

BETRAYED

with a

KISS

Advocate Press



One Pastor's Story of Finding God in the Wake
of Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence

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South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press

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For Weston, Chelsea, Sami,
and all those who have endured
loving an abuser.

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Preface

I've never felt like I truly fit in the world. I'm always outside, on the edge, while other people connect. I'm not the coolest person, and I'm always late to the party on what's hip and trendy. I'll always be the girl who owns too many action figures and not enough makeup brushes.

But in late 2017, I found I finally fit. It wasn't a club or group I ever sought to join, and if I could, I'd dismantle the club altogether.

The club started with one magazine article announcing to the world that Harvey Weinstein had been sexually harassing and assaulting women for years. Within hours, #MeToo was trending on every social media platform as women around the globe told stories about their sexual assault or history of harassment.

Weinstein was only the beginning of a social reckoning that spanned months, with Hollywood icons removed from positions or fired over allegations of abuse of power and sexual assault. At first, my feminist heart wept with joy as women appeared to obtain justice. Finally, victims' cries were heard—and believed. Every day I would wake up to headlines about the misdeeds of yet another person in Hollywood coming to light.

Then the focus moved beyond Hollywood to political figures and other high-profile positions. And there I found my group—the place I fit in. I fit in with the victimized women, those who'd suffered at the hands of predators.

Instead of experiencing relief and strength, a chaos of emotions overwhelmed me.

I didn't understand what was happening. My life was finally what I wanted it to be. I had recently adopted a beautiful baby boy, I loved my husband fiercely, and I was succeeding as an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. After almost a decade of setbacks, my life was beginning to make sense, or so I thought.

But no. The constant media attention and stories of assault and harassment slit me open, and instead of hope, I felt heartache. Instead of strong, I felt weak.

It started first with nightmares and ended with obsession. I became addicted to

news, and justice was my drug. I didn't just want these men found guilty—I needed it to the point of distraction.

As the months wore on, so did my fear that while their reputations were destroyed, these monsters still walked free. I never thought hearing stories of women from my “club” would be overwhelming, but they were. Every story became a trigger for my own #MeToo moments. If only these men would go to jail, I told myself, then I'd be safe again. We'd all be safe.

Finally finding my club came with a cost I didn't know how to pay, and I could not find a way to stand up with these women, each with a story of abuse—not without sacrificing a tenuous hold on my stability. After years of turmoil, I had my life on track. I couldn't allow myself to go back to a time when everything around me seemed hard and out of control, could I?

But it was too late. The tumult of emotions sucked me in, forced me to deal with what I'd pushed aside for so long.

To regain my power, I had to look back at how I found hope in God and God's people again despite seeing the worst of humanity. I had to begin telling my story, if at the very least so others who didn't know how could tell theirs, too. I had to remember a time when I had too many WWJD bracelets than should ever be allowed and to remember that, in suffering, I found out who Jesus was. I had to remember that young girl who believed in the false promises about God found on the back of a popular theology book, and how she became the woman who fought to forge ahead when the lies turned to ash.

My story is not new, sensational, or exceptional. It's quite common.

That is why I am writing it: So the world stops believing it's rare. My story could be your story, your daughter's, your sister's, your friend's, or your co-worker's, and it very well might be. Thirty-four is probably too young to write a memoir about domestic violence and sexual assault, and I am no expert on pain, suffering, mental illness, or God (despite my degree). But here I am still attempting to make sense of who God is, what God promises, and where God is in our suffering.

Maybe you belong to my club or a similar club, or a club just trying to find God. Join me as I search for God amid the wreckage.

Prologue

It was in the hallowed halls of seminary that I began to accept the fact that I'd been raped. Somehow, one of the hardest and most heartbreaking times of my life and one of the most transformative and spiritual happened simultaneously.

Growing up, I'd never been told about the horrors of abusive relationships or sexual assault. I drank from coffee cups that boasted Jeremiah 29:11 and promised that good girls received good men. Conversations about consent and rape culture were not happening around me—and certainly not in churches in West Texas and Eastern New Mexico, where I lived.

At the tender age of nineteen, I woke up one morning to the realization I'd been sold a lie. Marriage for “good girls” wasn't always good or safe. I found myself in an abusive marriage where rape and sexual assault were a part of my daily life. This “good man” I had prayed for, who I believed God had promised me, was not the man sleeping beside me, and I had no language or theology to confront this bitter truth or even to work through it.

But in seminary, two years after I was divorced and finally in a safe relationship, I found myself finally able to confront the truth and discover God's true promises.

In many ways, seminary was everything I wanted school to be. I was pushed to think and talk about God every day, and intellectually I was in my version of heaven in this academically rigorous environment. The study of theology taught me God was more than the bumper-sticker version I'd previously believed. God was vast, fair, just, loving, and beyond articulation. I discovered that I connected with God spiritually through the study of theology. My prayer life disciplined, and I was more consistent in practicing spiritual disciplines during these three years of school than I have ever been in my life.

The depth of knowing God in heart and head allowed me the space to face my former marriage—and this is where seminary became hell.

On one hand, my life was perfect, for I was utterly fulfilled and secure. On the

other hand, it was spiraling out of control. I was plagued with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and thoughts of self-harm. In some ways, my studies made me stronger, and learning about who God is—and not the therapeutic feel-good version I had previously clung to—saved me. In other ways, my faith faltered, and I struggled with how God could let any of it happen to me.

I wasn't sure I knew how to go on.

Professors taught about God's love and grace while I gasped for air to accept and realize I had been raped. This same God, portrayed in scripture as lover and friend, had allowed me to live a life where I could wake up beside a man and still feel the ache from the night before in my arms, legs, and pelvis, only to roll out of bed and cook breakfast for the same person who'd hurt me.

How did I cope with the fact that evil had a face and it claimed to love me? It claimed to honor and cherish me and forsake all others? This face was both the face of my dreams for the future and the epitome of my greatest fears and nightmares. I had vowed before God to spend forever with this person, and I did the things good girls ought to do.

How could I survive the best three years of my life while working through and reliving the worst three years of my life? Where did I go for strength and knowledge when my previous theology of God was breaking under the weight of deep suffering, and I was writing papers about a true theology that embraces the fact that people suffer and so does God?

I was as deeply angry and untrusting of people as I was desperate to connect and feel loved and secured. I was making peace with being divorced while being engaged and newly married to someone else.

How could I trust this new man when I didn't trust God or myself after being assaulted by my previous husband? How could I feel all this doubt, yet be moved and remade by God in class and my assignments? Could one heart, one head, one spirit, and one soul hold all these conflicting thoughts in tension and still survive?

Could this person who felt so drawn to God, yet so angry with God, ever be a pastor?

I didn't know whether the wounds of my first marriage would haunt me forever or if God would resurrect my broken body and soul and use my life for glory. I was afraid the church would look at the resulting mental illness as my flaw and not rejoice that I survived and found God amidst the mess and chaos.

I didn't think I could stand in both death and resurrection.

Chapter 1

My ex-husband is not the villain of my story. No matter how much I want him to be, it is untrue.

Making him the villain gives him too much power and makes me weak when my Savior made me strong. Making him the villain inevitably makes him the main character in my life, and he simply isn't anymore. In many ways, he is no more than a footnote. Making him the villain is making the story his when it is my story—but more importantly, it is God's story of dominion and love that overcomes evil.

The real villain in the world is sin and brokenness that ravages our hearts, lives, and actions. Even now, a decade after our first date, I believe his love for me was real, just not as strong as he loved himself or his need for control and power. That's a hard truth to swallow, as it seems like it might be simpler if he never had real feelings or emotions beyond a desire to inflict pain. I even think that at times in the cycle of abuse, his tears and words of regret were honest. He was lost and in pain, and I knew it the moment I met him and looked into his striking blue eyes. He'd been raised in cycles of anger and abusive behavior and wasn't given safe and healthy boundaries or thoughts on sexuality, self-respect, or self-worth.

What I failed to recognize was his anger, bitterness, and lies. If I had to choose one word to describe him when we first met, it would be charming. I was manipulated from the moment we met, and I think everyone around him was as well. He could fit into any situation and make you believe he was genuine; this would be impressive if it wasn't so scary.

After eight months of being his friend and crushing on him majorly, I finally “convinced” him he was worthy of me. The gaslighting—which is manipulating someone psychologically to cause them to question their sanity—and web of deceit began immediately. He always made me feel like it was my job to tell him he was good enough, while simultaneously making me feel I was not.

In hindsight, our first date foreshadowed our entire relationship, as it ended in a

car crash. After a date where he admitted to wanting to hold my hand and kiss me but didn't because I "deserved better," my car was T-boned on the way home by a driver on a cell phone. The passenger side door never opened properly again, which reflected the way our relationship crushed my heart to the point where it, too, refused to open properly.

He beguiled everyone around him, and he possessed a way of putting everyone at ease. My parents adored him and were enthusiastic about our relationship. He was my first date, first kiss, first relationship, first heartbreak, and first discovery that the world was more complex and sinister than my popular Christian theology ever prepared me to understand.

On the surface, he was the perfect doting and devout boyfriend, but slowly he began to control my actions and even my thoughts without me realizing it. He would convince me of something, and somehow I would think it had been my idea all along.

He proposed after four months of dating, just before leaving for Army Basic Training. I was only nineteen years old.

I never accepted a date in high school because my standards were high, and if you weren't part of my Christian Wednesday night crew, you weren't worthy, because I was a good girl and I needed a good Christian man.

But three weeks before I was set to attend college on scholarship, after I'd had a major kidney operation at the beginning of summer, my doctor did not clear me to leave home. My college plan shifted: I would remain at home, attend the local community college, and get my general requirements out of the way for free on scholarship. The one condition my parents had was that I get a job.

I met him at that very job.

I excelled at my job. After six months I was a crew manager and after a year was up for an assistant manager position, which I turned down to get married instead. Good girls waited until marriage to live with boyfriends, and knowing this, he proposed—and I said yes.

I was stuck between my commitment to my faith and my feelings toward him, and it wouldn't be the last time. No, it was only the beginning. Somehow he saw he could push and convince me out of my deep-seated desire to fit, and he made himself appear to be somewhere I fit.

Books later taught me this is called grooming, but to me, it felt like falling in love—until it became only falling.

Looking back I can see every warning sign of an abusive relationship, every manipulation, every lie. But at the time all I could see was love. If I'm being totally honest, the week before we got married I began to see some things that made me hesitant or even wary to walk down the aisle, but I was too ashamed—or maybe even a little too prideful—to admit it. We live in a society that overall accepts divorce more readily

than calling off a wedding. I can't even name what the warning signs were; it was more like a feeling of being unsettled and without peace. I told myself they were nerves, that this was normal, and I put on my white dress and veil.

I remember when I experienced his anger for the first time, and while it wasn't directed at me, I instinctively feared it. I'd called him during basic training and told him about some wedding drama that had occurred during our long-distance engagement. He was so mad I was dealing with it alone that he ripped the plastic casing around the phone book on the directory, or so he said. That was the first time of thousands that I would tell myself I was loving by overlooking a flaw, that no one was perfect. But, yeah, the fact that he'd hulked out and broken rigid plastic with his bare hands was frightening. While I'd been told to stay pure and that boys would be boys, no one had warned me about anger.

Once he released his anger, it became his primary emotion, and fear and submission mine.

After about a month of marriage, his mask began to slip. Soon I found myself sleeping next to a stranger I could never seem to please. Unprepared for the harsh reality of my situation, young, naïve, and afraid, I embarked on the impossible task to make him happy. After all, I had read a Christian book that told me God invented marriage to make people holy more than happy, but I couldn't shake the belief that I was called to make him happy in an attempt to be holy. Placing the happiness and well-being of my partner above my own sounded like what it meant to love a person, but I was never given boundaries.

Once, after he was arrested for "suspected adultery," before I could finally break free, I cried to a friend, "I wish I'd never met him! If I hadn't I wouldn't feel this pain!"

Her response was what I'd expect from a fellow Christian: "No, you don't. You're just hurting."

Eight years later, I believe her. As much as I wish I could go back in time and change the past and avoid all the pain, abuse, and rape I endured at his hands, a much larger part of me wouldn't change anything about the course my life took. Meeting him and surviving the trauma led me to meet Weston and my son. Meeting him caused me to meet God in a fullness I never imagined possible and a craving to know God even deeper.

Meeting him caused me to truly meet me.

Do I wish I could have maybe gained all these things without the trauma of domestic violence and sexual assault? I would have to be a total masochist not to. But I am a better, stronger, more loving, more compassionate, more empathetic person because I understand suffering and redemption. I am a better spouse, friend, pastor, mother, and disciple because I have faced death and embraced life. I know to the depth of my very bones that resurrection follows death.

I am no phoenix rising from the ashes, but I am a living, breathing witness and proclamation to God's power, love, mercy, and justice. My life proves God's goodness more than it displays the brokenness of sin, as God took a tragedy and made beauty. The God of the Christian Fairytale Happily Ever-After Gospel doesn't take burlap and make it cashmere; it preaches you earn what you deserve. But the one true God looks at what I have earned and what I deserve and gives me immensely more than what I am due. God gives grace and mercy and makes what I receive better than I deserve.

God gives life, but before I could truly live after the trauma, I would have to face that I had almost died. Parts of me had already died, while other places in me still needed to.

My upbringing taught me God prohibits divorce, but my parents raised me to never let anyone treat me without respect. That basically means that being trapped in an abusive marriage was the epitome of theological confusion. What was the faithful response?

I remember one time I forgot to wash his uniforms for work.

"Chrisie, where are my clothes?" His tone was dark, and I sensed his barely controlled rage.

"In the hamper, I think. Why? Are you out of clean ones?" I nervously asked.

"Yes! You know I need a clean uniform for work. How could you be this stupid?" His voice was loud, his face close enough to breathe my air. "You do this to me all the time! Do you want me to get in trouble and lose rank, huh? Answer me! God, I cannot believe you. It isn't like you do anything all day or make any money."

By then, he'd backed me up against the wall.

"I'm sorry," I croaked, cowering. My heart raced. "I'll try to do better. I'll wash them right now. It was an accident. Please."

I tried desperately to be a good wife, worthy and beloved. I listened to his criticism, and his words defined me, cut me down, left me bleeding. Good Christian girls were good wives, and good wives made their husbands happy.

After his first affair, I chose reconciliation. Some days I think this was the wrong choice and kept me in harm's way, as the abuse and assault not only continued but escalated. Multiple times, my life literally was in danger.

Other days I know, given the misunderstandings of God I was operating under, the guilt of not trying again would have been unbearable, as well. Yeah, that's the crappy thing about making decisions in the fallen state of the world—sometimes neither choice is really all that great. All a person can do is make a choice based on the information available at the time and pray that God guides and redeems.

My weak theology and the cycles of abuse were both binding and enslaving me. It would take a literal act of God to break the chains and rebuild my life, and my faith.

But first, it would feel as though they were both shattered.

Chapter 2

I am no stranger to fear, as panic and anxiety and I are old friends.

My parents are both amazing and deeply flawed individuals, which makes them normal humans with red blood cells running through their veins. I always knew I was loved and cared for. My father is a United Methodist pastor and scholar, and my love of literature, curiosity, and theology all come from him. In many ways, he and I are the same, but in other ways, it feels as though we speak an entirely different language or are an entirely different species. Dad taught me to pray, to think critically, to love Jesus, and to be a hardcore perfectionist. I love him so much it hurts at times.

But loving someone as broken and flawed as my dad can definitely hurt. The child of a severely alcoholic mother who emotionally abused and assaulted him for sixty years, he has spent his entire life coping with the toxicity and damage done to his ego. When I was a child, he was prone to bouts of anger and deep insecurity, yet he was also my first example of the healing power of proper mental health care and God's redemption, as I witnessed his transformation and softened heart. He taught that you should take care of your wounds and that therapy is a fully legitimate form of health care.

During seminary, my mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and I understood so much more about my home life and myself. Some of my anxiety and depression as a child were probably genetic, but also my attempt to cope with the extremes of my environment. Mental health care in the panhandle of Texas in the early 1990s was not equipped to properly diagnose my mother, and she was forced to suffer much longer than necessary. My heart still breaks for her.

Mental illness abounds in my family, and unfortunately, I am no exception. When I was in the fourth grade, I was taken to the emergency room with my first panic attack. For the next six months, I suffered from anxiety and panic attacks so severe I could barely sleep at night. I would awaken in the middle of the night with checking compulsions that forced me to get up and unlock and relock the doors. A simple small dose of an antidepressant changed my life, and I'm sure the life of my parents.

Suddenly I could sleep and eat and be a normal child. I used to feel a deep sense of shame that I suffered from such extreme depression and anxiety before puberty, but I no longer do. It simply was how my brain worked.

Every person desires deeply to fit, to find their place in the world. As a redheaded boisterous preacher's kid, I never really flew under the radar. My father served in small West Texas towns, and the new kid always stood out. But me? I was like a flashing neon sign. I wish I were in high school now where my coolness would truly be appreciated. Today, geek culture is trendy. My Star Wars references would have made me friends, while people would have envied my awesome collection of strategy board games.

But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, my penchant toward books, Legos, and choir over makeup, Myspace, and MTV News didn't exactly win me any popularity contests. At least not in junior high, which should be defined as the "awkward as a giraffe" stage for most humans. For several years in one place we called home, the mean girls and boys of our school bullied me routinely, and I hated it. While I was never a total outcast and I had many friends, overall it was a hard few years. Antidepressants kept me afloat.

In high school, I thrived. Though not hip or cool, I found friends with shared interests and no longer feared sitting alone at lunch. I was doing so well my doctors took me off antidepressants.

In eighteen months, we realized that was a grave mistake. I began to spiral into depression and developed a secondary moderately severe eating disorder that I battled my senior year of high school and my first year of college. My eating disorder was termed "not otherwise specified," which was a fancy way of saying I hadn't lost enough weight to be hospitalized, but enough that it was dangerous. I would go days without eating until my hunger would cause me to eat, only making me feel guilty or want to purge. Whenever I looked in the mirror, I saw weight in my midsection, while other people saw my collarbone protruding and my baggy clothes sagging. When I ate a small meal, crying that I overate, my friends saw too few nutrients to survive.

One morning I looked in the mirror while blow-drying my hair (which was falling out in clumps) and felt God telling me I was not healthy. I robotically walked into my parents' room and said, "I think I have a problem. I haven't eaten in days, and I am still afraid to eat."

Back to therapy I went. Again, a mild antidepressant dramatically changed my life, and after six months my mood stabilized and my relationship with food returned to normal. I regained the fifty pounds I had lost, and my hair stopped falling out from the lack of nutrients.

I learned later that my brain apparently doesn't make adequate amounts of serotonin and norepinephrine on its own, much like a diabetic who cannot produce

enough insulin. I'll need to stay on antidepressants for the rest of my life.

Still, overall, high school was a time when I started coming into my own and when I began to claim my beliefs in God, and I'll admit I was sometimes obnoxious about it. Several others in my youth group were involved in a youth-led worship service on Wednesday evenings, and I threw myself into it. I have come to realize this was both beneficial and equally harmful to my spiritual formation. I often wonder if we were hyper-evangelicals who probably did more harm than I ever want to admit.

The praise band was a group of teenagers with some talent who played highly emotional worship songs written by Matt Redman. Every week we had a teenager "preach." Yes, this was as wonderful and terrible as it sounds. Sometimes we had some great youth directors teach, and some of the youth gave testimonies about who God is, while other times we heard "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul" (and I mean that literally).

This was where I began to experience my call to ministry, for it was in that little sanctuary in a United Methodist church in Clovis, New Mexico, that I began to preach at the age of fifteen.

I would answer God's call on these Wednesday nights and simultaneously dream of dating the members of the praise band.

These boys were like catnip to my good Christian girl sensibilities. I mean, just picture it: They were good boys, and they were in a band. But alas, it was not meant to be. Now in my thirties, I can say, "Thank my ever-loving God for that." See, these guys were serial daters who left a trail of broken hearts in their wake.

I love these guys. I mean it. We are all still Facebook friends, and we share pictures of our children and our respective ministries. They have beautiful families and lovely spouses, and I am sure they were never the right match for me. They epitomized everything that popular teenage girl theology books told me I wanted and needed—which I now know is incorrect.

Still, I did meet Jesus every Wednesday when they led worship. Like me, this theology was deep within them, and they were truly striving to be good Christian boys, and I know God honored our moronic efforts as teenagers.

I can still remember their sermons. While some were truly the Holy Spirit moving, others damaged me and my theological understandings of God's purpose and call on my life. See, this popular Christian theology affected these guys as much, if not more, as it affected me. It existed in the air we breathed and the words we spoke. One night, the leader of the band preached a sermon that at the time I thought was incredible, but now I see it for what it was: heretical, oppressive, and frankly misogynistic. It was diminishing of who God is, who women are, and what God desires for humanity. It caused severe damage to me spiritually, psychologically, and theologically.

I in no way blame him. He fell victim to the same lies about God I did. His heart

desired purely to know and share God. But I wish I were joking when I say his sermon was about how God commanded teenage Christian girls to be holier than simply, “Don’t drink, smoke, or chew, or date boys who do.”

Was he right that God wanted more for us than that? Absolutely, I believe that with every fiber of my being. After all, I bought into fairytale Christianity: that if I was a good Christian then my prince would appear and I would live a happily ever after worthy of a testimony during a Christian radio station telethon.

It would take me many more years to realize how weary I was back then from trying to earn my prince and prize from God. It wouldn’t be until I was on the brink of death from exhaustion that I would let this millstone around my neck go. Sometimes I still wish that this were the worst my story would be, that the most pain I would suffer in life was at the hands of bad theology from untrained theologians who weren’t even old enough to vote. But this was only a shadow of what was to come.

I bought many of the books at the local Christian bookstore in the young adult section. Occasionally, one of these sermons or books would mention God’s grace and love for those who were sexually abused, but not all. Sexual assault and rape were never discussed in the resources. On the issue of sexual violence, it seemed to me the church was silent. And its silence implied that sexual assault was uncommon, which is disgustingly untrue.

I assumed rape, violence in marriage, and verbal abuse were the stuff of Lifetime movies and afterschool specials, not something that reportedly occurs in a third of relationships both in and out of the church.

In short, I was woefully unprepared for the realities of a broken and fallen world, where people do evil things. It never even crossed my mind that another person could take my physical body against my will or would employ coercion, threats, or manipulation to gain access to my body. I believed my mother’s prayers for a spouse and God would reward me for my piety with the perfect husband.



About the Author

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