

RECOGNIZING THE HURT, RESTORING TRUST, AND FINDING YOUR VOICE

A Companion Worksheet to Reflection: **When Shepherds Fail to Protect**

Before You Begin

Sometimes the wounds we carry are not only from what someone did to us, but from what others failed to do when we reached out for help.

Perhaps you sought guidance from a pastor, ministry leader, or trusted Christian friend and left feeling misunderstood, dismissed, or alone. Perhaps you were encouraged to forgive or reconcile before anyone fully understood what had happened.

These exercises are intended to help you reflect on those experiences, recognize what you needed, and consider what healing and appropriate accountability might look like.

You do not have to complete everything at once. Some questions may bring up painful memories. Give yourself permission to move slowly, skip questions, or seek support from a trusted professional.

The purpose is not to encourage resentment toward the church. It is to help you acknowledge your experience honestly while learning to distinguish the failures of people from the character of God.

Exercise 1: When I Reached Out for Help

Purpose: Identify what you were experiencing, why you sought spiritual support, and how the response affected you.

Think about a time when you turned to someone in your church for help with a painful or harmful situation.

1. What was happening in your life that led you to seek help?

Consider what you were experiencing emotionally, relationally, or spiritually.

My reflection:

2. What did you hope your pastor or spiritual leader would understand?

Consider whether you needed someone to listen, believe that your concerns deserved attention, help you recognize harmful behavior, provide guidance, or assist you in finding safety and support.

My reflection:

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3. How did the person respond, and how did that response affect you?

Describe what was said or done and how you experienced it. You do not need to determine whether the person intended to hurt you.

My reflection:

4. What do you recognize now that you may not have understood at the time?

Perhaps you can now identify a need you could not express, a boundary you did not know you could establish, or a behavior you had minimized.

My reflection:

Biblical truth to consider: Ezekiel 34:4 reminds us that God takes seriously the responsibility of shepherds to strengthen the weak and care for the injured.

Exercise 2: Separating God's Character From People's Failures

Purpose: Explore whether painful experiences with spiritual leaders have affected how you understand or relate to God.

When someone represents God in a position of spiritual authority, their behavior can influence how we perceive Him. Yet Scripture reveals that God's character is not defined by the actions or failures of those who serve Him.

1. Have your experiences with church leadership affected your relationship with God?

Consider whether you have experienced difficulty trusting Him, praying, reading Scripture, attending church, or believing that He cares about your suffering.

My reflection:

2. What conclusions, if any, did you begin to draw about God because of what happened?

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For example, did you begin to wonder whether your suffering mattered to Him or whether asking for help was wrong?

My reflection:

3. Read Ezekiel 34:11–16 and John 10:11–15. What do these passages reveal about God's heart toward those who are wounded?

Write what Scripture teaches, even if you are not yet able to feel or fully embrace those truths.

My reflection:

4. What might it look like to begin separating what people did from who God reveals Himself to be?

My reflection:

Exercise 3: Understanding Grace, Forgiveness, and Accountability

Purpose: Examine beliefs about forgiveness and Christian love that may have made it difficult to recognize or address harmful behavior.

Sometimes Christians believe that extending grace means overlooking wrongdoing or that forgiveness requires restoring a relationship to what it was before.

Scripture calls us to forgive, but it also teaches repentance, wisdom, correction, and accountability.

Read Luke 3:8, Galatians 6:1, and Matthew 18:15–17.

1. Have you ever felt that being a good Christian required you to remain silent about harmful behavior?

If so, what did you believe would happen if you spoke honestly?

My reflection:

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2. Have you confused forgiveness with reconciliation, trust, or the removal of boundaries?

Consider how these are related but distinct. Forgiveness does not automatically restore trust or make continued contact safe.

My reflection:

3. What differences do you recognize between an apology and genuine repentance?

Consider acknowledgment of wrongdoing, concern for those harmed, acceptance of responsibility, respect for boundaries, and meaningful change over time.

My reflection:

4. Is there a situation in which you need to extend grace while also maintaining appropriate boundaries?

My reflection:

Exercise 4: Finding My Voice Without Carrying Someone Else's Responsibility

Purpose: Consider whether there is something you need to communicate while recognizing that you are not responsible for controlling another person's response.

Speaking truthfully about a painful experience can be difficult, especially when you fear being misunderstood, dismissed, or viewed as divisive.

You have the right to communicate your experience respectfully. You also have the freedom to decide whether a particular conversation is wise or safe.

1. Is there something about your experience that you have never felt able to express?

What would you want the other person to understand?

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My reflection:

2. What would you hope to accomplish by sharing your experience?

Check any that apply:

- I want someone to understand how I was affected.
- I would like acknowledgment of what happened.
- I hope for a meaningful apology.
- I want to establish or clarify boundaries.
- I want leadership to consider how similar situations are handled.
- I want to express my experience without expecting a particular response.
- I am not ready to have this conversation, and I need time or support.

3. What is within your responsibility, and what belongs to the other person?

What I can take responsibility for

What I cannot control

Communicating truthfully

Whether someone agrees with me

Speaking respectfully

Whether someone apologizes

Establishing boundaries

Whether someone changes

Seeking appropriate support

Whether leadership takes corrective action

Making decisions about my participation How others interpret my decisions

4. If you choose to speak, what are the three most important things you want to communicate?

First:

Second:

Third:

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Biblical truth to consider: Ephesians 4:15 calls us to speak the truth in love. It does not require us to control how that truth is received.

Exercise 5: What Does Healing Look Like for Me Now?

Purpose: Identify what you need in this season of healing without making your restoration dependent upon another person's acknowledgment or change.

Healing does not require pretending that what happened was acceptable. Nor does it require you to remain in a situation where you continue to experience harm.

Sometimes healing includes receiving an apology or experiencing meaningful restoration within a church community. At other times, it involves grieving what was lost, establishing boundaries, or finding a healthier place of spiritual fellowship.

1. What part of this experience still causes you pain?

Consider whether the deepest hurt comes from the original situation, the response of others, the loss of trust, or something else.

My reflection:

2. What do you believe you need most in your healing right now?

- Acknowledgment of my experience
- Permission to grieve what happened
- A clearer understanding of healthy boundaries
- Support from a trusted person or professional
- Renewed confidence in God's character
- A healthier church community
- Time to process what happened
- Something else: _____

3. What is one small step you can take toward healing that does not depend on someone else's response?

My next step:

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4. How might knowing Jesus as the Good Shepherd change the way you understand your healing journey?

Read Psalm 23 and John 10:11–15 before answering.

My reflection:

My Personal Commitment

After completing these exercises, take a moment to consider what you have learned about your experience, your needs, and God's character.

Complete the following statements:

One truth I want to remember about God is:

One burden I no longer want to carry as though it were my responsibility is:

One step I will prayerfully consider taking is:

A Closing Reminder

You are not required to deny your pain to demonstrate forgiveness.

You are not required to remain silent to demonstrate respect.

You are not required to restore trust where safety and accountability have not been established.

And you are not responsible for correcting every failure of those who were entrusted with caring for you.

You can speak truthfully, extend grace, establish boundaries, and continue seeking healing.

Above all, remember that the failures of human shepherds do not change the heart of the Good Shepherd.

He sees you. He knows what happened. And He has not abandoned you.