

L E A V I N G  
S I L E N C E

*Sexualized Violence, the Bible,  
and Standing with Survivors*

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**LEADER'S NOTE:** Because this book dives into some deeply painful, personal topics, the questions in this study guide may trigger memories of trauma or feelings of distress for some members of your group. It is important to not pressure anyone to answer any question during your group conversations—you may be unaware of those in your group who are actually survivors of sexualized violence, and some people may not want to reveal that about themselves. The questions are structured so that people can easily discuss other experiences as well, but it is important to begin each session with a reminder that no one is required to share more than they feel comfortable, nor should participants push anyone else to share at any time. It would also be a good idea to remind everyone in the group that it is very possible that people in your group have experienced sexualized violence or know someone who has, and that it's essential to approach each conversation with that in mind.

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## BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

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1. Which public #MeToo stories of sexualized violence have moved you most? Was the survivor believed? What actions of accountability, if any, were taken?
2. Are any of the author's "I believe" guideposts (pp. 22–25) for this book new or challenging for you? In what ways?
3. On page 26, the author writes, "A God who is with us—*really* with us—will stand up for us even if no one else does." How have you experienced God doing this for you or your family or community? When have you experienced a lack of this?
4. Which scriptural story or passage are you most looking forward to examining in this book, and why? How have the traditional interpretations of these stories and passages been formative for you?
5. How have you seen certain #MeToo stories privileged over others (pp. 27–28)?
6. What is your initial reaction to the author's assertion that "God is a survivor, too" (p. 30)?

## AN ORIGINAL SIN

### *Sexualized Violence, Power, and the God Who Sees*

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1. Have you been taught that “gendered hierarchies” and “the power-grabbing implicit in sexualized violence” are simply a part of human nature (pp. 31–32)? Do you agree with the author that such a belief is in error? Why or why not?
2. The author asserts that “Hagar’s disempowerment, forced surrogacy, and abuse reflect the roles that white supremacy still coerces Black women to fill today” (p. 34). How do you see this occurring in our society?
3. What do you think about the idea of “consent” being a modern notion (p. 35)? Does this affect how you respond to Sarah’s actions toward Hagar?
4. How have you seen that, like Sarah, “hurt people hurt people” (p. 37)? What does it take to “metabolize” our trauma so that we can break the chain of brokenness and begin to “create new life around us” (p. 39)?
5. On page 41, the author writes, “Hagar is meant to be trodden into submission, her strength, character, and witness squeezed out of her like toothpaste from a rolled-up tube. She does not comply.” How does this description resonate with you, whether regarding your own experiences or those of a loved one?
6. Have you ever had to survive before you could thrive? Did you still feel seen by God during that time? How, or how not?
7. Have you been taught that receiving blessing and redemption requires us first to experience pain, even like that of sexualized violence? What do you think now?
8. On page 48, the author writes, “The stakes are always lower the more power a person has.” How was this true for David and Bathsheba? How is it still true today?
9. The author claims that there are times “when the notion of consent becomes even more confounded . . . when the stakes of saying no are so high they might even cost someone’s life” (pp. 49–50). Does this ring true to you, from something you’ve seen in our world, or in your own life, that you want to share?
10. Where are you powerful, and where are you not (p. 51)? What social locators are at play?
11. What socioeconomic issues related to sexualized violence concern you most? What would you like to see your church do about it?
12. On page 56, the author writes, “For some survivors, seeing how power is abused in our world in ways that allow and even encourage sexualized violence may undercut their confidence in God’s *power* as part of their healing.” How can your church gently hold space for survivors in this struggle?

## BEARING WITNESS TO OURSELVES AND ONE ANOTHER

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1. What do you think about Dinah's silence in Genesis 34? Do you agree with the author that it is a form of witness (p. 62)? Why or why not?
2. Are you more prone to fight, flight, or freeze in response to a dangerous or traumatic situation? Any examples you want to share?
3. In what ways does our society seem to demand an "ideal survivor" (p. 63)?
4. What do you think about the author's proposal of the phrases "culture of safety" and "culture of accountability" rather than "culture of reporting" (p. 64)? How can your church cultivate such a culture?
5. What examples can you share of people caring about their own (or their family's or group's) honor rather than someone's well-being? Did they claim to be acting on behalf of this person, as Dinah's brothers did (pp. 67–68)?
6. Why do survivors of sexualized violence sometimes turn to their abusers after assault (p. 71)? How can we respond in such situations?
7. In what ways do would-be allies like Absalom sometimes act lamentably, even further contributing to the victimization of survivors?
8. How can we work to ever be "deliberately recognizing and attending to our own emotional needs" (p. 77) so that we can more helpfully respond to others' trauma?
9. Had you read or heard the story of Tamar, Amnon, and Absalom in 2 Samuel 13 before this? If not, were you surprised to find this story in the Bible? Or if so, how has your perspective on it shifted after reading this book chapter?
10. What are some ways your church can "bear witness" to others' trauma—rather than being like the spectators to Daughter Zion's rape in Lamentations 1:12 (p. 80)?
11. Have you found any ways to "make a burden less heavy for another person without then placing a burden on [yourself] that is too crushing" (p. 82)? How do you (or can you) balance your own needs with those of others? Are there burdens you have had to say you could not carry?
12. What emotions are most "unacceptable" in our society, and why do you think that is? How is your church making space for the "full range of emotion that comes along the journey" (p. 85) of being allies to survivors?

## MEN, TOO

### *Sexualized Violence Affects Everybody*

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1. In what ways are men often taught that their pain is illegitimate? How does this cause additional shame?
2. How do we broaden the definition of masculinity to create space for the healing of male survivors?
3. How do you process the lack of internal consistency in Scripture concerning masculinity and femininity—that, for example, “there are many places that include prominent and rigid assumptions about what masculinity and femininity are” (p. 94)?
4. How does recognizing the “strict set of gender roles” undergirding the commands given in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 help us understand different possible meanings behind them (pp. 96–99)? Does this change how you understand their application (if any) to our lives today?
5. What does the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 reveal about the role of power in sexualized violence?
6. How can our wounding, anger, and trauma lead us into hurtful actions (p. 106)? Feel free to share any personal examples.
7. The author states that “no one deserves to have their bodily autonomy violated . . . even people who have behaved abusively in the past” (p. 107). Do you agree with this? If so, what societal changes (in our families and larger institutions) might we want to see?
8. What contemporary situations come to mind “in which people who are more powerful *deliberately* exploit the stereotypes of less powerful people, pretending that they are a threat” (p. 111)? Did/do they get away with it?
9. What can seem like consent but isn’t, as in the story of Samson and Delilah (p. 115)? How can traditional or stereotypical gender roles factor into this?
10. When have you witnessed that, like Samson, survivors “still have power even after they’ve experienced abuse” (p. 118)?
11. Which biblical narrative explored in this chapter was most compelling or challenging for you, and why? How has your view of it changed over time, including since reading this chapter?
12. With all we have learned in this chapter, how specifically can your church take steps to better support male survivors, both at the macro and micro levels?

## **“IF MY FATHER AND MOTHER FORSAKE ME”**

### *Family Betrayal and Sexualized Violence*

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1. How do the events in Genesis 22 and Judges 11 “illustrate the vulnerability of children to the convictions and whims of their parents” (p. 124)? Do they remind you of any contemporary or personal examples you want to share?
2. What do you think of the author’s statement that “God’s challenge to Abraham is not to sacrifice his son as a sign of faith, but to be willing to wrestle with God . . . also as a sign of his faith” (p. 125)? If you want to share, have you ever submitted to what you thought was God’s voice only to believe later you should have pushed back?
3. How might Abraham’s choices in Genesis 22 have affected Sarah and Isaac going forward? Does this dynamic resonate with you from any personal experience?
4. In what ways might the story of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11 resonate with survivors, even though it is not actually about sexualized violence? How is it similar, and how is it different?
5. On page 129, the author writes, “Children should not have to bear the weight of their parents’ mistakes, should not be the offering sacrificed to appease God.” What thoughts and feelings emerge for you after reading this assertion?
6. What are some examples of how our society’s children (and women) are “sacrificed along the way” (p. 130), in addition to acts of sexualized violence against them?
7. How does Jesus invite us to “take a more complex look at families” (p. 132) than the traditional, nuclear family-based model generally associated with Christianity?
8. What social taboos related to sexualized violence might Jesus call you and your church to break in discipleship to him?
9. On page 135, the author writes, “The Prince of Peace ushers in a unity forged only in the fires of justice.” How has peace often been “pushed” on survivors ahead of healing and justice?
10. What are some ways your church can “draw together family” (p. 139)? What are some possible pitfalls to watch out for here?
11. How have interpretations of passages like Ephesians 5:21-24 and 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 contributed to justification of sexualized violence in marriages? What do you think we should do with these passages in light of this?
12. Psalm 27:10 says, “If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” What are some of the opportunities and challenges related to “reclaiming God as parent after abuse” (p. 143)? How have you experienced God as parent—or in some other way instead?

## MOVING BEYOND BLAME

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1. What is your “embedded” theology regarding Scripture’s explanation for suffering and trauma? Has that changed over the years, especially in response to your own or others’ painful experiences?
2. How has a Deuteronomistic “get what you deserve” theology let you (or someone you know) down? Has someone ever implied (or outright stated) this as a reason for your suffering?
3. What do you think of the author’s description of the Bible as an “ongoing, sacred conversation” (p. 158)? Does this “polyphony” help you make sense of how “different parts are in tension or even disagreement with each other”? Why or why not?
4. Was Daughter Zion’s voice in Lamentations included in your scriptural formation? If so, how was she portrayed? If not, what is your initial reaction to her narrative?
5. Does the “cruel, jeering tone” (p. 164) of the voice in Lamentations 1:7-9 remind you of any others you have experienced or witnessed? How does it change the message of Lamentations to read these verses as from a new speaker rather than the original narrator?
6. Read Lamentations 1 together. What do you make of Daughter Zion’s confession of sin? What would you say to her if you had the chance?
7. On page 168, the author writes, “If I claim to stand with survivors and to empower survivors to speak, then I need to be prepared to let survivors say what they want and need to say, regardless of how uncomfortable it makes me.” Does this statement challenge you? How?
8. How do you see in our society that certain people “bear heavier expectations for ‘perfection’ than others do” (p. 170)? How can your church counteract these double standards?
9. When have you been tempted to blame (yourself or others) rather than process more difficult emotions? Is blame still sometimes an important part of this processing? Why or why not?
10. On page 177, the author writes, “We shouldn’t have to feel that we must hide parts of our stories in order to be treated as people.” What are the implications of allowing complexity in our narratives, both for survivors and for perpetrators?
11. Where do you want to relinquish self-blame? How can you take a step in this direction while having patience with yourself?
12. Have you witnessed or participated in a “brave space” (p. 179)? How can your church cultivate brave spaces?

## JESUS AND SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

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1. How do you view the role of Mary's consent in the annunciation story? Do you see her pregnancy as "a sign of her empowerment" (p. 184)? Why or why not?
2. In what ways do you see the gospel stories demonstrating "a deep commitment to taking the stories of women seriously" (pp. 185–86)? Is there a story of Jesus "attending to the marginalized" that is particularly special to you?
3. How does Jesus establish himself as a "trustworthy figure for survivors of sexualized violence" (p. 189)? What particular words or actions of his have personally helped you trust him?
4. Why does the story of the bleeding woman seem to be of special significance for survivors of sexualized violence (pp. 189–91)? What can it teach us about what they need from the Christian community?
5. When have you taken a tentative step out of the shadows to receive love and healing (p. 191)? What happened from there?
6. What is your initial reaction to the idea of Jesus' crucifixion as an abuse narrative (p. 193)? What is the evidence for or against it? What are the implications of this perspective?
7. Have you struggled with the idea of Jesus' crucifixion as a "necessary evil" allowed (or even devised) by God (p. 195–96)? Has your view shifted after reading this chapter?
8. What can would-be allies to survivors of sexualized violence learn from Jesus' disciple Thomas in his processing of the resurrection?
9. How has your view changed regarding what healing looks like in your own or another's life? What role does your understanding of the resurrection play in this?
10. After reading more about the imagery in Revelation depicting "the consummation of Jesus' kingship as taking place through sexualized, violent acts" (p. 205), are you ready to "set them aside" as an instance of a biblical author missing the mark, or to make sense of them some other way?
11. How does your understanding of the idea of "Satan" compare to that of the author's (p. 208)? Within whatever definition you have, are there ways you have felt "the hold of Satan's power" (p. 209) begin to break in your life, church, or community?
12. On page 210, the author writes, "Understanding sexuality as a self-giving yet self-affirming embrace of one another, we could truly bring our whole selves—safely and powerfully—into communion with God and others." To conclude the study, what is one way you would like to see your church community support such a view of intimacy under the redeeming, reimagining reign of Christ?