to meeting with a Christian counselor, pastor, or mentor to help you through the process, especially if you uncover truths that are difficult for you to bear.

Processing these sessions in a group is beneficial. Together you can work through the concepts and assist one another in gaining understanding and insight. We are healed in community; so

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do not give up until you find a group of people who can love you, uphold you in prayer, hear the anguish of your heart, and encourage you to grow.

Each session is built around one aspect of your journey. While this book is conveniently designed in chapter format, allow yourself the flexibility to take the study at your own pace. Let the timeline be yours in order to get the most out of each session.

As you study, don't forget God loves you, as well as your loved one who struggles with sexual brokenness. Whether your loved one is a spouse, a son or daughter, a brother or sister, Mom or Dad, or even a neighbor or friend, God's presence and guidance can give you the comfort and direction you need to survive and grow. I pray you will be able to give up your shame and, someday, become a wounded healer.

HOPE FOR YOUR JOURNEY

To all who are heartbroken and yearn for comfort:

“As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13).

To all who are confused and want to know truth:

“I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right” (Isaiah 45:19).

To all who are discouraged and long for hope:

“Those who hope in me will not be disappointed” (Isaiah 49:23).

To all who feel rejected and crave love:

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed” (Isaiah 54:10).

To all who struggle with sin and hunger for God’s grace:

“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25).

To all who are tired and yearn for rest:

“Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”
(Matthew 11:28).

To all whose hearts are filled with fear and want courage:

“Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15).

““You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:9-10).

THE STORY OF NEHEMIAH

The Old Testament books and their stories seem so far removed from our current culture that we think we cannot relate to a society so different from our own. While the times and seasons described in the book of Nehemiah happened thousands of years ago, people still exhibit the same characteristics. No matter how we look on the outside, as human beings we experience similar thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

So Nehemiah's story is pertinent to us. As the Bible says, "All Scripture is God-breathed [given by divine inspiration] and is profitable for instruction, for conviction [of sin], for correction [of error and restoration to obedience], for training in righteousness [learning to live in conformity to God's will, both publicly and privately—behaving honorably with personal integrity and moral courage]" (2 Timothy 3:16, AMP).

But what does God want us to learn through Nehemiah? Who was he? What do we need to know about him?

When we first meet Nehemiah, he was serving as a cupbearer in the Persian court of King Artaxerxes I. Cupbearers tasted the king's wine before he drank it to prevent him from being poisoned. The possibility of death was part of Nehemiah's daily life. Most likely, Nehemiah also was a eunuch. Male servants were made into eunuchs, deliberately castrated, so they could be trusted around the queen and other women of the court. He also became a valued and trusted advisor to the king.

Nothing is said about Nehemiah's parents. It is presumed they were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar or killed when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. (Read about the fall of Jerusalem in 2 Chronicles 36:15-21.) Jewish by heritage, he grew up as a foreigner in what is now the country of Iran. Whatever happened, we can be sure he knew the pain of being severed from his family and beloved Jewish people.

God put on Nehemiah's heart to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which Nebuchadnezzar destroyed in 586 BC. In ancient cities, the walls were vital, as they were the only means for people to defend their cities against their enemies. The walls symbolized strength and protection;

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without strong walls, the city could not be considered safe. The city government was also located within those walls.

Nehemiah had every reason to think the job he had been given was impossible to accomplish. His contemporary, Ezra, along with the Jewish exiles, had been given permission to rebuild the temple under the reign of King Cyrus. However, much of the city still lay in ruins. When they attempted to rebuild the walls, they were stopped. The work they did accomplish on the walls was burned.

Seventy-nine years before Ezra, Zerubbabel led a group of exiles to Jerusalem in an effort to rebuild the city; but that did not happen. So God gave Nehemiah the job of rebuilding the walls, which was no small feat. City walls were often built high and thick. In the book of Daniel, we read of the massive walls around the city of Babylon, which were about 100 feet thick and 300 feet high. The coming of Nehemiah, with the blessing and help of Artaxerxes I, was God's plan for restoring His people to their homeland. God intervened in human history through Nehemiah's life. Only through God's power and guidance could the walls of Jerusalem be rebuilt in only fifty-two days.

What can we learn from Nehemiah? As you study portions of the book of Nehemiah in these sessions, you'll discover God is still in complete control and is working out the details in every life—including yours—according to His will and purpose.

1

HEARING THE NEWS

Shocking moments occur in all our lives when time seems to stand still. Mary experienced one of those moments while eating lunch with her daughter, Lisa.

“How’s your job going?” Mary asked.

“It’s going great, Mom. Of course, a new job always stretches us. You know the drill: adapting to new surroundings, high expectations, testy people. It’s always a challenge.” Lisa paused. “I really invited you to lunch today to talk about something more important.”

“You mean you didn’t invite me to celebrate Valentine’s Day with you?” Mary’s eyes twinkled. “Or to tell me you love me?”

“Oh, Mom, c’mon. Not really. You know I love you.”

“What could be more important? What do you want me to know?”

Lisa took a deep breath, paused, then said, “Mom, I’m a lesbian. I thought you might know by now. Did you have any suspicions?”

Mary was stunned. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She wanted to reason with her daughter, but the right words wouldn’t come.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Lisa excused herself. “Why don’t I call you later when you have time to think about it, Mom?”

“I don’t know how I got home that day,” Mary said. “For weeks I could barely eat or sleep, and I cried constantly. I couldn’t help thinking that Lisa’s death would have been easier to take than this announcement.”

In that moment, Mary’s life changed forever. She went from feeling like a good parent to feeling overwhelmed with guilt. She constantly asked herself where she had gone wrong. She desperately wanted a chance to pull her precious daughter into her arms, tell her she loved her, and correct all the parenting mistakes she had made in the past.

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out . . . and I am concerned about their suffering.”

—Exodus 3:7

“The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

—Psalm 34:17-18

REFLECTING

When have you received heartbreaking news about a family member or friend?

How did you respond to that news?

“You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.”

—Psalm 10:17

EXPLORING

The biblical prophet Nehemiah was acquainted with distressing news too. He would have understood parents like Mary—and you. His heart broke over unfulfilled dreams.

1. Read Nehemiah 1:1-4. How did Nehemiah respond to the news about his beloved city?

Receiving discouraging news is painful. Its devastating effects can blindside us, especially when the news relates to someone we love and care about very much.

2. In what ways can you relate to Nehemiah’s suffering?

Discovering that a family member is taking steps to embrace his or her same-sex attractions or change gender identity can be particularly devastating, especially when that person cuts him or herself off from the family. When this situation occurs, the family may feel as if that person has died. And, in truth, many of our dreams and expectations for that loved one may die.

We may find ourselves asking questions like these: Who is this person we thought we knew? How could this situation have happened to our family? What about my fervent prayers for this

child or other family member? The relationship seems forever changed, perhaps irretrievably; and our faith in God and life in general may be shaken.

3. When you heard that your child or other loved one was experiencing same-sex attraction or gender confusion, how did you feel?

When our losses happen too quickly and we do not allow ourselves time to grieve, we experience *compound grief*. One loss piggybacks onto another, and we may sink into despair.

What did you say or do?

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

—Psalm 119:105, NASB

4. What dreams do you have for that person?

Put the letter *D* before any of these dreams that seem to have died.

Roller Coaster of Grief

Receiving the devastating news of a loved one’s same-sex attractions or gender confusion can throw us into a vicious cycle of grief. Our faith is severely tested, and our emotions take a frightening roller-coaster ride.

This cycle of emotion is predictable and intense. Shock, denial, anger, blame, depression, isolation, bargaining, panic, guilt, and mourning manifest themselves, although not necessarily in this order. Eventually, acceptance and hope are realized. (See “Stages of Grief” on page 123.)

RECLAIM, RESTORE, AND REBUILD

Anticipatory grief is mourning or grieving today over future problems or the absence of a loved one.

Sexual brokenness and the negative consequences prey on our minds, and coping is difficult.

5. Which emotions are you dealing with right now?

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”
—Isaiah 54:10

How are these emotions affecting your daily life and interactions with other people?

Compound Grief

Nehemiah was no stranger to feelings like ours. He grew up as a foreigner in a pagan country, longing for his family, his people, and his home. Memories of past atrocities experienced in Jerusalem plagued his thoughts. When new word came of the devastated condition of his city, Nehemiah mourned for days. The broken walls and burned gates brought disgrace on those he loved.

Previous losses in your life may compound your grief about your family member’s sexual attractions or gender confusion. The more losses you’ve endured, the longer the grief cycle continues. You may wonder why you can’t seem to get over this news.

If you are experiencing compound grief, your sorrow may last for an extended period of time. Be patient with yourself, remembering that God is the “God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). He grieves with you for your loved one and will give you grace to endure one moment at a time. With His strength, eventually you can and will move on.

6. What grief experiences (e.g., death in the family, job loss, problems with another child) came along prior to the news of your loved one’s same-sex attractions or gender identity issues?

How do these grief experiences influence your response?

7. How long have you grieved over the news about your family member?

Secondary Losses

8. After the initial shock of disturbing news, we may experience secondary losses. For example, a son or daughter may leave home, move in with his or her partner, or commit more fully to living as a homosexual or transgendered person. Naturally, such a decision will force changes in the family or parenting roles. What secondary losses have you experienced after the initial loss?

9. The grief cycle causes worry and fear about the future. One fear leads to another, a downward spiral begins, and the worst is expected. What trouble, shame, difficulties, or disgrace have you anticipated?

“Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.”

—Carl Bard

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

—Jeremiah 29:11

“Nothing that has occurred or will occur in heaven or earth or hell can change the tender mercies of our God. Forever His mercy stands, a boundless, overwhelming immensity of divine pity and compassion.”
—A. W. Tozer

Impact of Grief

The cycle of grief paints a painful process, affecting you and your family members in physical, emotional, spiritual, and social ways. The symptoms are listed below.

Confusion	Withdrawal
Memory loss	Insomnia
Anxiety/panic	Uncontrollable weeping
Depression	Lethargy
Shame	Stomach pain
Guilt	Fatigue/exhaustion
Suicidal thoughts	Indecisiveness
Irritability	Loss of appetite
Inability to concentrate	Aggression
Nail-biting	Fear of insanity
Overwhelming anger	Frenetic activity
Excessive sleeping	Forgetfulness
Disorganization	Numbness

10. Which symptoms have you experienced during your grieving process? Underline them in the above list.

How have these symptoms impacted your life?

Beyond Grief

11. Read Lamentations 3:22–26. How did Jeremiah find relief from his grief?

Discovering a loved one struggles with same-sex attractions or gender dysphoria does not necessitate an end to the relationship. After the grieving period, we must create a new relationship

with that person. When our feelings and understanding of God's truth clash with those of our loved ones, we must learn to see them through Jesus' eyes. Ask Him to show you how He sees them and how to express His love without judgment. God does not require us to agree with or approve of the lies Satan attempts to make our loved ones believe about themselves. His love is higher and greater than anything we can imagine—both for us and for them.

With regard to the heartbreak you feel about their sexual or gender issues, cast “all your anxiety on Him” (1 Peter 5:7).

God knows. He cares. He understands. He loves us even while we are living in sin, and He loves your family member. You may not feel like leaning into God's arms. But staying connected to Him will make all the difference as you move through your grief.

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”

—1 Peter 5:10

12. How has your relationship with your loved one changed since you learned of his or her same-sex attractions or gender confusion?

13. Which elements of your relationship were not changed by this news?

14. What possibilities do you see for a new and different relationship with your loved one?

So often we're discouraged when life comes crashing around us. But don't lose heart! God is at work in your life and in your loved one's life, even in the midst of suffering.

In Philippians 1:6, the apostle Paul reminds us, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Through our pain, we're conformed to the image of Christ; and we share in the fellowship of His sufferings.

RECLAIM, RESTORE, AND REBUILD

While it's important for you to keep moving forward through your grief, taking good care of *you* during this time is also vital. Here are some suggestions:

- Spend quality time with God. François Fénelon, an early Christian writer, said, "Talk with God with the thoughts that your heart is full of. . . . Tell Him without hesitation everything that comes into your head, with the simplicity and familiarity of a little child sitting on its mother's knee" (*Talking with God*, Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009, pp. 3-4).
- Ask God to give you a Bible promise to stand on for the transformation of your loved one who struggles.
- Plan recreational activities to provide a release from your stress.
- Maintain a sense of humor. (Suggestion: Read a book by Barbara Johnson, Martha Bolton, Dave Meuer, or Phil Callaway.)
- Cultivate one or more hobbies that don't involve your loved one who is encountering tough issues.
- Listen to your favorite praise music, as it will help bring you into God's presence.
- Journal your thoughts and feelings. Share them with a friend.
- Join a support group for families affected by sexual brokenness, or start one at your church.
- Learn to say no without feeling guilty.
- At bedtime each night think of at least one good thing that happened that day and praise God for it.
- Allow God to help you develop a prayer life that is not all about your loved one.

REBUILDING

God longs to "rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated" (Isaiah 61:4).

Write a letter to God, telling Him your honest feelings about what has happened to you and your family. God is not afraid of your negative feelings. Ask Him to show you the possible good He wishes to bring out of this situation.

Memorize Jeremiah 29:11.

2

ENCOUNTERING GOD

“Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong. . . . Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.” These words from Psalm 37 pierced Marla’s aching heart. “Can I trust You, Lord?” she asked.

She laid her Bible on the coffee table and walked into the kitchen to pour another cup of her favorite chocolate-raspberry coffee. Then she remembered: Her husband, Ben, had stayed up late the night before, supposedly paying bills online. But what had he *really* been doing? The old nagging fears returned.

Marla’s hands trembled as she flicked the switch on Ben’s computer and turned on the monitor. She *had* to know. Before she and Ben were married, he told her he had struggled with homosexual temptations. But he promised he was past that, and she believed him. Since then, however, she caught him several times looking at pornography on the computer. Each time, he promised never to do it again.

Marla gasped in shock as photos of nude men flashed across the computer screen. “What is this?” she cried out in disbelief. “Not again!” She slumped in the computer chair and cried, leaning her head on the desk in despair.

“You know what, God? I’m through,” she told the Lord through her tears. “I can’t go on living like this! How can I keep believing in You and trusting You when I continue to get hurt this way?”

Feelings of betrayal and abandonment flooded her being, and her stomach knotted with anxiety at the thought of having to confront Ben again.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; LORD, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.”

—Psalm 130:1-2

“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.”

—Psalm 4:1

“The Lord’s mercy often
rides to the door of our
heart upon the black
horse of affliction.”
—Charles Spurgeon

“Consider it a sheer gift,
friends, when tests and
challenges come at you
from all sides. You know
that under pressure, your
faith-life is forced into the
open and shows its true
colors. So don’t try to get
out of anything prema-
turely. Let it do its work
so you become mature
and well-developed, not
deficient in any way.”
—James 1:2-4, MSG

Then a still, small voice pierced her broken heart. “Marla, will you trust Me? You know My Word. Is there any part that isn’t true? I’ve promised always to be with you.”

Even in her severe emotional pain, Marla felt a slight twinge of hope. Though the journey to recovery would be difficult, she knew God would walk every step with her.

REFLECTING

In what ways does your loved one’s sexual or gender issues feel like a betrayal or abandonment?

EXPLORING

Nehemiah, too, knew what it was like to feel betrayed and abandoned by people he once trusted. Displaced by the invasion of Jerusalem and captured by people who did not honor God, he longed to return to his homeland where he could worship the Lord freely.

Processing Grief

1. Read Nehemiah 1:4-6. How did Nehemiah respond to the news about his city, family, and friends?

According to the biblical timeline, Nehemiah processed his grief before God for about four months. What happened during those months of mourning? It would seem that Nehemiah used that time to come to terms with his emotions, confess his anger, and forgive those who broke down the walls and burned the gates of his beloved city.

In our moments of desperation, especially when we hear the news of a loved one’s sin and suffering, we may feel that God has deserted us. We, too, may feel like strangers in unfamiliar territory, longing for home. We may wish we could simply wave a magic wand and return everything to the way it was before.

2. The Psalmist artfully captures these feelings in the following passages. Read both passages, and write them in your own words.

Psalm 13:1–2:

Psalm 22:1–2:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who was martyred for his faith, talks in his book *Life Together* about “wish dreams”—what we wish or expect should happen—in the church. We can bring these same “wish dreams” to our families and to our relationship with God.

“It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with God without having a right concept of who He is.”

—Dan DeHaan

3. Which word or phrase from these two psalms best captures how you feel right now?

4. When we find out troubling news about a loved one, we may attempt to make a deal with God, saying, “God, if you will just do _____, then I will do _____. What promises have you made in exchange for the Lord’s intervention in the life of your loved one?”

Hearing the news about a loved one’s sexual preference or gender confusion can be a terrible shock. Even if we had suspected it earlier, knowing the truth traumatizes us. We look at our loved one with new eyes; our beloved may seem like a stranger to us. We may feel as though someone has stolen away the person we thought we knew.

“Only Jesus revealed that God is a Father of incomparable tenderness, that if we take all the goodness, wisdom, and compassion of the best mothers and fathers who have ever lived, they would only be a faint shadow of the love and mercy in the heart of the redeeming God.”
—Brennan Manning

“I had passed beyond grief, beyond terror, all but beyond hope, and it was there in that wilderness that for the first time in my life I caught something of what it must be like to love God truly. It was only a glimpse, but it was like stumbling on fresh water in the desert . . . Though God was nowhere to be clearly seen, nowhere to be clearly heard, I had to be near him.”
—Frederick Buechner

5. When we are hurting, we tend to blame others for what happened. What or whom have you wanted to blame for your loved one’s sexual brokenness?

6. Which aspects of your loved one have changed (e.g., personality, attitudes, actions, style of dress)?

Which aspects remain the same?

Questioning God

Agonizing situations cause us to be skeptical about God. We may ask, “How could a loving God allow this to happen?” especially if we have been faithful Christian parents who did our best to raise our children to know and love the Lord with all their hearts. Aren’t we entitled to a trouble-free family?

The problem with this line of thinking is that we have a limited view of God’s plan. We have our own ideas about what a loving God should or shouldn’t do and how He should respond to our pain. When God doesn’t measure up, our faith is deeply shaken. Our anger at others may then be directed toward God.

In John 11, Martha and Mary, good friends of Jesus, were inconsolable with grief over their brother Lazarus’s death. Both of them accused Jesus, “If only you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21, 32, NLT).

Like Martha and Mary, we sometimes bemoan God’s seeming absence—His lack of intervention when He could have stopped a particular tragedy. But notice Jesus’ response when he saw Mary’s grief: “He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. . . . Jesus wept” (vv. 33, 35). He noticed the sisters’ grief. He loved Lazarus, too, and grieved his death as well.

But Jesus knew the rest of the story. He understood that Lazarus's death was simply a part of God's greater plan to reveal the Father's glory in a radical way through resurrection.

Guilt about our sin and mistakes often compounds our anger at God. "If only" we had known sooner. "If only" we had paid attention to our first suspicions. "If only" we had . . .

7. What "if onlys" have you felt about your situation?

8. If God were sitting across the room from you, what would you say to Him regarding His involvement or lack of involvement in the situation?

9. How might your "if onlys" impact your life, especially your relationship with God?

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

—Romans 8:38-39, NASB

"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

—Revelation 3:19-20

Trusting God's Love and Sovereignty

God looks on us with infinite loving-kindness, remarkable compassion, and powerful mercy, as a father does his children. God did not create same-sex sexual attraction. He also did not create men and women in the wrong bodies, causing them to desire to change their birth gender to the opposite one. In fact, both are against His divine plan for creation; and both are against Scripture's clear teaching for human sexual behavior. The distortion of God's plan for a sacred union between a man and a woman does not glorify Him. But He still loves His children and longs to see them live in obedience to Him.

RECLAIM, RESTORE, AND REBUILD

“The forgiveness of Jesus not only takes away our sins, it makes them as if they had never been.”

—Anita Worthen

10. Read Psalm 139. What characteristics of God do you see in this chapter?

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”

—John 15:9-11

11. Which verse gives you the most comfort?

Why?

God’s love is immeasurable, unstoppable, uncontainable, and inexhaustible. When we experience grief and heartache, He longs for us to come to Him in prayer, so He can comfort us. His Holy Spirit moves within our hearts, reassuring us of His

love.

Remember: God knows you, and He understands your loved one’s personal struggles. He sees the past, the present, and the future. Nothing escapes His notice!

He reminds us, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine You are precious and honored in my sight, and . . . I love you Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed” (Isaiah 43:1, 4; 54:10).

12. When we face tough situations, we have a choice to control the circumstances in our own power or to walk in faith, fully surrendered to God’s will. Which one comes more naturally to you?

13. In what ways have you tried to change or control your loved one’s feelings or behavior?

What were the results?

We can trust God because we know Jesus. The author of Hebrews tells us, “The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word” (1:3). We can plainly see and experience God’s incredible love by knowing Jesus, who became a man in order to live on Earth and die a sacrificial death on the cross to redeem us from our sins. Then He rose again to conquer death and purchase a place for us in God’s eternal Kingdom.

Having Jesus in your life while you deal with the pain of your loved one’s homosexuality can offer you comfort, stability, peace, and the knowledge that He is in control. If you have never committed your life to Jesus, please consider doing so. If you’re not certain how to do it, you can pray the following prayer:

Dear Jesus,

I need you! I confess I have been trying to run my life on my own, and I ask you to forgive me. Please come into my heart and reign on the throne of my life. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sin. Thank you for forgiving me and giving me the gift of eternal life. I commit to serving you with all my heart.

In Jesus’ name, amen.

When we establish a relationship with God by accepting Jesus as our personal Savior, we have the greatest power in all the universe available to us. It’s no wonder Nehemiah called God “the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love Him and keep his commandments” (1:5). Nehemiah knew firsthand how good God was at loving His suffering children.

If you have already committed your life to Christ, you may want to recommit your life and this situation to Him, knowing He is sovereign and He loves you.

REBUILDING

Take time this week to ask God to renew your trust in Him. Choose at least one relevant Bible passage you can memorize and cling to as you seek wisdom and healing for your family. Write this verse on an index card, and carry it with you to review in difficult moments.

Also memorize Psalm 4:1.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

—Proverbs 3:5-6, NASB

