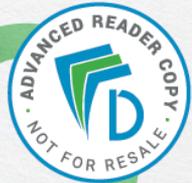


“Tabitha is a true rarity. Her words  
are the unspoken truths of millions.”

—Sophia San Filippo, managing editor of *Love What Matters*



# Jesus *and* Therapy

Bridging the Gap

Between Faith and

Mental Health

*Tabitha Gates*

## Advance Praise for Jesus and Therapy

“Between her unabashed willingness to delineate the unseen depths of trauma, mental health, and faith, and her writing that is all at once visceral, relatable, and witty; Tabitha is a true rarity. Her words are the unspoken truths of millions.”

—Sophia San Filippo, managing editor of  
*Love What Matters*

“Tabitha has been gifted with such a talent of articulating not only what so many yearn to hear, but also what they *need* to hear. She couples love with brutal honesty, sharing such unique circumstances in life that, I know, are saving people around the globe. Her words are truly resonating with countless people while God uses her to share His grace and goodness.”

—Regan Long, co-founder of The Real Deal  
of Parenting, public speaker, and author of  
*Stuck at 5 CM, A Letter for Every Mother,*  
and *101 Moments of Motherhood*

“The Bible tells us that we will have trouble in life, but mental illness is something many Christians feel they should be able to overcome with faith, causing them to question their belief system when they cannot do so. *Jesus and Therapy* offers a fresh and practical way to address mental illness without shame by offering readers solutions to these struggles as they lean on Jesus for their hope.”

—Quinn Kelly, host of the *Renew You* podcast  
on Air 1 & K-Love Radio

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“As a mama who struggles with an anxiety disorder myself, I know how isolating and painful it can be to silently battle our own thoughts. Tabitha offers a sense of community and the affirmation God is working and is close to us, even in the *hardest hard*.”

—Jaclyn Warren, founder of *Mommy’s 15 Minutes* and contributing author of *So God Made a Mother*

“For those hanging on by a thread, feeling alone, and lost in the darkness of their struggles with anxiety and depression, Tabitha can relate. She uses her story in a powerful way to throw out a rope of hope to those in desperate need. This resource is one the church will be able to add to their libraries, small groups, and life-changing ministries to help believers who are depressed walk their road of restoration and healing.”

—Caris Snider, speaker, podcaster, and author of the *Anxiety Elephants* series and *Car Line Mom: 100 Days of Encouragement*

“Tabitha’s words are such a light to those who are hurting. She shares authentically and vulnerably from her own trials and experiences and gives hope to those who are walking through their own set of hard times. Her writing is powerful, yet real and relatable, reminding all of us that even in pain and suffering, there is still hope.”

—Allison Brost, Christian singer/songwriter and author of *This Side of Perfect* and *Grateful: 30 Days of Growing in Thankfulness*

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This thoughtful and compassionate book is for anyone who has felt like an unfit or second-class Christian due to mental health stigmatization from the Christian community. Tabitha has written a deeply personal story that invites the reader into the truth about oneself (valued beyond words by Jesus) and the possibility of healing. The sections titled “Jesus and Therapy” can easily be integrated into therapy with clients who may be struggling with their faith, painful church experiences and spiritual abuse. Tabitha is a clear, strong voice of advocacy for mental health in the church just when it is needed most.

—Michelle Caulk, PhD, licensed counselor;  
Director of Clinical Experiences at Huntington  
University; Master Accelerated Resolution  
Therapy (ART) Clinician; and co-author of  
*Healing Out Loud: How to Embrace God’s  
Love When You Don’t Like Yourself*

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# Jesus *and* Therapy

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# Jesus *and* Therapy

**Bridging the Gap  
Between Faith and  
Mental Health**

*Tabitha Gates*

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## DEXTERITY

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Nashville, TN 37211

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## A Note to Readers

Hello, friend! Thank you for picking up this book. I'm so grateful for the privilege I have been given to play a small role in you or your loved one's journey as you navigate the sometimes confusing intersection where your faith and mental health meet. Speaking of journeys, the one I've walked through to get to this moment where I'm able to witness my life come full circle could only be the result of the goodness of a God who loves a good comeback story and has an ultimate redemptive purpose in mind for even the darkest moments in life.

My story has been in the making for nearly forty years. Though shame has kept me quiet for much of my life, I'm no longer willing to stay silent. Throughout this book, I share my truth regarding the abuse and mistreatment that occurred behind closed doors, both at home and within the church, with the hope that it will be the catalyst to help you share your own story and find healing.

If I had to venture a guess as to why you picked up this book, I would say perhaps it's because you're wrestling with your mental health. Maybe you have been struggling for as long as you can remember. You haven't given up hope that your life amounts to so much more than your diagnosis. You refuse to believe the brokenness you are facing right now is how your story ends. You might even be desperately clinging to your faith, despite possibly feeling betrayed by your Maker due to harm caused by His children. Or maybe you're struggling to find your

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place in the Christian community after they defined you and your faith by your mental health struggles. Perhaps believers even placed the blame for your battle at your feet—“God is punishing you.” “He is trying to teach you a lesson.” “Your faith is too weak.” “If you prayed more, you wouldn’t need antidepressants.” “If you really trusted God, you wouldn’t have anxiety.”

Or perhaps you know someone who’s in the trenches of their own battle. You’ve tried to help your loved one with their struggle, but you second-guess if you’re saying the right thing—doing the right thing. You seek to understand the issue of mental health so that you can better support the people you care about.

The messages you will find in this book are for everyone. If you are personally struggling, I believe you will feel seen, understood, and less alone by the end of this book. If you know someone or love someone who wrestles with their mental health, you will gain tremendous knowledge, advice, and resources for how to best love and show up for that person.

Damaging perspectives about mental health challenges within the bounds of Christianity may have already led you to walk away from organized religion, the church, or perhaps even your relationship with God. After all, how loving could God be when His children, who are supposed to reflect Him, meet suffering with rejection and further wounding?

This broken spot is exactly where I found myself in my adolescent years. A home life consisting of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse had set the stage for spiritual abuse by male leadership in a cult-like fundamentalist Christian church that my family attended. Eventually, after years of abuse, pain, and abandonment, I walked

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away from the only God my church had ever shown me, defeated, disillusioned, and done with religion. Soon after that, at the age of sixteen, I landed in a psych ward.

I share this because I want you to understand that I know how it feels to walk out of a church and vow to never darken its doorstep again. I know what it's like to refuse to associate with fellow Christians because you're ashamed to be associated with them after watching them wound, ostracize, or harshly judge you or your loved ones. I was the wandering prodigal who turned my back on God because I couldn't separate Christ from what others called "Christianity."

While I may not have been willing to follow the God who had been modeled to me my entire childhood, I desperately wanted a God who was waiting to extend grace to me. I wanted someone who'd love *all* of me completely. That God . . . I'd consider following. No one in my life seemed to know *that* kind of Savior, but my heart was desperate to find Him.

## Faith and Mental Health Care Can Coexist

After much healing and many years in therapy, I came to know Jesus and to embrace His body—the church. As an active member of my church today, I am passionate about helping bridge the gap that often exists between people who are struggling with their mental health and the Christian community. The church should be the first place we go to find healthy, restorative relationships and healing, but unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.

Due to broken bodies and a broken world, the issue of mental health isn't going away. In the United States alone, anxiety affects forty million people every year . . . *forty*

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*million*. Over sixteen million Americans suffer from a depressive disorder. Nearly eight million adults suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>1</sup> And that doesn't even touch on the mental-health statistics involving our kids, which have skyrocketed in the past several years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now imagine those suffering individuals turning toward their local church for help and instead of finding resources, support, and open arms, they only find shame, judgment, and blank stares. The truth is, friends, the church as it is today—and at times Christian culture, no matter how well-intentioned—is not always educated or equipped to deal with mental health struggles. In fact, sometimes it does more harm than good. I cannot tell you how many people have told me they no longer attend church because of the deep wounding and rejection they have experienced from other believers who perpetuate the fallacy that mental health struggles have to do with a lack of faith, personal failings, or sinful life choices.

Too often in the church, we communicate explicitly or implicitly to weary believers that there is no place for them in the body of Christ until they are “healed.” We treat individuals with mental health struggles as weak links, as lesser Christians, or even as people who are walking in sin.

We have to do better. We have a chance as the church to be a hospital for the hurting, a light in the darkness, and a beacon of hope, love, and redemption for those who are struggling.

As you'll see in the following pages, and as you may have discovered in your own life, you *can* be a Christian and still struggle with your mental health and suicidal

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thoughts. You *can* have faith that will move mountains but still have days when you cannot move yourself out of bed. You *can* love Jesus with all your heart and still rely heavily on a therapist to walk you through life's issues and traumas. You *can* believe that God holds the entire world in His hands but still find yourself in the middle of the mother of all panic attacks because everything *feels* out of control. There is a place for both faith and mental health care to coexist, and that is where transformation and recovery can be found: in Jesus *and* therapy.

I write this book as someone who has personal mental health struggles—and as someone who longs to see the church offer healing, not hurt, to those who are suffering.

If you've been hanging on by a thread to your faith, feel like an outsider in the body of Christ, or have faced rejection over your mental health—this book was written for you.

If you feel angry with God and don't know how to forgive the people who hurt you in His name, this book is for you.

If you are a parent, child, spouse, or sibling who lives with someone who wrestles with mental health issues, this book is for you.

If you are a pastor, counselor, family member, or friend seeking to understand and embrace people who live with mental health conditions, this book is for you.

In the coming chapters, we are going to do the following:

- Address common misconceptions about believers and mental health

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- Discuss the church and its role in dealing with mental illness
- Work on identifying, acknowledging, and releasing past wounds
- Dismantle false beliefs about ourselves and our faith and replace them with truth
- Discuss pivotal biblical figures who wrestled with their mental health
- Build a personal and professional support system
- Examine the benefits of therapy
- Walk through practical steps to working through church hurt
- Talk about how to rebuild our spiritual foundation in the truth of Christ
- Firmly establish our identity in Jesus and our place in the church

I know firsthand that some wounds only Christ can heal, and I believe that He desires to walk with you every step of the way through your healing journey. With that in mind, at the end of each chapter, you'll find suggestions for spiritual application.

Because I personally have experienced the power of Jesus and professional therapy working together, especially for those of us who have trauma in our past or present, I also include at the end of each chapter questions, conversations, and action steps you can discuss with your therapist.

No matter where you are on your faith journey, I'd love to come alongside you and share my story and the lessons I've learned along the way as we dispel the common misconceptions about believers who suffer from mental health conditions. My hope is that by the time you

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turn the last page of this book, you'll see the abundant life available to you, the hope waiting despite the diagnosis, and the truth about how valuable you are to Jesus and the people around you.

Your story isn't over yet.

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One

## The Reason for My Wars

### *Identifying Abuse, Legalism, and Grace*

Violators cannot live with the truth: survivors cannot live without it . . . .But the truth won't go away. It will keep surfacing until it is recognized. Truth will outlast any campaigns mounted against it, no matter how mighty, clever, or long. It is invincible.

—CHRISTINE OKSANA, *SAFE PASSAGE TO HEALING*

*Trigger Warning: This chapter discusses child abuse ranging from physical to emotional abuse, as well as spiritual abuse. Some readers may find the author's recollections of prior abuse distressing.*

Every kid deserves a childhood where they can spend their most formative years experiencing innocence, belonging, love, joy, and physical and emotional safety. The kids who actually get such an experience? Well, they are the lucky ones. If your experience with the people who should have protected you wasn't a good one, you're not alone. There are many of us who still bear the wounds of a past

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that was not our fault. Please know that you're seen and understood in this space.

I was an infant when my father's physical abuse of me began. As my mom tells it, I earned his wrath because I kept him awake, crying from colic. His anger was only matched in intensity by my mom's fear of him. So, with no one to intervene, his episodes built in intensity throughout my childhood and ranged from punching me until I blacked out to screaming that I was going to hell as he beat me with a belt. The physical abuse evolved into what I can only describe as narcissistic psychological warfare as I entered my preteen and teenage years.

I tried to please my father—oh, how I tried. As a young child, I would always color him pictures and write him notes and try to endear myself to him. As a teen, I was the live-action Cinderella when I'd come to visit him—ironing his work clothes, making his bed, cleaning his home, and cooking for my siblings despite not being the oldest child. When you are raised in an abusive home where love is conditional or absent, you will do almost anything to feel it, even if only for a moment. Everything within me yearned to be Daddy's girl. If I'd known then what I know now, I could have saved myself a lifetime of chasing after his love and approval. But what I didn't realize was that as a narcissist, my father was incapable of providing the emotional support and nurturing I needed and deserved.

When I was only seven years old, Dad walked out on our family, leaving behind my mom, my older brother, my little sister, and me. His abandonment broke me. I still remember that sunny afternoon in Guam, when he and my mom sat me down at our round oak dining room table and told me that once we arrived at our next military duty station in Hawaii, they would be getting a divorce. I don't

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recall my mother saying a word during this conversation, which made it clear that Dad was driving the decision. Due to an extensive amount of trauma, many of my memories are repressed, and it is always significant to me when I retain a memory from my childhood—and this one seems as clear as if it happened yesterday.

At that time, the only thing my young heart understood was that I was the only daughter without a dad to take me to our church's father-daughter dance. I did not realize I was grieving a love I'd never had and a relationship that had never existed outside of my dreams. It didn't occur to me that his decision to leave was my only way of escaping a daily life in an ever-precarious environment and living in constant fear of his angry outbursts.

True to his word, my dad began the divorce process (and found his next wife) within months of being stationed in Hawaii. I wish I could tell you that my life improved in my father's absence, that my parents' coparenting couldn't have been better, and that both parents put my emotional well-being and physical safety first. But instead, I lived the rest of my childhood and adolescence deeply afraid of the father who'd moved only five minutes away from us with his new wife—far enough for me to feel the loss of his presence in our home, yet close enough to continue disappointing and hurting me.

When Dad and his wife decided to move from Hawaii to the mainland, I was heartbroken. I knew what it meant—he was moving on without us, without me. I'd failed to earn his unattainable love or to gain any positive attention when he was just minutes away. Once he moved thousands of miles away, I wouldn't even be able to try. I wouldn't realize it for decades, but watching my dad walk away prompted countless years of me chasing after people

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to love me, despite having such low self-esteem that I never once believed I was worthy of their love.

As I approached my teen years without an objective adult to help me walk through the pain of my father's abuse and abandonment, my negative self-beliefs were slowly solidifying. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was innately unworthy of saving. If I was worth protecting, wouldn't someone have jumped in front of me to take my father's hits? For years, I waited for someone to recognize the irreversible and damaging imprint this abuse caused in my life, but no one intervened. And so, I found myself growing up faster than any child should have to.

## Filling My Father's Shoes

At the recommendation of the naval officer who introduced my parents to each other, my family started attending a nondenominational church when we first moved to the island. When Dad moved out, we ended up moving in with the officer's family while my mom got back on her feet.

Due to Hawaii's distance from the continental United States, we were completely isolated from all family and friends. No one visited us, and we could not afford to fly back to see them, so my mom always told us the church was our family. They were all we had, and they knew it. If you look at the pattern in most cults, abusive relationships, and toxic churches, it often starts with isolation from your friends, family, and at times, the entire outside world.

Sadly, domestic childhood abuse is disturbingly common. What I didn't realize at the time was that by attending that church, we were simply replacing one type of abuse with another: spiritual abuse.

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The lack of a loving paternal relationship coupled with the desperate desire for attention from my father set the stage for the men in my mom's church to slide into the roles of being my leader, my authority, my mentor, my big brother, and even my father figure. The implication was plainly stated—they would fill my dad's shoes. At the time, this seemed like a kind, sacrificial, loving gesture, but it ultimately ended up becoming my worst nightmare. Abe was one of those men.

When I first met Abe at church, I found him to be friendly and outgoing. He was a young newlywed, about fifteen years older than me, who had recently moved to Hawaii with his bride. Abe's bubbly wife reminded me of a cheerleader. At the ripe old age of eight, I knew very few people who were *that* enthusiastic about life, so I was naturally drawn to her. Abe and his new bride were attending the university together, and my mom would bring me to their living quarters on campus to visit with them and have reading/speech lessons with Abe, an aspiring teacher. I spoke with a lisp at the time, so my mom thought reading aloud with someone would help correct my speech patterns.

Abe told me that he was like a big brother to me. Outside of *actual* my older brother, I was missing male role models in my life, so I relished the idea of a man wanting to invest his time and attention in me. It made me believe for a minute that just maybe, I was worthy of love.

The third male role model in my life outside of my father and Abe was an elder in our church, Brent. When he spoke, it was loudly with self-imposed authority, ensuring everyone noticed him and his position. According to Brent, he had the gifts of prophecy and interpretation. He was always in the front row at church, ready to share the

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words the Lord had just given him, half of which were terrifying to me as a kid.

In our church, we had something called “home fellowships”—weekly small groups that met in someone’s home. In a typical church, these meetings might have included worship, a Bible study, or a discussion expounding on the Sunday sermon topic. Instead, the group that met in our home, which was led by Brent, turned into the Brent Show—a toxic dumping ground for him to speak his mind and flex his authority, without an ounce of accountability.

Initially, hosting the home fellowship at our house made me feel quite special because I’d help Mom clean and set up all the drinks and refreshments. I’d been told by my church leaders that I had the gift of hospitality, and I held on to that rare piece of praise with a death grip. In retrospect, I now understand the patriarchal views that shaped that praise. Heavily influenced by the teachings of Bill Gothard, the patriarchal founder of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, my male church leadership thought women were only good for cleaning, serving, raising babies, and cooking. Gothard’s organization was recently the subject of the Amazon documentary *Shiny Happy People*, which gave the world greater insight into this disturbing organization.

## Controlled by the Church

No one who attended our church back then was interested in just being a stereotypical “Sunday Christian.” If that was the type of Christian you wanted to be, one who could simply pop in for the service and then go about your business the rest of the week, odds were you’d run for the hills after attending our hyper-controlling congregation or, better yet, be excommunicated! It was an

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early Sunday prayer, Sunday service, Sunday night home fellowship, Wednesday night service, church game nights, and camping trips kind of situation. If you thought you could just show your face on Sunday morning and then act however you wanted on Monday, you'd be in for a rude awakening. Church leaders kept tabs on members at all times. My best friend was the pastor's daughter, and her life was even more of a fishbowl than mine.

This intense level of involvement was expected from all church members, resulting in a hyper-dependence on the church leadership. Even adults seemed incapable of making decisions for themselves. The leadership had their nose in every family's business, freely giving opinions, advice, and criticisms. It was as cultlike as you could get, and because our family was so deeply entrenched, we were highly vulnerable to their desire to control the members of the congregation.

The church offered me and my siblings—who were homeschooled—our only social exposure and our only friends, as it was the only place where we spent a significant amount of time. It was the epitome of the adage “It takes a village to raise a child,” except the village was comprised of self-righteous men whose only expectation of anyone was *nothing less than perfection*.

Though I was able to identify the abuse at the hands of my father for what it was early on, it took me well into my twenties *and* thirties to recognize the extent of spiritual abuse that occurred in my childhood church. For that reason, and because so many of us suffer with our mental health due to spiritual abuse, I want to briefly address some of the ways you can spot spiritual abuse. I believe we must identify what is not healthy and not of God before we can move further on in our healing journey. Whether or not it is obvious to you that you experienced

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spiritual abuse, it can be helpful to name these things, understand how abuse plays out, and reflect on if it may have happened to you.

Spiritually abusive leaders may:

- Use Scripture to induce guilt, shame, or fear
- Continually tell you that you are unworthy
- Limit access to other biblical teachings and accuse leaders other than themselves of being false teachers
- Control what people listen to, read, or watch
- Make you feel guilty for questioning their authority
- Use their own outward spirituality to justify abusive behavior
- Refuse to acknowledge their own shortcomings
- Twist Scripture to coerce or control people
- Claim they have closer access to God than others
- Declare that if you disobey them, you are disobeying the Lord
- Force accountability by coercing “confessions” and using inappropriate means to find out details about your life and “sins”
- Create an environment where it is unacceptable to voice disagreement or ask questions
- Overstep boundaries related to personal issues such as marriage, children, and finances

My church checked the box on every single one of these warning signs. I wish I could have known back then that the completely unattainable, legalistic existence the “church” attempted to force me to maintain was not what God required of me. If only I had understood that behind

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closed doors, not a single one of them was the person they portrayed themselves to be and that they were holding me to a standard that they themselves could not meet.

## By Grace I Have Been Saved?

While I never experienced grace in action in that little church, it certainly impressed upon me how despicable it was to abuse it! The only option set before me was absolute perfection, so as not to risk falling into the category of “sinner.”

I longed to experience the freedom of what a life under grace felt like, except grace was more of an abstract idea in this congregation rather than something you practiced giving or receiving on a regular basis. Instead, I was left to put together the only picture of Jesus I could, which was shaped by people further from His heart and character than you can imagine.

My home life had taught me that I wasn't worth loving as I was. The church reinforced that message.

My home life demonstrated that I had to earn my good standing. The church taught me that I had to earn my place with Jesus *and* that anything I earned was revocable. I always felt that my salvation was entirely dependent on how I behaved and that I was barely hanging on to it.

My home life instilled in me the belief that I'd never be good enough. My church family wholly agreed.

Every wounding message I received from being raised in a dysfunctional home was like a dagger to my heart. When the church reinforced those lies, it merely drove the pain deeper and cemented my beliefs about myself and my worth.

Within the walls of that church, I learned that God was someone to fear, a harsh taskmaster who expected

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my absolute obedience. And according to the church, that obedience was being 100 percent submissive to *any* man who claimed to be speaking for God and serving Him. I was not to question their authority. *Obedience was to be immediate and complete.*

As I grew into adolescence in this legalistic existence, it seemed as if the list of what I could not do was continually growing.

I was not allowed to speak in church.

*I was a woman; we did not do that.*

I was not allowed to like boys.

*They would distract me from Jesus.*

I was not allowed to date.

*We kissed dating goodbye.*

I was not allowed to give forward-facing hugs to any member of the opposite sex.

*They could not handle the temptation of feeling my body up against theirs.*

I was not allowed to watch any movies that said a single swear word or took the Lord's name in vain.

*I should not be entertained by sin.*

I was not allowed to listen to any secular music.

*Drums and electric guitars were of the devil, and there was no such thing as Christian rock music!*

I was not allowed to listen to any music or watch any TV at all in mandated church-wide fasts or those imposed by my mom.

*I should be willing to give up everything for Jesus.*

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I was not allowed to be friends with the pastor's daughter anymore.

*Even she was a bad influence on me. She talked to me about boys, wrote me notes during the sermon—you know, the usual “deadly” sins!*

I could not appropriately identify and label the intense legalism of my childhood church or my upbringing, because it was all that I knew. Follow the rules. Be a flawless Christian. Mistakes are not allowed.

While I passionately followed Christ in my younger years and desired to be like Him more than anything, the absence of grace would eventually drive a wedge between me and my Savior, severely affecting my mental health and sending me into a long, dark period of depression.

## God's Honest Truth

Perhaps one or many parts of my church experience resonate with you. If so, I am so sorry that you have to unlearn those “core” beliefs you now realize are unbiblical. Though I'm sure it must feel like it at times, I promise you are not alone on this journey. There are many of us who have been where you are now and are still fighting through it. I talk to people on a regular basis who are doing the hard and holy work of processing their church experience and beginning to flush out all the lies that were passed off to them as God's truth.

If you're curious to hear what God says about grace, you probably need to hear as badly as I did that there is *nothing* you can do to earn God's love. His love existed before the world began, and it is already yours—there is nothing you can do to lose it. No mistake or sin could ever separate you from the immense love God has for you

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(Romans 8:38–39). In fact, the Bible is full of verses that demonstrate why being perfect is *not* what God requires of His children:

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

(John 6:28–29)

So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.

(Romans 3:28 NLT)

“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

(Galatians 2:21 NIV)

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

(Ephesians 2:8–9 NLT)

For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God.

(Romans 10:4 NLT)

I don't know about you, but I didn't grow up hearing about *these* verses from the Bible, which is odd, because I was forced to read and memorize my Bible without ceasing! Isn't it comforting to know that the love, the

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belonging, and the acceptance we have been searching for our whole lives are right here, waiting for us? It certainly didn't feel like those things were extended to us when the church was rejecting us, did it? I had to walk through countless years of pain, rejection, abuse, and judgment before I could move on from the gaping wounds my church left behind.

As you work to carve out your own path—or to help someone else carve out theirs—through the feelings and negative beliefs that have been planted in your mind and soul, you will begin the work of breaking down the walls of “religion.” Through this challenging but freeing process, you'll gain a deeper and healthier understanding of how God feels about you—and about all of us. Church was never meant to be this way.

## ***Jesus and Therapy***

### **Jesus**

Maybe you haven't been on speaking terms with God for a while and you don't even know how to begin to pray. If this is your reality, put on "Kind" by Cory Asbury or "Crazy About You" by Tauren Wells and take a moment to just sit. As you listen, consider that the angry and unapproachable image you might have of Jesus isn't a reflection of the One who welcomes you to come and lay down your heavy load at His feet. Even if nothing else makes sense right now, know that His heart for you is *kind*.

### **Therapy**

If you have a history of childhood abuse or trauma—including spiritual abuse—it might be beneficial to ask your therapist to help you to recognize ways your earthly caregivers shaped your view of who God is and how He feels about you. If this is the first time you're realizing you were subjected to spiritual abuse, work with your counselor to identify which aspects of spiritually abusive leaders, as identified in this chapter, are consistent with your experiences.

Two

## Hard to Love

### ***Becoming Mindful of Inaccurate Core Self and Spiritual Beliefs***

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
Therefore, with lovingkindness I have drawn you  
and continued My faithfulness to you.

—JEREMIAH 31:3 (AMP)

*Trigger Warning: This chapter discusses the topics of child abuse and the spiritual abuse of women.*

I was fifteen years old, sitting in a room full of my closest friends and family at our weekly home fellowship group, and we'd just finished watching the newest *Veggie Tales*. (You know you're a church kid when that's the only acceptable form of entertainment!) As was customary, before my brother, sister, and I flew to the Midwest to spend time with my father, Brent, and other church members prayed over us. They prayed for protection as we traveled, for my siblings and I to be a light and a witness to our father and his girlfriend, and for God to keep our faith strong in the face of opposition.

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This particular Sunday night, Brent had something special he wanted to say to me in the presence of the entire group. He began, “You’ve gone too far, Tabitha. Even God cannot reach you and if He could, He probably wouldn’t want to. You’re beyond saving. You’re like a stubborn donkey.” (Almost every man in my church had called me this at some point. It was their religiously “acceptable” way of calling me a you-know-what.) “I’m just going to stop trying to help you from this point on. I wash my hands of you.”

This man had known me since I was a little girl. I trusted him. I’d bought into every “prophecy” he’d ever spoken over me. I thought God had surrounded me with godly men to fill the hole my father’s absence had left in my life. And I believed these men were free to treat me however they wanted to “in the name of the Lord.”

In the wake of Brent’s words, I sat stunned, crushed, and trying to process that I had just been publicly disowned and rejected not just by a significant figure in our church, but by Jesus *Himself*! Was I really beyond reaching and not worth saving? As I sat in the ensuing silence, not one person in that room cut Brent off, argued with him, or stood up for me. In a group full of close friends, parents, and siblings, not a word was uttered in my defense. To this day, I often wonder if that moment would have had less of a detrimental impact and how my life might have gone differently had anyone intervened on my behalf.

If you’re wondering what prompted Brent’s outburst, I wasn’t a bad kid. But after experiencing so much abuse, I’d changed. How could I not have? Brent and the other church leaders had watched me gradually become emotionally defeated, shut down, disillusioned, and depressed. Yet instead of showing me compassion or offering help, they

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interpreted my brokenness as disobedience. I didn't let anyone in; therefore, I must be difficult and stubborn. My primal desire to protect myself, when no one else was doing so, was viewed as an act of rebellion and a sign of a heart not submitted to my spiritual leaders and parents.

## Betrayal by the Brethren

To add insult to extensive injury, within that same year, a visiting “prophet” spent a couple of weeks at our church. Apparently, he had been “sent” to confirm what Brent had spoken over me. All he had to do was blow into town, claim the gift of prophecy, and then—*bam!* He was given the freedom to speak “words from the Lord” over vulnerable men, women, and children. Not a single member of our congregation knew who this individual was, where he had come from, or how he'd found our church. All I knew at the time was that I found it odd that a “prophet” from Heaven chain-smoked cigarettes and dressed like he'd just gotten pulled out of a luau to deliver his messages from above.

So, there I sat in Brent's home for our home fellowship meeting (we alternated meeting in different church members' homes) when this visiting pseudo-prophet asked me to come sit in the chair in the middle of the room so he could speak over me. This was a very Pentecostal thing to do, and my church was all about the “laying on of hands” and speaking prophetic words over church members. In fact, they would record it on tape anytime you were “prophesied” over and to this day I still have a cassette tape from the church with some of my “words from the Lord” on it. Every red flag you can imagine was going off in my head about this guy, but it appeared I was the only person suspicious of his heavenly citizenship. At

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that age, I didn't know I could say no to a church leader or that I could tell my mom how uncomfortable this man was making me and escape the situation. Plus, if I refused to accept prayer, I could only *imagine* what worse things would be thought of me. What kind of Christian would that make me? Resigned, I sat and surrendered myself to whatever was about to happen.

Loudly and with great authority in his voice, the “prophet” began to speak his “word from the Lord”: “God sees your rebellion. He will punish you for your attitude. You will go to your grave early for your rebellious heart and ways.” *Wait . . . what?* I looked around incredulously at the rest of my church family, who were laying hands on me like this dude was speaking a blessing over me rather than condemning me to an early grave. They had their eyes closed as if this was some sacred moment. People I loved were even nodding along. Feeling like I had no other choice, I sat there unmoving. I wasn't old enough to drive and get away from there, and I didn't know where I would go anyway. The only people I knew were church members, and I wouldn't be safe in any of their homes either. Peeking through my half-closed eyelids, I waited in vain for someone to come to my defense. Instead, I sat surrounded by Christians with their arms outstretched toward me, joining in with a total stranger as he spoke words of death and destruction over my young life.

The betrayal I felt at that moment was all-consuming. The fact that not a single person in that room felt a protective impulse toward me *still* disappoints me to this day. This lack of protection was precisely why I didn't trust any of the adults in my life at the time. And this was just one of many situations—all of which I'd eventually

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spend countless years unpacking in therapy—that would continue to be allowed and encouraged.

## Into the Lion's Den

As the months went on, my depression deepened. I could feel it pulling me further and further under with each passing day. Besides the spiritual abuse I was suffering at church, I was also experiencing a hopeless toxic cycle of narcissistic abuse from my father, and though I wanted to, I could not run away from my forced annual visits. I felt my desperation growing as I approached my sixteenth birthday. Wasn't I at the age where I should have a choice whether I spent time with my dad? If so, why was time with him being forced on me? My mental health hanging on by a thin, rapidly fraying thread, I went into that summer's visitation with my dad feeling like I was drowning. The leaders in my church had washed their hands of me, and now I was about to walk into the lion's den.

Even in my earliest years, I understood my dad didn't truly love me. I knew if I wanted to be treated decently and not trigger his temper, I had to walk a delicate tightrope with both my words and my behavior. I was painfully aware that a "good relationship" with my dad was entirely dependent on me "acting right." As you can probably guess, this tumultuous balancing act with my earthly father didn't stop with my dad. By the time I was a teenager, it had come to represent how I viewed my relationship with my heavenly Father as well.

I remember the precise moment my father spoke aloud the words I'd always feared to be true. I was sitting on my brother's bed and Dad was casually playing solitaire on the '90s desktop computer a few feet away from me when he flippantly uttered the words that pierced my heart:

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“If your mom and I would have known how things were going to work out, we wouldn’t have had kids.”

At his words, I started choking back sobs. The magnitude of his statement hit me like a freight train—my own dad wished I’d never been born. The thing is, you can think you know how someone feels about you, but there is a death that happens when the words are spoken aloud. There’s no more pretense to hide behind.

Instead of comforting me, my dad began belittling me over my audacity to cry, until my older brother came in and said, “Okay, Dad, just stop. Look at her. Obviously, she’s had enough.” Despite him also being conditioned to tolerate my father’s outbursts, something in my brother recognized I’d hit my breaking point.

I waited to phone my mom until my father was at work the next day, so he wouldn’t hear my conversation. Curling up in Dad’s favorite recliner where he’d sit at the end of his workday and have me take off his shoes for him, I called my mother, crying. I begged to be allowed to change my ticket and just come home. “Well, you know how he’ll react if you do that,” she said. “It will probably be the end of your relationship. You don’t want to burn that bridge because somewhere down the road, you might want to try again with him.”

There it sat, the entire future of our relationship in the hands of a tragically unstable teenager. But how could I stay? Being near my dad was destroying me—there was no escaping his abuse when we were under the same roof. My mind was going to a very dark place, and I could feel my mental health collapsing under the weight brought on by the full realization that I was unwanted, unloved, and supposedly destined for a tragically early death. It was like watching a slow-motion train wreck I was powerless to stop.

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I ended up staying the whole summer. Ultimately, the guilt over not wanting to be the one responsible for the permanent demise of the relationship with my dad proved to be stronger than my instinct for self-preservation.

I had no way of knowing it then, but my choice to stay for the remainder of the summer would change the course of my young life. In a desperate effort to numb the pain, I started stealing Dad's alcohol, experimenting with smoking, and playing with fire, both figuratively and literally. Something in me had shifted. It felt as though my internal dialogue had been solidified. My fate to die young was etched in stone. Nothing mattered anymore. Perhaps it was the words that had been spoken over me that I was fundamentally unworthy and unwanted by both Jesus and my father that had me self-destructing. Regardless of the catalyst, my actions started to reflect what I now actually believed—that I was a lost cause.

### Unworthy of Love

Because I experienced rejections from numerous foundational people in my life early on, I spent my most formative years attempting to earn love from those around me. When those I turned to failed to offer me either love or protection, I would think, *If they refuse to love or accept me or be a part of my life . . . why would anyone else love me, accept me, or stay?* Unsurprisingly, this viewpoint was projected onto God as well. After all, I was damaged goods, irreversibly messed up, and too hard for anyone—even my heavenly Father—to love.

Since rejection from fellow Christians had permeated much of my young life, it conditioned me to spend my teens and twenties expecting the rejection I believed I deserved in every subsequent relationship. How could I trust the

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best about people or God when all I'd experienced was the worst of humanity?

If you find yourself in a place where your worth has been defined by the misconceptions and wounding messages of others, my hope is to help you unravel the lies that have been packaged and presented to you as God's perspective. But before we deep dive into God's character and how He feels about you—which we'll do in the coming chapters—let's first take a moment to identify some foundational falsehoods. Recognizing these false beliefs is imperative to our healing journeys, because what we think to be true about ourselves often becomes our internal dialogue. And when that internal dialogue dictates how we feel we deserve to be treated, it can keep us from pursuing or accepting all the goodness God has for us.

No matter how many lies we've come to believe throughout our lives, there's still hope. As we evaluate the areas where we haven't valued ourselves in the same way that Jesus does, we have the power to shift our perspective and change our narrative through healing, counseling, and prayer.

To receive God's truth about what defines us, the lie that we're inherently undesirable or unlovable must be dismantled. Identifying those areas where our circumstances, rather than God, have dictated our worth will be key to our healing journey. As we slowly begin to heal and recognize our own value, some important things will happen:

- Unhealthy habits and negative mindsets, like categorizing ourselves as a waste of time and space, will shift and evolve into healthy self-love.
- We will no longer perceive our basic needs for love, protection, and belonging as an inconvenience to others.

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- We will finally be free to receive the words of truth that God speaks over us, as we release every lie, condemnation, and judgment that has been spoken over our lives.

As you read over the reminders below of who Jesus says you are, feel free to write down any core beliefs about yourself that don't reflect the Father's heart of God—which are false beliefs that you will want to work on releasing. We are each invited to root ourselves in a new identity that is found in Jesus alone.

### Identity in Christ Affirmations

#### **I am a child of the King.**

But you are God's chosen treasure—priests who are kings, a spiritual "nation" set apart as God's devoted ones. He called you out of darkness to experience his marvelous light, and now he claims you as his very own.

(1 Peter 2:9 TPT)

#### **I am valuable.**

For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God.

(1 Peter 1:18–19 NLT)

#### **I am chosen.**

Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.

(Ephesians 1:4 NLT)

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**I am heard.**

I am passionately in love with God because  
he listens to me.

He hears my prayers and answers them.

As long as I live, I'll keep praying to him,  
for he stoops down to listen to my heart's cry.

(Psalm 116:1–2 TPT)

**I am enough.**

Everything we could ever need for life and godliness  
has already been deposited in us by his divine  
power. For all this was lavished upon us through the  
rich experience of knowing him who has called us  
by name and invited us to come to him through a  
glorious manifestation of his goodness.

(2 Peter 1:3 TPT)

**I am not alone.**

"The LORD himself goes before you and will be with  
you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

(Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV)

**I am accepted.**

"You will bring God glory when you accept and  
welcome one another as partners, just as the  
Anointed One has fully accepted you and received  
you as his partner."

(Romans 15:7 TPT)

**I am blameless.**

. . . just as [in His love] He chose us in Christ [actually  
selected us for Himself as His own] before the  
foundation of the world, so that we would be holy

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[that is, consecrated, set apart for Him, purpose-driven] and blameless in His sight.

(Ephesians 1:4 AMP)

**I am loved.**

So now I live with the confidence that there is nothing in the universe with the power to separate us from God's love. I'm convinced that his love will triumph over death, life's troubles, fallen angels, or dark rulers in the heavens. There is nothing in our present or future circumstances that can weaken his love.

(Romans 8:38 TPT)

**I am God's masterpiece.**

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

(Ephesians 2:10 NLT)

## ***Jesus and Therapy***

### **Jesus**

Will you invite Jesus into your healing journey going forward? Ask Him for His strength as you begin to peel back layers of deep-rooted beliefs and ask Him to reveal the Father's heart toward you and the good plans that are in store for your future.

### **Therapy**

Discuss with your therapist your desire to be more mindful of negative or untrue self-talk. Allow them to walk you through the process of identifying those core self and spiritual beliefs that you're beginning to recognize are inaccurate.

## Three

# You Don't Look Like Jesus

## *Navigating Condemnation over Mental Health*

These people show respect to Me with their mouth,  
and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far  
from Me. Their worship of Me is worth nothing.  
They teach rules that men have made.

—ISAIAH 29:13 (NLV)

*Trigger Warning: This chapter discusses suicide and spiritual abuse.*

After being demoted to second-class citizen by a congregation I dreaded returning to and being deeply wounded by my father, I came home that summer as a sixteen-year-old who was more broken than ever. I didn't know how much longer I could contain the pain I was feeling. My views about myself, God, and the church were becoming more and more tainted.

Unfortunately for me, the church I grew up in had two unspoken codes of conduct: First, you had better put on a happy face. It didn't matter if your only child

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had been taken by cancer, you were going through a horrific divorce, you were enduring abuse, or you were contemplating suicide—you better count it all joy and turn that frown upside down, Sister! Secondly, if someone asked how you were doing, the appropriate response was, “Fine.” It didn’t matter if tears were streaming down your face; you were always *fine*. No one wanted to hear anything different. Authenticity wasn’t welcome, only toxic positive Christianity.

Despite knowing that silent suffering (while counting it all joy, of course) was expected of me, I couldn’t continue to stay quiet. I had to try to talk to someone. I needed someone to know how much I was hurting, how lost I felt, and how scared I was of this darkness swallowing me whole. I ached for a safe and protective adult who’d pull me up from the pit I had fallen into. Surely, someone felt I was worthy of saving.

As I searched for someone I could trust with my story, my church was going through a huge upheaval. When the senior pastor’s family suddenly left the church because of a family emergency, our much younger, inexperienced associate pastor, Abe, took over the senior pastor position faster than you could blink. Yes, this was the same young man I’d met when he was a university student. Suddenly, someone who’d been in a brotherly role in my life was my “spiritual authority,” and boy, did he make sure I knew it.

To complicate matters further, Abe was also the principal of the Christian school that was operated by our church. I had started working there as a teacher’s aide when I was fifteen years old, so Abe was already heavily involved in my daily life. Being my pastor and my boss turned out to be a lethal combination of power.

## Fire and Brimstone

When I finally worked up the nerve to tell my church leaders about the deep depression I was experiencing, I didn't leave any cards on the table. I needed Abe and the others to know that I was ready to end my life just to escape it all. I don't know what I expected to hear in response to my costly confession, but it wasn't the flippant words that met my ears. "Well, you'll go to Hell if you commit suicide," they told me.

My heart longed to hear that I was loved, that no one wanted to lose me, that I was not a bad seed, that my future was bright, and that just maybe life would get better. Deep inside, I wanted some type of affirmation that my life had a purpose and that it would be a mistake to cut it short before I could experience all that God had for me.

Feeling as though Abe had just slapped me in the face, I could only respond with, "Well, I'm already *in* hell every day of my life, so I'll just trade one hell for the other." Everything was so dark, so painful, so hopeless, it didn't matter much to me by that point where I would spend eternity. I wasn't sure I believed in an afterlife anyway. All that mattered to me was being anywhere but trapped in my present life that I couldn't seem to escape.

My brash young pastor had not yet experienced counseling a church member through anything, had no knowledge of mental health conditions, and was very open about the fact that he hadn't lived a life where he'd experienced any hardship. On top of that, I was his first guinea pig for experimenting with counseling. Rather than referring me to a professional counselor, or at least throwing out an "I'll pray for you," he continually said things that made my situation feel dramatically worse. He repeatedly spewed his flawed theology at me.

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“Suicide victims aren’t allowed into Heaven.”

“God can’t forgive you if you hurt yourself.”

“You wouldn’t be in this position with your mental health to begin with if your faith was stronger.”

“Do you really need antidepressants, or do you just need to trust God more?”

All this spiritual abuse was coming from a man who’d known me since I was seven years old. I babysat his daughter. He called himself my big brother. I genuinely believed he cared about me, yet his portrayal of God’s heart toward me was false and harmful. He had no idea that his astounding lack of compassion, understanding, godly wisdom, and just flat-out common sense was doing far more harm than good.

The mistreatment didn’t stop with Abe, Brent, and other male leadership in the church. Almost every interaction I had with other believers regarding my depression deepened my feelings of alienation, strengthened my resolve to not trust them with my pain, and gave me a very early understanding of how much the church as a whole was lacking mental health awareness and the resources to handle mental health issues appropriately.

Because the harshest, most judgmental group of individuals I encountered on my journey through mental health challenges were always Christians, I deeply struggled as a young person attempting to defend myself against false accusations and judgments from the people I was supposed to be looking to for an example. If, like me, you’re living with any long-term mental or physical illness, you’ve probably encountered several types of stereotypical reactions after a fellow believer discovered

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that you, God forbid, wrestle with your emotional well-being. For my sanity, I've had to begin labeling these stereotypical reactions, so I can recognize them for what they are—which, by the way, is far from the heart of God toward me. Perhaps you, too, have experienced some of these individuals in your own journey. Let's take a look at some of these judgmental "characters" I—and quite possibly you, too—have found in the church.

*The Holier-Than-Thou Pharisee*

This individual cannot possibly relate to your struggles, because they are too occupied with pretending they don't have any struggles of their own. They are too blessed to be stressed. (Man, I hate that phrase!) They are convinced that *you* are the one who's doing something wrong; otherwise, God would be blessing you. The pedestal they put themselves on prevents them from offering any true wisdom, authenticity, or compassion. They are so far out of touch with the heart of God, yet they continually speak in His name, convinced that they are His appointed mouthpiece. There is a humility that can only grow when you're less focused on judging people for their dirty feet and battered, road-worn sandals and more focused on getting on your knees, rolling up your sleeves, and washing feet as Jesus modeled. Let's just say that the Holier-Than-Thou Pharisees don't have it.

*The Too-Heavenly-Minded-for-Earthly-Good Christian*

We all know at least one of these people. Their every response is that they will pray for you, but they seem incapable of offering any tangible assistance. Your physical or mental health diagnosis can just be surrendered to the Lord, as far as they're concerned.

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They don't understand the psychology behind why you are having a panic attack; why your PTSD is triggered by certain sights, sounds, or situations; or why you can't get out of bed when chronic pain rears its ugly head. They have a scripture for everything, but don't make the time or offer the resources to help meet your immediate needs, whether that's giving you a ride to the doctor, picking up your groceries, or babysitting your kids while you go to counseling. It's great to have your mind set on eternity, but not to the extent that you lose sight of God's will for you to be His hands and feet to people who are hurting and lost in *this* life.

*The Ill-Equipped Church Leader*

Imagine going to your pastor or elder for help, feeling like you're at the end of your rope and desperate for some hope and encouragement, only to be told that you've brought this on yourself, you've displeased God, or you've done something to warrant this "punishment." Perhaps significant trauma was discounted, or abuse was swept under the rug. You walk out of their office feeling more alone and defeated than ever. Yes, there are some pastors and church leaders who are quite good at counseling people through trauma, pain, addictions, and mental health struggles, thanks to previous training or a perspective gained through personal experience. However, seminary does not provide a degree in psychology, and a good pastor will recognize where their expertise ends and refer you to the appropriate source to get help. I passionately believe we need mental health awareness and sensitivity training for church leaders. Additionally, as the church, we need immediate resources on hand to be able to refer individuals out for counseling, rehab, and other forms of help.

## False Condemnation

When it comes to living with a mental health struggle, many parallels can be drawn between the Bible's account of Job and his friends and modern-day interactions one might have with fellow believers, church leaders, and even family members. At first, when Job's friends heard of all the loss and suffering he was going through, the Bible says they set out to sympathize with him and comfort him. Seeing the tremendous pain their friend was in, three of Job's friends sat in silence with him for seven days and nights.

So far, so good, right? By all accounts, the visiting gentlemen were well-meaning. They had come to comfort him. They sat and empathized with this man, so wracked with grief and pain that they hardly recognized him.

I think this is sometimes how things begin with certain friends or family who have good intentions. They start out seeking to comfort you, feeling sympathetic toward your mental health struggles. They may even be helpful initially and respond appropriately when a crisis arises. However, as time passes and your pain does not quickly subside, they begin to do what Job's friends did—give in to the human urge to find the source of your suffering. They begin to assign blame and attempt to problem-solve for you and oversimplify things.

*"If you would just pray more, heavenly help would come."*

*"If you memorize enough scriptures, you can make the suicidal thoughts go away."*

*"If you were strong enough, you could train your mind not to think this way."*

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“You just need to command your soul to bless the Lord.”

“This too shall pass.”

“Count it all joy.”

And, perhaps my all-time favorite, which is sprinkled over every hard, uncomfortable situation:

“God never gives you more than you can handle.”

If you try throwing out that last “helpful” cookie-cutter response to someone in the depths of depression, I can pretty much guarantee they’re not thinking, *Thank you so much for reminding me of God’s holy truth!* Instead, they’re making a mental note never to be vulnerable with you again.

Rather than bringing hope and life to our plight, well-intentioned platitudes offer little but condemnation and shame. And being falsely condemned is certainly something Job would know a thing or two about.

Exhibit A: Job opened his mouth to speak.

Cursing the day he was born, Job finally gave voice to his pain and despair. He despised his life, and he wasn’t even trying to hide it. I imagine most reasonable people, hearing all that Job had lost and suffered through, would have given Job a bit of grace at this moment . . . but not his friends. Upon hearing Job’s outburst, Job’s friend Eliphaz inserted himself into the conversation. After a humble brag about himself, reminding Job of all the people he’s helped and the wisdom he’s spoken into others’ lives, Eliphaz started slipping in accusations and suggestions that God is punishing Job. Perhaps Job brought all these trials on himself, and they were merely the product of God’s discipline:

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“Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?  
Or where were the upright destroyed?  
According to what I have seen,  
those who plow wrongdoing  
and those who sow trouble harvest it.”  
(Job 4:7–8 NASB)

“Behold, happy is the person whom God disciplines,  
so do not reject the discipline of the Almighty.  
For He inflicts pain, and gives relief;  
He wounds, but His hands *also* heal.”  
(Job 5:17–18 NASB)

After Eliphaz basically suggested that Job’s pain and loss were of his own doing, Job finally declared to his friends,

“Oh, that you would be completely silent!”  
(Job 13:5 NASB)

Often, people’s negative or hurtful reactions toward those struggling with mental health conditions are rooted purely in ignorance. Having no idea where the other person is coming from or the degree to which they’re struggling, they offer what they feel are practical solutions for what they perceive to be the problem. In their mind, they’re helping—their friend needs assistance, so they are coming to the rescue. Unfortunately for the recipient of the advice, the well-meaning friend often has no comprehension of the complexities surrounding mental illness or the potential trauma behind it. And if the unsolicited advice continues, it often leads to the demise of the relationship.

## Just Sit with Me

Job has gone through unspeakable loss and is understandably consumed by anguish. His words don't just go on for one short chapter, oh no, he lets it all out. In fact, it's not until the thirty-eighth chapter of the book of Job that Job's dialogue with his friends ends as God addresses him. Job needed to be heard. He needed to grieve out loud. He needed to recount the trauma that he was still very much in the midst of by the time God responded to his cries. There were two women in my childhood and teenage years who grew to mean so much to me because they would do just that. Before I was able to attend therapy regularly, they would simply sit and listen to me tell the tales of the same trauma as many times as I needed to. I have no doubt these women saved my life on multiple occasions by just sitting with me in my pain.

When a person is suffering from depression, they often just need a safe space—with safe people—where they can share their feelings. They need an outlet to discuss the journey that's brought them to this point in their lives. It's not a pretty process. Rarely is it even a brief conversation.

Sometimes we just need to mourn—we need someone to sit in the dark with us and hold our hand. On other days, we may need a prayer warrior to stand in the gap and go to Heaven on our behalf. A humble heart, a listening ear, and a compassionate spirit will go far in making you a safe space for someone to share their troubles with. The only way to discern whether a struggling individual needs a silent presence or tangible help is to keep showing up, be present in their suffering, and look for ways to assist them.

Also, it's important to note that when it comes to mental health struggles, being made to feel like our suffering is a burden is the last thing that is needed or

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beneficial. When we're wrestling with God, we don't need someone to defend His character as we walk through our doubt, grief, or anger. It's a journey we must go on to build authentic faith. And God is big enough to handle our emotions and our questions.

Like Job's friends eventually learned, we must meet people where they're at. There is a season for everything under the sun, and sometimes that is a season of simply sitting in silence and weeping with those who mourn.

### **Second-Class Christian**

An important part of meeting people where they're at is treating them, their season, and their struggles with respect. Being treated as less than, or as a second-class member of society and a "permanently broken" member of the church, is far too common. I once took a poll among friends about what they wished they could tell people about their mental health struggles. Unfortunately, as you can see by their responses below, a common theme emerged of feeling judged and deemed inferior by their fellow Christians.

"I'm not choosing to be this way."

"I'm not lazy. I'm not refusing to try. It's not about willpower."

"Depression and anxiety can make me sick, and at times, they come with debilitating physical effects, but that doesn't mean I'm irresponsible."

"I deserve to be treated with honor and dignity, as someone cherished by their Creator. Please don't make me feel less than."

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“Every human being has brokenness, whether in their brain or their body. So please don’t judge me.”

“Struggling with my mental health doesn’t mean I’m crazy.”

“I wish the church would stop telling me my faith isn’t strong enough.”

“I’m not a mistake.”

“I can love Jesus and have faith but still have a chemical imbalance that causes me to need an antidepressant.”

## God’s “Ranking System”

Like my friends, my struggles left me feeling “less than,” as if my value as a person and as a Christian had been weighed and measured and I’d come up short. Can you imagine if God had a ranking system of how “good” of a believer you were that was determined by your societal, physical, or mental limitations? What if He disqualified you from being an effective member of the body of Christ simply because your body or brain worked a bit differently than the person standing next to you?

Thankfully, we don’t have to imagine this reality in Heaven because Jesus doesn’t rank believers with mental health struggles as second-class Christians. You aren’t denied access to His throne because you wrestle with emotional afflictions. You don’t mean less to Him because you face darker moments than others. Your prayers don’t get demoted because you’ve got a psychiatrist or a therapist on speed dial.

If the church withheld its open arms and alienated anyone suffering from a *physical* ailment or a long-term illness, it’s not difficult to imagine the uproar that

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would follow. Instead, as they should, Christian culture celebrates those individuals for pushing forward, despite their chronic struggles or limitations. Those of us who deal with mental health conditions should not be treated any differently!

Why are we not applauding these struggling members of the body of Christ for getting up that morning and choosing to come to church, despite knowing they may feel alienated or misunderstood? After all, some days it takes just as much strength and courage for someone battling depression or anxiety to get out of bed and face the world as someone battling a long-term illness—*because that is exactly what they are doing*. Those with mental health conditions are battling long-term, and in some cases debilitating, disorders that just happen to be invisible to the rest of the world.

Sadly, many of us *have* experienced discrimination within the walls of the church for conditions out of our control. We have been made to feel like we are not mature believers, that we are living in sin, or that we are not putting our hope in Jesus simply because of our mental health challenges.

If this is your story, you aren't alone. It breaks my heart that other believers turned you away when Christ was waiting to welcome you with open arms. I'm sorry if instead of being known by your character and the contents of your heart, you were judged and seen only through the lens of a diagnosis. You are a necessary and valuable member of the body, and the church *needs* you.

The tragic reality is that much of the church desperately needs to reframe its beliefs and preconceived notions about mental health. Not only do they need to be clothed in compassion, but they also need to be educated about all the various mental health challenges that affect

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one in four individuals, whether or not they're believers. Until the church's misconceptions around mental health have a serious come-to-Jesus moment, though, you may not always find the truth and compassion you're looking for within certain Christian circles. However, no matter where you find yourself, you *can* focus on the truth of God's character as displayed repeatedly in the Bible. You *can* rest in how God views and defines you, rather than letting your worth come from the flawed beliefs of others.

## ***Jesus and Therapy***

### **Jesus**

Ask God to show you where you've allowed others to assign your value or lack thereof. Pray for Him to begin a deep work of restoration in your heart as He reveals your true worth. Begin to separate the people in your life who didn't reflect Christ's character from Jesus Himself. The less the line between Christianity and Christ is blurred in your mind, the faster you'll see that Jesus doesn't want to hurt you, and that His arms are the safest place for you to be.

### **Therapy**

If you have encountered people in your life who made you feel inferior, pinpoint those individuals and those instances with your therapist and look for ways you might have allowed their wounding messages to become part of your identity. Where have you internalized any blame or condemnation you've received? Have you taken ownership and carried the weight of a diagnosis that is out of your control?

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## About the Author

Tabitha Yates is a mental health advocate, writer, and suicide attempt survivor known as *The Redeemed Mama* on social media, where she writes about faith, mental health, and God's redemptive plan. Tabitha's writing has been featured in *Yahoo News*, *MSN*, *Relevant Magazine*, *The Mighty*, and *Love What Matters*, with more to come. Through practical advice, personal anecdotes, and biblical insights, Tabitha has used her platform to help renew the faith of millions of individuals struggling with where their faith and mental health intersect.

Tabitha is the daughter and granddaughter of military veterans, having lived in California, Iceland, Guam, and Hawaii by the age of eight. She and her husband, a now-retired Army officer, have lived all over the United States. They and their three children now call the Tucson, Arizona, area home. *Jesus and Therapy: Bridging the Gap between Faith and Mental Health* is her first book.

You can find more of Tabitha's writing on her website, [theredeemedmama.com](http://theredeemedmama.com). Follow her on social media for daily interactions and encouragement.

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From mental health advocate Tabitha Yates, *Jesus and Therapy* is a deeply powerful and essential exploration of mental health within the Christian community.

Tabitha Yates knows firsthand the shadows that mental health struggles can cast, especially within a church setting. Her own journey through depression, anxiety, and a suicide attempt has uniquely equipped her to understand and assist others who find themselves in similar situations, as well as to guide church leaders in providing meaningful support to their struggling members. In *Jesus and Therapy: Bridging the Gap Between Faith and Mental Health*, Yates combines insights from psychology, personal experience, and Scripture to offer practical steps for confronting and healing trauma.

**TABITHA YATES** is a writer, speaker, suicide attempt survivor, and mental health advocate residing in southern Arizona. She has a passion for helping people heal from the wounds of their past. Her writing focuses on faith, mental health, and God's redemptive plan for each of us. With a passion for those recovering from church hurt, she hopes to lovingly prod the church into having necessary mental health conversations more openly and frequently. Through her platforms, Tabitha has helped renew the faith of millions of individuals who are struggling with the place where their faith and mental health intersect. *Jesus and Therapy* is her first book.

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- National publicity campaign
- Author-led launch team to garner early reviews and preorders
- Social media promotion campaign with paid ads to author's 50K+ Facebook followers
- Influencer ARC mailings, cross promotion, and partnered giveaways
- Promotions at speaking engagements, trade shows, and other book events

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