

# Introduction

If you are reading this, it's likely someone did something to disgrace or shame you. That "someone" may have been a stranger or an acquaintance and that "something" could have been any form of non-consensual sexual behavior. It may have occurred yesterday or decades ago.

The number of occurrences of sexual assaults is staggering. At least one in four women and one in six men are or will be victims of sexual assault in their lifetime.

We wrote this book for the many victims of sexual assault, both female and male, to offer accessible, gospel-based help, hope, and healing.

Also, we wrote this book to help equip pastors and ministry staff as well as family members and friends of victims. As they read what we are saying to victims, we hope they learn to respond and care for victims in ways that are compassionate, practical, and informed.

For many years we have ministered to victims who want and need a clear explanation of how the gospel applies to their experience of sexual assault and its effects in their lives. We have talked to many parents, spouses, ministers, and friends who are looking for solid, gospel-based information that would be helpful in serving victims.

Our experience in the area of abuse, both personally and professionally, led us to write this book. While avoiding platitudes, suspicious questions, and shallow theology, we combine practical victim advocacy, biblical and theological depth, and up-to-date academic research.

Lindsey currently counsels victims of sexual assault. Previously, she worked at a sexual assault crisis center where she provided crisis intervention to victims of assault and conducted a variety of training seminars to service providers. Lindsey also worked at a domestic violence shelter. Many of the women she served were also victims of sexual assault. Her graduate research was on sexual violence and public health responses.

Justin is a pastor and has counseled numerous victims of sexual

assault. Since 2001, he has taught theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. Justin also taught courses on sexual violence in the Sociology and Religious Studies departments as well as in the Studies of Women and Gender program at the University of Virginia.

In *Rid of My Disgrace*, we address the effects of sexual assault with the biblical message of grace and redemption. Jesus responds to your pain and past. Your story does not end with the assault. Your life was intended for more than shame, guilt, despair, pain, and denial. The assault does not define you or have the last word on your identity. Yes, it is part of your story, but not the end of your story.

The message of the gospel redeems what has been destroyed and applies grace to disgrace.

∴ This book contains both footnotes and endnotes. Letters are used to indicate footnotes, which were included so that Scripture references would be readily available to the reader.

# Disgrace and Grace

If you have suffered as the result of a sexual assault, this book is written to you and for you—not about you. What happened to you was not your fault. You are not to blame. You did not deserve it. You did not ask for this. You should not be silenced. You are not worthless. You do not have to pretend like nothing happened. Nobody had the right to violate you. You are not responsible for what happened to you. You are not damaged goods. You were supposed to be treated with dignity and respect. You were the victim of assault and it was wrong. You were sinned against. Despite all the pain, healing *can* happen and there *is* hope.

While you may cognitively agree that hope is out there, you may still feel a major effect of the sexual assault—disgrace, a deep sense of filthy defilement encumbered with shame.

Disgrace is the opposite of grace. Grace is love that seeks you out even if you have nothing to give in return. Grace is being loved when you are or feel unlovable. Grace has the power to turn despair into hope. Grace listens, lifts up, cures, transforms, and heals.

Disgrace destroys, causes pain, deforms, and wounds. It alienates and isolates. Disgrace makes you feel worthless, rejected, unwanted, and repulsive, like a *persona non grata* (a “person without grace”). Disgrace silences and shuns. Your suffering of disgrace is only increased when others force your silence. The refusals of others to speak about sexual assault and listen to victims tell the truth is a refusal to offer grace and healing.

To your sense of disgrace, God restores, heals, and re-creates through grace. A good short definition of grace is “one-way love.”<sup>1</sup> This is the opposite of your experience of assault, which was “one-way violence.” To your experience of one-way violence, God brings one-way love. The contrast between the two is staggering.

One-way love does not avoid you, but comes near, not because of

personal merit but because of your need. It is the lasting transformation that takes place in human experience. One-way love is the change agent you need for the pain you are experiencing.

Unfortunately, the message you hear most often is self-heal, self-love, and self-help. Sexual assault victims are frequently told some version of the following: “One can will one’s well-being”<sup>2</sup> or “If you are willing to work hard and find good support, you can not only heal but thrive.”<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is reflected in the famous quote, “No one can disgrace us but ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

This is all horrible news.<sup>5</sup> The reason this is bad news is that abuse victims are rightfully, and understandably, broken over how they’ve been violated. But those in pain simply may not have the wherewithal to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” On a superficial level, self-esteem techniques and a tough “refusal to allow others to hurt me” tactic may work for the short term. But what happens for the abused person on a bad day, a bad month, or a bad year? Sin and the effects of sin are similar to the laws of inertia: a person (or object) in motion will continue on that trajectory until acted upon by an outside force. If one is devastated by sin, a personal failure to rise above the effects of sin will simply create a snowball effect of shame. Hurting people need something from the outside to stop the downward spiral. Fortunately, grace floods in from the outside at the point when hope to change oneself is lost.<sup>6</sup> Grace declares and promises that you will be healed. One-way love does not command “Heal thyself!” but declares “You will be healed!” Jeremiah 17:14 promises:

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed;  
save me, and I shall be saved,  
for you are my praise.

God’s one-way love replaces self-love and is the true path to healing. This is amazingly good news and it highlights the contrast between disgrace and grace or one-way violence and one-way love. God heals our wounds. Can you receive grace and be rid of your disgrace? With the gospel of Jesus Christ, the answer is yes. Between the Bible’s bookends of creation and restored creation is the unfolding story of redemption. Biblical creation begins in harmony, unity, and peace (*shalom*),<sup>7</sup> but

redemption was needed because tragically, humanity rebelled, and the result was disgrace and destruction—the vandalism of *shalom*. But because God is faithful and compassionate, he restores his fallen creation and responds with grace and redemption. This good news is fully expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and its scope is as “far as the curse is found.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus is the redemptive work of God in our own history, in our own human flesh.

Martin Luther describes this good news: “God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who are sick, gives sight to none but the blind, and life to none but the dead. . . . He has mercy on none but the wretched and gives grace to none but those who are in disgrace.”<sup>9</sup> This message of the gospel is for all but is particularly relevant to victims of sexual assault. The purpose of this book is to proclaim this message of healing and hope to you, because you know too well the depths of suffering and the overwhelming sense of disgrace.

### **Rid of My Disgrace**

To illustrate the trauma of sexual assault and hope for redemption, we will investigate 2 Samuel 13. This passage is the biblical account of Tamar’s assault by her half-brother Amnon. Tamar’s assault reflects the contrast between disgrace and grace. Disgrace versus grace is similar to the contrasts between destruction and redemption, sin and salvation, brokenness and healing, despair and hope, shame and compassion, guilt and forgiveness, violence and peace.

[1]In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David. [2]Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar that he made himself ill. For she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her. [3]Now Amnon had an adviser named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David’s brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man. [4]He asked Amnon, “Why do you, the king’s son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won’t you tell me?” Amnon said to him, “I’m in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.” [5]“Go to bed and pretend to be ill,” Jonadab said. “When your father comes to see you, say to him, ‘I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I may watch her and then eat it from her hand.’” [6]So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. When

the king came to see him, Amnon said to him, “I would like my sister Tamar to come and make some special bread in my sight, so I may eat from her hand.”

[7]David sent word to Tamar at the palace: “Go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him.” [8]So Tamar went to the house of her brother Amnon, who was lying down. She took some dough, kneaded it, made the bread in his sight and baked it. [9]Then she took the pan and served him the bread, but he refused to eat. “Send everyone out of here,” Amnon said. So everyone left him. [10]Then Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring the food here into my bedroom so I may eat from your hand.” And Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon in his bedroom. [11]But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, “Come to bed with me, my sister.” [12]“No, my brother!” she said to him. “Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing. [13]What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you.” [14]But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her.

[15]Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, “Get up and get out!” [16]“No!” she said to him. “Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me.” But he refused to listen to her. [17]He called his personal servant and said, “Get this woman out of my sight and bolt the door after her.” [18]So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing an ornate robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. [19]Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went.

[20]Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother. Don’t take this thing to heart.” And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom’s house, a desolate woman. [21]When King David heard all this, he was furious. [22]And Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar.<sup>a</sup>

Second Samuel 13 provides an insightful analysis of sexual assault because it is portrayed through Tamar’s eyes. Tragically, her experience

---

<sup>a</sup>2 Sam. 13:1–22 NIV.

includes manipulation, force, violence, negation of her will, emotional trauma, debilitating loss of sense of self, display of grief and mourning, crushing shame, degradation, forced silence, and prolonged social isolation with desolation. Tamar's social and personal boundaries are clearly violated.<sup>10</sup>

It's clear in verses 12, 14, and 22 that Amnon's actions of assault are violating, shaming, forceful, and humiliating. Violence permeates his words and actions. The words used to describe Amnon's feelings and physical state express sick emotions rather than life-giving ones. According to Phyllis Tribble, Amnon reduces Tamar to the state of a "disposable object."<sup>11</sup> After he assaults Tamar, Amnon commands her to leave by telling his servant, "Get this woman out of my sight."<sup>b</sup> Other translations say "Throw this woman out."<sup>c</sup> Amnon barely speaks of her as a person. She is a thing Amnon wants thrown out. To him, Tamar is trash.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding biblical accounts of sexual assault, Mieke Bal writes, "Rape is an expression of hatred, motivated by hate, and is often accompanied by offensive verbal language."<sup>13</sup> Amnon failed to consider Tamar as a complete person, created with dignity in the image of God. The intensity of Amnon's desire for Tamar was matched only by the intensity with which he hated her.

Verses 13, 19, and 22 repeatedly describe the effects of Tamar's assault: disgrace, shame, and reproach. After the assault, Tamar is privately and publicly traumatized by shame. The description of her outward appearance intends to show her inward feelings. Verse 19 is one sentence made up of four clauses that describe Tamar's state: "Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went."

Dressing the head with a headdress symbolizes dignity, but to the contrary, applying ashes is a symbol of lowliness.<sup>d</sup> Figuratively, ashes signify that which is without value or what is loathsome. Ashes on the head are a sign of humiliation and disgrace.<sup>14</sup> The "shame" that Tamar spoke of before the assault in verse 13—"Where could I get rid of my disgrace?"—is now a reality.

Tamar's robe is a special symbol of her elevated social status; however, she tears her robe. The rending of clothes—often articulated bibli-

---

<sup>b</sup>2 Sam. 13:17 NIV.

<sup>c</sup>New American Standard Bible and New Living Translation.

<sup>d</sup>Isa. 61:3.

cally as “sackcloth and ashes”—is an act of grievous affliction, revealing the sorrow of the heart, and is an expression of loss and lament. Tamar had her dignity torn from her, and the invasion is now expressed with physical gestures. The narrator describes Tamar as a person.<sup>e</sup> But after this violation, her beauty is exchanged for feelings of shame and loss expressed through symbols of emotional distress. Tamar has become a person who has experienced loss of control over her body, over her life, and over her dignity.

To put her hands on her head is a gesture of grief.<sup>15</sup> The book of Jeremiah describes the image of hands on the head to express shame.<sup>f</sup> Covering the head with one’s hands and with ashes is a double image intensifying the expression of the abused person’s state of deep shame and anguish.

The basic meaning of “cry” is to plead, from a disturbed heart, for help in time of distress. Tamar’s cry is not to summon another, but to express her deeply felt distress. Tamar’s “crying aloud” is an audible expression of pain, emphasizing the distress already conveyed through her visual appearance and gestures.

While we read that she leaves crying, we are not specifically told where she goes. The image produced is one of Tamar wandering aimlessly, with her torn dress, wailing like one in mourning, publicly announcing her grief and her disgrace. The assault has reduced her to a state of aimless despair.<sup>16</sup>

Tamar’s body language portrays deep pain. Her actions resemble a rite of shame and link her with all other victims of assault. The post-assault scene is dominated by physical symbols that express Tamar’s inner trauma. She has been grievously wronged by Amnon and left alone by everyone else. Her brother Absalom said, “Be quiet now, my sister. . . . Don’t take this thing to heart” (v. 20). He would rather have kept her assault and suffering hidden. Even though the text says her father, the king, was furious, he did nothing. It was appropriate for David to be angry. However, he should have reached out to Tamar and protected her, even if it was only in a gesture of articulating that anger to her that she had been wronged. When victims are abused and shamed, often the

<sup>e</sup>2 Sam. 13:1.

<sup>f</sup>Jer. 2:36–37. “How much you go about, changing your way! You shall be put to shame by Egypt as you were put to shame by Assyria. From it too you will come away with your hands on your head, for the LORD has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them.”



response (or lack thereof) of family and friends continues to pile on the shame. Those who should have been supportive and taken her side did not. They minimized what had happened, showing that they did not understand the depth of Tamar's pain.

Second Samuel 13 describes well the destruction wrought by sexual assault, which includes the violation and its effects, the sin against Tamar, and its consequences. An important question asked by assault victims is echoed in verse 13 when Tamar asks, "Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" Her question was left unanswered in the text. Absalom, her brother, responded to Tamar's pain by plotting to kill Amnon and by silencing her. David, Tamar's father, ignored her disgrace.

However, there was one who later came and entered her pain and shame. Jesus Christ was killed, not for revenge but to bear her shame on the cross<sup>g</sup> and to offer her a new robe of righteousness to replace her torn robes of disgrace.<sup>h</sup> How Tamar felt after the assault, described in verse 19, is shockingly similar to what Jesus experienced leading up to and during his crucifixion.<sup>i</sup> Jesus entered her pain and shame as Tamar's substitute to remove the stain of sins committed against her, and he rose from the dead to bring her healing and hope.

## **Disgrace, Grace Applied, and Grace Accomplished**

The message of this book is that the gospel applies grace to disgrace and redeems what is destroyed. This good news for victims is explained in the three parts of the book.<sup>17</sup>

### *Part One—Disgrace*

In order to deal with the issue honestly and directly, the first part (chapters 2 and 3) presents a clear definition of sexual assault and a description of its effects. Numerous misconceptions surround the issue of sexual assault as victims are often unsure if their experiences classify as assault. Sexual assault is not just rape by a stranger with physical force or a weapon. Most victims (approximately 80 percent) are assaulted by an acquaintance (relative, spouse, dating partner, friend, pastor,

---

<sup>g</sup>Heb. 12:2.

<sup>h</sup>Isa. 61:10.

<sup>i</sup>He was betrayed by a close friend, abandoned by his other friends, mocked, beaten, publicly shamed and humiliated, and he felt abandoned by God (Psalm 22 and Matt. 27:45–46).

teacher, boss, coach, therapist, doctor, etc.). Sexual assault also includes attempted rape or any form of nonconsensual sexual contact.

Many victims feel the effects of sexual assault but are isolated or confused because they believe a popular misconception of what sexual assault entails. The purpose of chapter 2 is to let victims know the prevalence of their experiences and the truth about assault. Chapter 3 on the effects of sexual assault is central for this book as it mostly describes the emotional damage done to victims, which is the focal point for applying the gospel of redemption.

### *Part Two—Grace Applied*

Chapters 4 through 9 focus on ways that grace is applied to the disgraceful experiences and effects of sexual assault. Denial, shame, distorted images of self and God, guilt, anger, and the despair that comes with it all can only be dealt with one way: through God's compassion, faithfulness, and grace.

We believe that the only thing that gets to the depth of the devastation of sexual assault is God's one-way, unconditional love expressed through, and founded on, the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. And in response to sin and its effects, God's radical grace and redemption are at the center of responding to the pain and needs brought on by a victim's experiences.

### *Part Three—Grace Accomplished*

The third part (chapters 10 through 12) is for further study for anyone who wants to read about the biblical understanding of sin, violence, and sexual assault, and God's response of redemption. Chapter 10 investigates the original peace (*shalom*) inherent to God's creation, the cosmic treason of human sin, and the violence that follows. We will trace a biblical theology of violence in general and explore what the Bible says about sexual assault in particular. The fall and sin invert mutual love and harmony into domination of and violence against each other. Sex, the very expression of human union and peace, becomes a tool for violence after the fall.

Chapters 11 and 12 trace the drama of redemption starting in the garden of Eden leading to the cross and resurrection and finally to completion in the new creation. God's steadfast unfailing love (*hesed*)<sup>18</sup> and grace are the threads throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Chapter 11 surveys significant, redemptive events in the Old Testament while chapter 12 shows how God's desire to restore peace and bring redemption is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When victims can identify with the horrendous victimization of the cross, they are more meaningfully able to celebrate the victorious resurrection of Christ. Jesus suffered violence that mirrors much of what victims experience today (shame, humiliation, silence, betrayal, pain, mockery, injustice, loneliness, etc.). While Jesus' suffering and death were real and brutal, there was resurrection after Good Friday. The cross is both the consequence of evil and God's method of accomplishing redemption. Jesus proves, by the resurrection, that God redeems, heals, and makes all things new.

As we explore how one-way love heals and replaces the destruction caused by one-way violence, it is helpful to look at the prayer of Psalm 6. Imagine this psalm as Tamar's cry and yours—a mourning of disgrace and longing for grace from God:

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,  
nor discipline me in your wrath.  
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;  
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.  
My soul also is greatly troubled.  
But you, O LORD—how long?  
Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;  
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.  
For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
in Sheol who will give you praise?  
I am weary with my moaning;  
every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.  
My eye wastes away because of grief;  
it grows weak because of all my foes.  
Depart from me, all you workers of evil,  
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.  
The LORD has heard my plea;  
the LORD accepts my prayer.  
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;  
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.

"Careful research, lots of Scripture, and a demonstration that the work of Christ says 'you are washed clean' to those who feel like outcasts: *Rid of My Disgrace* will speak to victims of sexual abuse."

**Ed Welch**, *Counselor and Faculty, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation*

"Gives sexual assault victims, and those who love and serve them, the freedom to grieve the violence against them and the tools to experience healing and hope in Jesus."

**Grace Driscoll**, *pastor's wife, mother of five, conference speaker, author*

"I praise God for the gospel that can heal and restore and for the Holcombs who had the courage and wisdom to write this book for us."

**Matt Chandler**, *Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, TX*

"Reminds victims of sexual assault that they are not alone and it is not the end of the story. From King David's daughter Tamar to the courageous survivors telling their stories today, the Holcombs take sexual assault out of the shadows of shame and isolation and into the light of the gospel."

**Monica Taffinder**, *cofounder and counselor, Grace Clinic Christian Counseling*

"In my interaction with teens and young adults, I have heard many stories of sexual abuse. I am so thrilled that there is a resource like this book that offers relevant, practical, and biblical hope."

**Rebecca St. James**, *singer, author, actress*

**JUSTIN S. HOLCOMB** (PhD, Emory University) is a pastor at Mars Hill Church (Seattle) and director of the Resurgence. He is also adjunct professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

**LINDSEY A. HOLCOMB** is a deacon at Mars Hill Church (Seattle), where she counsels victims of sexual assault and trains leaders to care for them.

CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

