

# Recovering from Child Abuse

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Healing and Hope for Victims

David Powlison



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You have been victimized by a terrible wrong. During your childhood, the time you were most vulnerable, instead of being protected, helped, and comforted you were abused. Most likely you were abused by someone who should have been trustworthy—a family member, a teacher, a neighbor, a coach, a pastor, a friend. Instead of being protected you were violated. You were treated with malice. Someone used, misused, and took advantage of you. Now you are wondering if recovery is possible.

The simple answer to that question is yes, recovery is possible. But you already know you can't just snap your fingers and make everything all better. And you know that pat answers won't help you. But here are two important truths to keep in mind: 1. You are not alone; and 2. There is hope.

Your recovery will be a process of learning and remembering those two truths not just once, but over and over. Think about how bread is made. It must be kneaded so the yeast will go through the whole loaf. These two truths must be kneaded into who you are until they work through every part of you. The working of these truths into the deepest part of you takes time. The damage you suffered may have been done in one or more terrible moments; the healing and the restoration unfolds at a human pace. It unfolds at your pace. It unfolds as part of your story, and it unfolds over time.

There are three broad categories of child abuse: verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. If you were verbally abused, someone whose words should have been helpful and kind instead demeaned you and assaulted you. If you were physically abused, someone (perhaps a parent or another authority figure) attacked you and hurt you. If you were sexually abused, someone used you and violated an intimate part of who you are.

However you were abused, what happened to you was evil—you were sinned against. And now you are suffering. God is mindful of your suffering, and he hears your cries. He heard the cry of a child dying of thirst in the desert (Genesis 21:17–18); he heard the cries of the Israelites suffering as slaves (Exodus 2:23–24); and he hears you. God has much to say to those who have experienced evil at the hands of others. So he has much to say to you.

### **Your Identity Is Bigger Than Your Abuse**

Abuse feels like an experience that has stamped you and has *the* final word on your identity. But the truth is, God gives you a different identity. No matter what terrible atrocities happened to you, they are not your identity. Your identity as God's child is far deeper than the abuse you suffered.

When you come to God through trusting in Jesus, he gives you a new identity. You become part of the family

of God. You are his dearly loved child. Listen to what the apostle John says about your identity: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). You have a perfect Father in heaven who loves you and wants to fill your life with the good gift of himself (Luke 11:13).

Because you are God’s child, you are not alone in a nightmare of pointless suffering. It’s true that the “heart knows its own bitterness” (Proverbs 14:10), and even your dearest friend can’t fully understand the terror, the aloneness, the pain, and the horror you experienced. But Jesus does understand, and he is with you.

Jesus experienced every form of suffering when he was in the world. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). He was betrayed and tortured. He is well acquainted with your grief, and he will never leave you (John 14:18).

### **Your Story Is Bigger Than Your Abuse**

Experiencing Jesus’ presence and love will give you the courage to see that the story of your life is bigger than your suffering. What happened to you is not the last word on who you are and where your life is going. It’s a significant part of your story, but it’s not *the most* significant part of your story. It’s only one part of the new story of your life that Jesus is writing.