



the
SHATTERED
SOUL

*Restoring Wholeness
and Rebuilding Your Faith
After Spiritual Trauma*

COLLEEN RAMSER, LPC

Foreword by Chuck DeGroat

Spiritual trauma crushes at the deepest level, shaking the very depths of who we are. It creates suffering we struggle to understand in ourselves, or in those who walk alongside. With deep compassion and truth, Colleen gently engages wounded hearts, helping us understand the depths of the trauma and begin the long journey of healing. *The Shattered Soul* brings hope and light into the darkest of journeys. It is a must-read for anyone walking with those who have suffered, and a vital resource for those who are grieving.

Rachael Denhollander, author of *What Is a Girl Worth?*

My favorite part about this book is the agency Colleen Ramser gives to the reader in healing. Writing with trauma-informed care and from her own experience, Ramser understands the shattered soul and how spiritual trauma disorients the wounded from their faith and from their own bodies. She writes as a companion, offering compassion, understanding, and tools for the reader to discover a truer sense of self.

Aimee Byrd, author of *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* and *Saving Face*

Many of us have experienced spiritual trauma and don't know how to express it. If you've suffered harm that has you thinking thoughts and feeling emotions you never thought possible—help is available. In *The Shattered Soul*, Colleen Ramser brings her whole self to the page. She bravely offers her clinical approach, trauma expertise, spiritual practices, and most importantly, her personal journey. She attests that when she felt like leaving faith and collapsing into the depths of despair, Jesus was there. This book is an invitation for you to go deeper, and He will be there for you too.

Kyle Idleman, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church and bestselling author of *Every Thought Captive*

I'm so thankful for my friend Colleen Ramser. I'm thankful for the way she has stewarded her pain and suffering to be a blessing to others in her counseling ministry. And now, I'm thankful for the way she has so carefully and gently offered help to those who have been harmed by those who should have loved in Jesus' name. Dear wounded soul, there is hope for recovery from abuse and trauma, and Colleen will help you find your way there.

Elyse Fitzpatrick, author of *Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women*

In *The Shattered Soul*, Colleen Ramser offers a thoughtful and compassionate exploration of spiritual abuse, written with clarity and great sensitivity. She gives language to pain that is often unnamed and charts a gentle, hope-filled path toward healing. This book will be a meaningful resource for survivors, for friends and loved ones who want to walk alongside them well, and for pastors and ministry leaders looking to deepen their understanding and care.

Kevin Jamison, lead pastor of Sojourn East

Spiritual trauma is real and devastating, yet too often ignored in our churches. Colleen Ramser courageously addresses this critical need with both professional skill and personal authenticity. Her work is essential for anyone serious about healing after religious harm.

Dr. Chris Moles, author of *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home*

Spiritual abuse and spiritual trauma are, sadly, things many Christians must reckon with. *The Shattered Soul* is a truly compassionate guide for the healing journey. Filled with wisdom from her own story and the stories of her clients, licensed counselor Colleen Ramser offers a tender invitation to healing for a wounded soul. This book doesn't spiritually bypass the wounds; instead, it gently helps the reader sift through the complexity of harm and recovery the way only a skilled trauma therapist like Colleen can.

This book is a must for anyone who has ever had to reckon with their soul being shattered by spiritual abuse and spiritual trauma and for the helpers who walk with those impacted.

Tabitha Westbrook, LMFT-S, LCMHC-QS, LPC-S, author of *Body & Soul, Healed & Whole: An Invitational Guide to Healthy Sexuality After Trauma, Abuse, and Coercive Control*

The Shattered Soul is a book that gives hope and encouragement of how to heal after an experience of spiritual trauma. Colleen Ramser's expertise on this subject as a licensed professional counselor plus her own experience of spiritual trauma and rebuilding her Christian faith gives this book credibility as a good tool for the therapist and for the lay person.

Joy Cofield, spiritual director/spiritual life coach

Insightful, invitational, spacious, and kind. *The Shattered Soul* not only helps to identify and name the experience and effects of spiritual abuse, it offers practical ways to find meaning and rediscover hope for those who have lived through it. Colleen's voice is a gentle and compassionate guide. If you're looking for a way to hold on to and integrate your faith and mental health, this book is for you.

Brian Lee, founder and executive director of Broken to Beloved

In this accessible and compassionate book, Colleen Ramser guides us with seasoned skill on the journey toward spiritual healing through greater wholeness. She is knowledgeable about the complexities of our embodied faith and offers practical steps for growth. It has been a delight over the years to speak with Colleen about these ideas and to see the fruit of her work with many people, now available to us all in written form.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington (PhD, University of St. Andrews, Scotland), professor of New Testament and pastor at Sojourn East Church

In a time when the church has faced a steady stream of controversy, it is in desperate need of wise, thoughtful, nurturing, and nourishing voices to help Christians navigate the ashes, heal their wounds, and reclaim their faith. I can think of few voices better than Colleen Ramser to provide such guidance. She is a wounded healer and a practitioner with a gentle voice of guidance, and I could not be more eager to see her share her words with the wider world. This is a much-needed book at a critical moment for the church.

Mike Cospers, senior contributor at *Christianity Today*

Colleen has written a timely resource on a topic of great importance. I know Colleen to be not just a trained professional, but also someone who has personally walked out the journey. This combination has enabled her to bring hope to those who are searching for a path forward to healing and wholeness.

Gregg Dedrick, cofounder of Iron Bell Ministries and Spirit-Led Leadership, and former president of KFC

Drawing from her own healing journey and years of walking alongside others, Colleen Ramser offers hope, clarity, and compassionate wisdom for those wounded by spiritual abuse. *The Shattered Soul* is a trusted guide—rich with insight, encouragement, and practical tools—to heal deeply wounded hearts and gently restore a sense of God's presence.

Georgia Shaffer, professional certified coach, PA licensed psychologist, author of *Taking Out Your Emotional Trash*, and founder of ReBUILD after Divorce

the shattered soul

The background of the cover features a dynamic splash of water, with numerous droplets and bubbles. The splash originates from the bottom right and moves upwards and to the left, creating a sense of movement and freshness. The water is rendered in various shades of gray, from light mist to darker, more defined splashes.

the
SHATTERED
SOUL

*Restoring Wholeness
and Rebuilding Your Faith
After Spiritual Trauma*

COLLEEN RAMSER, LPC



**TYNDALE
REFRESH™**

Think Well. Live Well. Be Well.

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Refresh*, and the Tyndale Refresh logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Refresh is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

The Shattered Soul: Restoring Wholeness and Rebuilding Your Faith After Spiritual Trauma

Copyright © 2026 by Colleen Ramser. All rights reserved.

Cover and interior photographs are the property of their respective copyright holders from Depositphotos, and all rights are reserved. Crystal shards © Sébastien Dubé; splash of water © Mariia Zaitseva; water splash © Hiroyuki Akimoto; a water splash © Jakub Pavlinec.

Author photograph copyright © 2024 by Mickie Winters. All rights reserved.

Cover designed by Ron C. Kaufmann

Interior designed by Cathy Miller

Edited by Christine M. Anderson

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from The ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers.

The client examples in this book are composites based on the author's professional interactions with hundreds of clients over the years. All names are invented, and any resemblance between the individuals described and real people is coincidental.

The URLs in this book were verified prior to publication. The publisher is not responsible for content in the links, links that have expired, or websites that have changed ownership after that time.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

This book is not intended to be a substitute for counseling with a mental health professional. Please consult with your own provider on matters related to your mental well-being or overall health.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-8719-3

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

contents

Foreword by Chuck DeGroat *xiii*

Finding God in the Depths *xvii*

1. The Wounded Soul *1*

PART 1: ORIENTING 23

2. The Divided Soul *27*

3. The Anchored Soul *53*

PART 2: GUARDING 73

4. Overcoming Silence *77*

5. Engaging Cynicism *93*

6. Experiencing God's Presence *107*

PART 3: AWAKENING 121

7. Untwisting Theology *125*

8. Understanding Loyalties *139*

9. Waking Up with Anger *153*

PART 4: DESCENDING 167

10. Finding New Mercies in Mourning *171*

11. Making Meaning of Meaninglessness *183*

12. Unburdening the Soul *195*

PART 5: RESTORING 209

13. Reconnecting to Community *213*

14. Becoming Real *227*

Afterword by Leslie Vernick *243*

Acknowledgments *247*

Notes *251*

About the Author *259*

foreword

When my soul was shattered more than twenty years ago after a painful ending at a church I'd given my whole heart to, I had no map for moving forward. Although I was a guide to others as both a pastor and a therapist, I suffered quietly and without guidance for nearly a decade in the aftermath of that traumatic event.

On the outside, I was still a good Christian—a faithful pastor, an attuned therapist, a loving husband, an attentive dad, and even an author and leader of others. On the inside, however, spiritual trauma had sabotaged my body and shattered my soul to the point that I was eventually hospitalized. It was a terrifying wake-up call that led me to finally engage my healing journey in earnest.

I would have given anything to have had a guide like Colleen Ramser and a map like *The Shattered Soul*.

The book you hold in your hands contains the hard-won wisdom of an experienced practitioner, one who knows the spiritual shattering that terrifies and traumatizes. In these pages, you will find welcome for your wounded soul and practical guidance to navigate your way home again. Because the reality is that

trauma renders us homeless. It fragments and frays the soul. It disconnects us from ourselves, from each other, and even from God. We wander like exiles—even exiles within our own bodies. We feel lost and alone, wondering if we'll ever find our way home. I know I did.

I remember lying in my hospital bed, wondering how I, who was a guide for others, could feel so lost and rudderless. In the months that followed, I looked in various places for wisdom. I devoured books on trauma and began to engage practices to attune my body, mind, and soul, but I struggled to pray. I was integrating on the fly, trying to find trauma-informed resources I could view through the lens of Christian faith. I did my best, but I was straining to see in the dark.

Friend, this book is the light I needed—and perhaps the light you need as well. Colleen seamlessly weaves the very best therapeutic wisdom with Christian faith and does so with an eye toward the unique phenomenon of spiritual trauma. She is your guide with a trustworthy map that offers specific direction for your wounded, weary, and wandering soul.

Moreover, her credibility as a guide isn't just in her expertise; no, she also leads from her own wounds. She commends the practices she herself has so faithfully engaged. And she does so with a gentle blend of wisdom, storytelling, clarity, brevity, tenderness, practicality, and—perhaps most importantly—hope.

What I've discovered about spiritual trauma is that it doesn't just traumatize the body; it really does traumatize the soul. The very places and practices and people that we might once have turned to no longer feel safe. For many of us, not even God feels safe. It's a terrifying disorientation.

This kind of trauma needs a particular kind of tending—and

Colleen is the safe guide to help you begin the journey. This is a book I'll be commending as a resource for years to come, both in my counseling practice and in the clinical counseling program where I teach at Western Theological Seminary.

Take it slow, friend, but by all means begin. It's time to heal.

Chuck DeGroat, PhD, LPC

*Executive Director: Clinical Counseling Program
Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan*

finding God in the depths

Healing from spiritual trauma didn't happen in the ways or places I expected it to. It didn't happen while I was reading my Bible, praying, going to church, or attending a community group. Nothing I did worked—at least, at first. And in many moments, I felt worse. I wouldn't say it was impossible for me to engage those practices—though I know it is for some—but it was painful and confusing.

Spiritual trauma turned everything I felt I knew and believed about Christians upside down. It suddenly seemed like all Christians—especially leaders—were untrustworthy, church was a joke, and God was very far away. I felt like there was the Christian “me” before trauma and then just my shattered soul afterward. I missed the overconfident, blissful me—the me that trusted God, easily connected to Scripture, prayed with an unwavering hope, and authentically opened myself up to others. But I couldn't find her—and I wasn't sure how to find her or even where she had gone.

What made it harder was that there weren't many places I could go where people understood what was going on in my soul or knew how to help me rebuild some substance of my faith. Hearing catchy Bible verses or cliché answers, such as “all things work for

your good,” or simply being in the presence of another Christian either constricted every muscle in my body or stirred up a simmering cynicism that kept me stuck. I was so lost. Fearful. Angry. Alone. Covered in shame. It wasn’t until I went into the darkest depths that I found God.

GOING INTO THE DEPTHS

Survivors of spiritual abuse often think or say things they never thought they would. *God is abusive, faith is meaningless, attending church is pointless.* Such statements leave many well-meaning pastors, people helpers, biblical counselors, and even Christian clinical counselors uncomfortable. So they might quickly attempt to counter such thinking with affirmations about the character of God, verses from the Bible, or a theological dissertation in the form of subtle comments. The problem is that none of these attempts acknowledge the dark yet tender spaces inside, which only leaves the shattered soul feeling more stuck and alone.

If that’s you—if you’ve experienced spiritual harm that has you thinking and feeling things you never thought you would about Christians and faith—know that this book does not proclaim platitudes about where you should be or even what the Bible says about where you should be. Instead, it goes with you to the depths and the dark places in which you find yourself. Although it might feel counterintuitive at first, you need to pull back, slow down, and reconnect to the wounded places in your soul. You may have been told—implicitly or explicitly—that you should pray more, read more, and bypass the painful places inside. But what I realized on my journey, and in helping many others on theirs, is that God’s presence is still there in the dark places.¹

When I went into the depths and acknowledged the dark places inside, God never left. Though it sometimes felt in my inmost being like I was leaving him, leaving my faith, or collapsing into the depths of despair, he was there. When I warded against my faith, pulled away from others, and spiraled in my mind, he was there. When I couldn't feel his presence, my soul, or anything related to my faith or practice, he was there. But I had to be willing to go to the depths to find him—and to realize he was there all along.

This book is an invitation and guide to help you attend to those same tender places in your soul. It will hurt sometimes, and you may want to give up in the middle of the process, but as I tell my clients, “It gets worse before it gets better—but then it gets better.” I’ve done my best to write in a way that’s gentle, spiritually sensitive, and honest, but that also points toward healing and growth. Know that the teaching and the guidance throughout this book is always offered as an invitation, and never a “should” or a demand. That’s why the reflection section at the end of each chapter is titled “Invitation.” I offer an invitation for you to go deeper, but feel free to take a pass if you’re not ready.

You might even decide after the first chapter that you’re not ready to continue and choose to pause for now. And that’s exactly what I want you to feel throughout this experience—that you have a choice. Chances are that others may have tried to force you back to your faith, your church, God’s presence, or a spiritual practice. Some may have told you they’re concerned that you might lose your faith if you don’t. But I trust that you will get exactly what you need here, and I invite you to push away what your body says is not needed or what feels overwhelming. Because part of what we’ll explore in the pages ahead is just how important it is for your healing that you learn to connect to your body.

When you experience spiritual trauma, it impacts your body as well as your mind and your soul because your body is carrying something painful inside. It's all interconnected. That's why the first chapters start with the body—to help you find your way back to your soul and ultimately the Divine. When anything related to faith feels painful, your body tells a story about your pathway to healing that's authentic, genuine, and integrated. That's not to say that reading the Bible, praying, attending church, or engaging other spiritual practices are discouraged, if those are accessible to you. However, when you have experienced spiritual trauma, forcing yourself to do these practices may create a battle inside that can leave you feeling more divided, disoriented, and guarded.

BATTLING INSIDE

After I was spiritually wounded, my faith felt like a battlefield full of faith leaders with guns, Christians with bows and arrows, and a video-game character labeled “hope” that turned into a monster if it got too close. Trauma had anchored me to the past so I would never forget what hurt me. In that sense it was protective, but it gave me insufficient information about what I was experiencing in the present. Once I learned how to anchor myself in the present—to communicate to my body as well as my mind and soul that I wasn't in danger—I realized there were not nearly as many guns, arrows, and monsters running around as I thought.

The anchors that once brought you peace in your faith might not work after what you've experienced—and that's normal and common. To help you understand what's going on in your wounded and divided soul, we'll explore new ways of connecting to your body and soul that take into account your spiritual

capacity. This connection enables you to build the capacity you'll need to be present with the burdens and wounds your soul is carrying and, later, to gently reconnect to parts of your faith. And in time, that's possible.

After trauma, we develop guarded parts of us inside that mean well and have been noble shields, but they need tending so we can heal. We might become frozen and silent so we aren't hurt or exploited again. A cynical part of us might be trying to protect us from disappointment by remaining bitter in God's presence or in response to anything related to faith. It's important not to rush past these protective parts of us but rather to slow down and pay attention to what they need. When we are present and anchored, our guarding becomes a thoughtful choice rather than an intrusion from the past. Then we can begin to awaken safely to deeper truths about what we've experienced.

We also need to understand the twisted relational dynamics, false loyalties, and anger that arise as we delve into the depths of what took place. Anger especially can feel uncomfortable for Christians since not many of us have been taught what to do with it, but we'll explore some practical ways to move through anger inwardly and outwardly. As we become more present to ourselves and our experience, a sense of despair, confusion, and meaninglessness can also emerge. Life might seem dark as our soul reveals deeper and more honest declarations and burdens we've been carrying that need to be witnessed and released so we can once again experience God's love in ways that feel safe and whole. This is the messy middle where we might be tempted to abandon ship or give up on our faith. But if we keep sailing through what feels like an unending sea, we will arrive on the other side.

EMERGING ON THE OTHER SIDE

I can't say how long it will take, but I do know that if you stay on the journey—if you keep searching and waiting—you will emerge on the other side. Your journey might take unexpected turns, but one day you will be surprised to look back and realize you're more restored, more whole, and less overwhelmed by the past. I've experienced the unfolding of this process in my own life, and I've had the privilege of compassionately witnessing it in the lives of so many others. When you get to the other side, you will be more rooted in who you are, in your faith, and in who God is. You will be able to discern when to guard and when to be vulnerable as you reengage in community, and you will extend more patience and compassion to your soul whenever you fall back into old tendencies. Your soul, your faith, and your community might not be the same as before—and there may be some grief that comes with that—but you will be far more authentic and embodied.

I'm put off when writers or social media influencers hype up their promised outcomes, so I don't want to do that. But I do want you to know that everything in this book is based on my personal experience, my expertise in trauma, my clinical approach with those I counsel, and what I know about spiritual formation. Although the stories I tell about clients are composites to protect confidentiality, everything I write about is anchored in the physical, emotional, and spiritual experiences that follow spiritual trauma.

My hope for you is that this book might become one page of many in your story that lead you toward God's presence and an authentic and embodied faith—maybe again or perhaps for the first time if you've known only an abusive type of faith. I

wish I could literally sit right there with you as you read because I would tailor the words on every page to your unique story. In fact, not being able to do that sometimes made writing this book hard for me.

If I had the privilege of sitting with you, I would tell you that while I know I am a compassionate witness, I also know that you don't know that yet. As you read, I hope you will eventually and safely soften into this book as though I were sitting with you. If you feel like you don't know where to go to find your soul among all the shattered pieces, I invite you to join me on the path where I and so many others have found healing. It begins right here, right where you are, as you find God in the depths and allow your soul to emerge in the pages to come.

THE WOUNDED SOUL

Ella quit praying and reading her Bible. She'd lost her sense of having a deep and personal relationship with God, and terms such as *submission*, *godly wife*, and *duties* left her feeling bitter toward the church. For years, her husband had used Scripture to manipulate her into sex, saying her body was his and the Bible said so. He called her names, controlled what she wore, and berated her if she ever questioned his spiritual leadership in the home. Eventually, she collapsed into a dark spiritual depression where death seemed like the only way out. Lost in a sea of confusion, intrusive thoughts, and pain, *Ella was experiencing spiritual trauma*.

Jonathan felt called to be a pastor. After completing his seminary degree, he and his wife and four young kids moved across the country so he could be an associate pastor at a dynamic and

rapidly growing church. Eager to serve God and live out his calling, Jonathan devoted himself fully to his work. The problem was that no matter how many hours he worked, the senior pastor demanded more, to the point that Jonathan often neglected his family and his well-being. The senior pastor's leadership style was laced with fear and guilt, and he routinely ostracized anyone who questioned him. When Jonathan tried to push back, the senior pastor equated his resistance with disobedience to God. Jonathan found himself feeling confused and anxious when he went to work during the week and to worship on Sundays. His hands shook every time he entered the church. He felt powerless, alone, and lost. Although he didn't know it, *Jonathan was experiencing spiritual trauma.*

As Allison described it, disobeying the teachings of Bill Gothard, founder of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, felt like disobeying God himself. She'd grown up in a home that used Gothard's homeschooling curriculum and shunned anything deemed "worldly." Her father, the spiritual leader in their home, forbade her to attend college and insisted he would choose a suitable man for her to marry. As Allison grew into young adulthood, she was exposed to teachings on grace and freedom in Christ through a coworker, which led her to research other ways of thinking about God and the Bible. As her childhood understanding of faith crumbled, she felt paralyzed in her understanding of God, herself, and the church. Like so many who have lived in fear-based, high-control religious settings, *Allison was experiencing spiritual trauma.*

Perhaps you recognized yourself or someone you know in one of these stories. Or you may be familiar with news stories exposing the abuses of prominent Christian leaders, organizations, or denominations. Although we might want to believe that instances

of spiritual abuse are rare, they are far more common than most of us realize. The behaviors that often characterize spiritual abuse, including twisted theology, selfish gain, and entitlement are demonstrated in multiple stories throughout the Bible, which means none of this is new under the sun. In some cases, spiritual abuse is more subtle than behaviors described in headline-grabbing stories.

All of this can create confusion about what, specifically, constitutes spiritual abuse. Those who have been wounded might spend months, if not years, wondering if what they experienced meets the criteria for spiritual abuse, or being unaware that it does. As a result, they wrestle with questions such as, *Am I misunderstanding what's happening? Am I too sensitive? Is this normal?*

Confusion also makes it difficult for pastors and ministry leaders to determine whether a staff member or individual in their congregation might have committed spiritual abuse and needs to be held accountable or removed from leadership. They wrestle with questions such as, *Am I seeing this clearly? What next steps are appropriate? Am I doing more harm than good?*

While not everything that causes hurt in a religious setting constitutes spiritual abuse, many things can result in spiritual trauma. And just because there wasn't intent to cause harm doesn't mean harm didn't occur. That's why it's important to understand what terms such as *spiritual abuse* and *spiritual trauma* are, and how both impact body and soul.

SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND SPIRITUAL TRAUMA

Although spiritual abuse and spiritual trauma are not the same thing, they are closely related, which can make it difficult for those who have experienced one, the other, or both to articulate their

experience. To provide clarity about how these terms are used throughout this book, let's take a closer look at some foundational definitions.

Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse is when a person or system of persons in perceived or real authority misuse their authority, using any means necessary to secure their desired outcomes at the expense of another's flourishing and spiritual well-being. It is marked by a pattern of behavior that is spiritual or religious in nature and results in selfish gain for the one(s) in power.

For additional clarity, let's unpack this definition one phrase at a time.

- *A person or system of persons in perceived or real authority* might range from a friend, mentor, spouse, or family member who has no formal religious title or role but asserts themselves as a spiritual authority to someone who does have a recognized religious role and spiritual authority, such as a pastor, church elder, church staff member, or board member or teacher at a Christian school.
- *Misuse their authority, using any means necessary* could include exploiting, coercing, manipulating, limiting, spiritually neglecting, or a host of other means one might use to secure or maintain a desired outcome. *Exploiting* takes advantage of someone's trust, vulnerability, or spiritual beliefs to serve the desires, goals, or agenda of the one in authority. *Coercing* uses pressure, threats, or intimidation to force someone into compliance or agreement, overriding their free will,

personal convictions, or spiritual autonomy. *Manipulating* uses emotional, spiritual, psychological, or social leverage to influence another. *Limiting* seeks to exclude access to the community, leadership roles, or opportunities. *Spiritually neglecting* involves removing spiritual guidance, mentorship, shepherding, or care from a vulnerable person.

- *To secure their desired outcomes* means getting what they want from someone. Such desired outcomes might be control, sex, money, dominance, reverence, loyalty, silence, emotional security, or adherence to spiritual or religious rules.
- *At the expense of another's flourishing and spiritual well-being* is what happens when someone in power prioritizes their own desires and gain above all else. Unwilling to surrender their desired outcome and gain, they justify behaving in ways that diminish the flourishing and spiritual well-being of another.
- *It is marked by a pattern of behavior that is spiritual or religious in nature* involves the misuse of spiritual beliefs, practices, or spiritual authority to harm others. These behaviors are often couched in religious language or justified as being "God's will."
- *And results in selfish gain¹ for the one(s) in power* might look like sexual or emotional power for one spouse in a marriage, unchallenged decision-making power for a ministry team leader, or saving face for an elder board that doesn't want to acknowledge wrong after deciding not to remove a staff member who exploited a congregant. To be clear, there's nothing wrong with desiring sex from a spouse or wanting a staff team to agree with a leader's ministry vision.

And feeling afraid to acknowledge a wrong is normal. The problem comes when the person with spiritual power and authority is determined to secure what they want or believe they need without regard for how their actions will impact another. Instead, they behave with entitlement, elevating their desired outcome above all else and expecting others to conform to their expectations: The spouse must consent to sex or risk being berated; the team must obey the ministry leader or risk termination; congregants must not question the elder board or risk being shunned or even asked to leave the church.

The best use of any definition is to provide a foundation for better understanding, communication, and decision-making. I hope this definition of spiritual abuse brings clarity to what you or someone you care about has experienced, and that it gives you a framework to move forward. At the same time, I also want to offer some cautions.

The term *spiritual abuse* can be misused when describing the actions of church leaders who are simply upholding healthy boundaries, established guidelines, or expectations for participation in the life of the church. Examples might include setting doctrinal beliefs required for membership, addressing ongoing patterns of sin as part of church discipline, or maintaining guidelines for partaking in Communion. As in any organization, individuals can then freely choose whether to align with those expectations or to step away if they cannot in good conscience do so. However, when someone crosses boundaries—by creating an unsafe environment, continually causing harm, or refusing to follow policies or meet work requirements if on staff—it is both appropriate and

necessary for leaders to enforce those boundaries. Doing so may result in decisions that are painful for the individual but necessary to protect the congregation, preserve trust, and maintain the integrity of the church's mission and community life.²

The term *spiritual abuse* can also be misused to identify what I would describe as ordinary people being humans. Ordinary people being humans are going to fail us with their ignorance, missteps, and shortcomings. I have absolutely failed others in these ways and although I am a perfectionist, I will never live up to anyone's standard of perfection.

We need to exercise caution and discernment because this can become a slippery slope when so many who spiritually abuse justify their behavior by saying, "It wasn't my intent to harm," "I didn't know," or "I was exercising biblical authority." Hear me when I say that lack of intent or education doesn't excuse the harm, and repair and healing is still needed. However, I do believe we need to acknowledge experiences that may not rise to the level of spiritual abuse but are still hurtful or disappointing.

A pastor forgetting to respond to a congregant's email can cause hurt but was it spiritual abuse? I don't think so.

A loving rebuke might be hard to hear but was it spiritual abuse? Not necessarily. If the rebuke oozed with pressure to conform or false teaching then, yes, it would be spiritual abuse, but otherwise perhaps not.

A church board removing a staff member or congregant due to inappropriate behavior or habitual issues that impact the church might be necessary and incredibly difficult for all involved but not necessarily abusive.

A disagreement with a ministry leader might be angering but was it spiritual abuse? Not necessarily. It might be just an honest disagreement.

A pastor's inability to meet the unrealistic demands of a congregant might be frustrating but is it spiritual abuse? Again, not necessarily. A pastor is a limited human being and will fail to live up to others' expectations just as we all do. The question is, at what point might it rise to the level of neglecting the sheep?

These situations are not always clear. Whatever form it takes or whatever the reasons for it might be, experiencing hurt matters because it can create the conditions for spiritual trauma. To heal from these wounds, it is essential to understand spiritual trauma and how it impacts us mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Spiritual Trauma

Spiritual trauma is the lasting impact someone experiences from a harmful event or environment that is spiritual or religious in nature. The experience overwhelms a person's capacity to cope, and it manifests in negative effects on their mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. This affects one's spiritual identity and worldview, as well as one's relationship with God, a faith community, and spiritual practices. Spiritual trauma can result from a single event or repeated events over time. It can also result from enforcement of religious doctrines, ideologies, or influences, such as pressure to conform, requirements for unquestioning obedience to authority figures/structures, rigidly enforced gender roles, or an unreasonable fear of anyone outside one's own spiritual community.

The potential impact of spiritual trauma can vary widely, which means the same abusive behavior or event could be mildly traumatic to one person and deeply traumatic to another. This is one reason why it can sometimes be difficult to agree on what is or is not considered spiritual trauma—because it often depends on individual experience.

Think of it this way: If someone rolled a heavy toy truck in your direction and it hit your toe, you might say ouch and then go about your day. However, if you had just broken your toe, your capacity to tolerate the pain of the toy truck collision would likely be a lot less—meaning your trauma response would be greater. Or imagine that someone repeatedly rolls a toy truck at your foot every day for weeks or months. Over time, the pain of repeated impact adds up. And this would be the case whether the person who rolled the truck your way did so maliciously or innocently. Regardless of their intent, the impact on you would be significant.

This illustrates why the potential impact of spiritual trauma is unique to each person. Our experience is influenced by our story, our emotional capacity at the time, our autonomic nervous system (more on that later), and how we internalized what happened. When we experience spiritual trauma, faith becomes scary and inaccessible because the trauma we experienced in a spiritual context has merged with our faith. When I explain this to my clients, they are often relieved to hear that the trauma stored in their body is a factor in losing or nearly losing their faith, and that in time they can untangle the two.

God created human beings as a unity of mind, body, and soul, which means that a wound to one part of us also impacts every other part of us. Although Scripture acknowledges and affirms this unity,³ the contemporary church often lacks an understanding

of and language for the interconnectedness of body and soul—much less for how trauma, including spiritual trauma, impacts our whole selves through trauma responses. It is essential to reclaim this understanding of our God-given design so we can experience healing at every level of what I call the *somatic soul*.

THE SOMATIC SOUL

Soma is one of the ancient Greek words New Testament writers use for *body*. To have a *somatic* soul, then, is to have an embodied soul—an immortal identity housed in a mortal vessel. Embodiment was part of God’s original design in creation—human beings were created in God’s image before, not after, the fall.

Embodiment includes many things, but for our purposes it refers to an awareness and integration of everything experienced in the body—physical sensations as well as thoughts and emotions. Embodiment acknowledges the mind-body or the soul-body connection, which is to say that the mind, the body, and the soul communicate with one another. The body tells us things about the condition of the mind and soul, and the mind and soul tell us things about the condition of the body. Physical sensations such as butterflies in the stomach or a rapid heart rate can communicate positive or negative emotions. And emotions such as joy or fear can be indicated by pleasant or unpleasant physical sensations. Embodiment is essentially a conversation among mind, body, and soul, which means we can’t address mental or spiritual trauma without allowing the body to be part of the conversation. However, in some Christian circles, we have become not merely disconnected from our embodiment, but skeptical of what it’s trying to communicate. When our embodiment communicates—through pain,

discomfort, anxiety, anger, sadness, or apathy—instead of listening, we have been taught to discount, ignore, or even shame it.

My client Brooke experienced this kind of disregard for her embodiment after she was reprimanded by the leaders of her church for not submitting to her husband, who was verbally abusive to her. Over a period of several months, she sought help from multiple Christian counselors, but when she explained that anxiety—racing heartbeat, confusion, and difficulty breathing—left her unable to read her Bible, pray, or attend church, they told her the answer was to cast her anxiety on the Lord and do those things anyway. Although no one said it directly, it was also implied that healing wouldn't come until she did. She was told she needed to trust God more and stop believing the lies Satan was telling her. Confused, Brooke continued to push through, but doing so only left her feeling more anxious, angry, and discouraged. Eventually, she grew bitter toward God for not healing her.

Through her anxiety symptoms, Brooke's body was clearly saying, "Mayday! Mayday! We have a problem!" But no one had taught Brooke how to listen to what her body was saying, and her counselors, though well intentioned, disregarded her symptoms. What Brooke didn't know is that the same God who breathed Scripture also created her autonomic nervous system (ANS).

The autonomic nervous system is responsible for involuntary or automatic bodily functions, such as breathing, heart rate, digestion, and blood pressure. The ANS is made up of two branches: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system, which are often likened to a car accelerator and brake. The sympathetic nervous system revs the engine to prepare the body for action in moments of stress by increasing heart rate, dilating pupils, slowing digestion, and so on. After the stress or danger

has passed, the parasympathetic nervous system gently applies the brakes, slowing the heart rate, supporting digestion, and encouraging rest to restore a sense of safety and balance. When these two branches are functioning normally, we experience the body's acceleration and braking much as we would in driving a car. However, after spiritual trauma, the transition between the two can feel like riding with an inexperienced driver who alternately floors the gas pedal and then slams on the brakes. The ANS sees threats everywhere and responds accordingly because it's stuck in survival mode.

Through the autonomic nervous system, the body often has a deeper understanding than the mind of what we are experiencing emotionally, physically, and spiritually. This is sometimes referred to as the "wisdom of the body" because there are times when the body knows more about our condition than we're consciously aware of. The ANS is continually giving the body data in the form of physical sensations, such as tightness in the chest, a sinking feeling in the stomach, or a heaviness on the shoulders. These physical sensations then send messages to the brain, and the brain begins to interpret what the ANS might be trying to say.

In Brooke's case, her autonomic nervous system was telling her, "Pause. These practices feel unsafe right now." If she had been taught to be curious about her symptoms rather than to disregard them, the wisdom of her body might have played an important role in discernment. Curiosity isn't jumping to conclusions or making judgments, it's simply gathering information for better understanding. Instead of trying to override her anxiety and ignore what her body was saying, imagine how things might have been different if Brooke had allowed herself to be curious by asking, "How might my anxiety be connected to the wounds I've experienced?" Her nervous system was signaling that her body was

stuck in a trauma response. Because her husband's verbal abuse was focused on what he considered her spiritual failings, Brooke's autonomic nervous system associated her spiritual life with abuse. She experienced anxiety when she tried to pray, read her Bible, and attend church because her body equated these activities with threat. In other words, her soul is somatic. What she didn't realize was that it wasn't just a spiritual issue she was experiencing, but a trauma response triggered by her faith practices.

TRAUMA RESPONSES

When we experience spiritual trauma, our body responds through trauma responses. A trauma response is a physical, emotional, and psychological reaction to a distressing or threatening event that overwhelms our ability to cope. A trauma response happens when the sympathetic nervous system accelerates in response to danger or the parasympathetic nervous system screeches to a complete stop to avoid impact. While abuse is a harmful behavior, a trauma response is the initial and natural physiological reaction to protect us from harm. Again, this is how the body is designed to function. However, with spiritual trauma, those protective physiological reactions get stuck in a way that prevents the body from returning to a state of safety and balance.

Here's an example of how this happens. Someone in spiritual authority consistently forces a person to comply with rigid and unrealistic rules (spiritual abuse). In response, that person experiences confusion, fear, and intense anxiety (trauma response). This leaves a lasting impact on their mind and body that triggers panic in spiritual contexts, leading to avoidance of God, religious community, and spiritual practices (spiritual trauma). These responses,

which are the body's way of protecting itself from harm, are automatic, involuntary, and outside of conscious control.

A trauma response occurs when the body detects a threat, initially through our senses, such as sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. Then the amygdala, also known as the alarm system of the brain, signals to the body that danger is present. This happens in seconds. The amygdala makes no distinction between a real or imagined threat—whether we are being chased by a lion or simply feeling anxious about a difficult conversation. The hypothalamus, or what's often called the command center, receives the signal and activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis or stress response system, which then sets off the trauma response. If there isn't any danger, then your prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for rational thinking, decision-making, and impulse control, calms the amygdala, and everything is restored to balance. If there truly is danger, then your prefrontal cortex goes offline, and your body acts out of instinct.

We might experience trauma responses physically in any number of ways, including increased or slowed heart rate, tense muscles, trembling, or even feeling physically unable to move or a lack of feeling in the body. Depending on the circumstances, common trauma responses fall into five main categories.⁴

- *Fight*. This is an offensive response that confronts the threat. It might take the form of rage, movement toward, control, or physical or emotional aggression to overcome the danger.
- *Flight*. This is an attempt to flee a threatening situation to survive and stay safe. It often takes the form of running away or avoidance of danger.

- *Freeze*. In this response, it's not uncommon to have a lot of energy in the body yet feel paralyzed, unable to act or move emotionally, physically, or mentally. Sometimes referred to as "deer in headlights," this response is a combination of fight and flight on hold.
- *Fawn*. In this response, one might suppress needs or opinions to avoid further harm. It manifests as people-pleasing, difficulty setting boundaries, over-apologizing, or being overly submissive.
- *Collapse*. Although this response is like the freeze response, it involves a deeper experience of immobilization characterized by feelings of despair, powerlessness, helplessness, lack of energy, heaviness, lifelessness, or apathy.

To get a sense of what it's like to experience both the autonomic nervous system and these trauma responses at work, imagine that you're driving on the expressway when the car just ahead and to the right of you begins to swerve into your lane. Immediately, your heart begins to race, and you feel breathless as you quickly swerve out of the way (sympathetic nervous system). Screeching sounds radiate through your body and pins and needles seem to cascade from your head to your toes. You feel like you might faint, and tears fill your eyes. *Did I really make it?* You exit the expressway and find a place to park and calm down. After about twenty minutes and a phone call to a loved one, your heart rate has come down, your breathing is stable, and you go on with your day (parasympathetic nervous system). Everything you experienced after the car swerved into your lane was your autonomic nervous system doing its best work to protect you.

And once the danger had passed, your body returned to its normal state.

Now imagine that instead of calming down, you continued to experience all the emotions and physical sensations even after the danger had passed. That is what happens when a trauma response gets stuck in your body. Even when the traumatizing event is over, you feel anxious and agitated, numb and shut down, depressed and overwhelmed, or a combination of all of these. Your body believes you are still in danger, and it keeps you stuck in a trauma response to protect you.

Let's consider yet another scenario. Imagine that the car did hit you, but you were fortunate enough to come away from the accident with only minor injuries. In its ongoing quest to keep you safe, your brain and autonomic nervous system have documented and filed away everything you experienced to prevent it from happening again. Whenever something reminds you of the accident, it activates your trauma response even though you are no longer in danger. These are called *triggers*. You might feel panicked when you see an ambulance or hear a siren, or you might go out of your way to avoid driving on the expressway.

The physical symptoms we experience when our trauma response is activated might be unpleasant in the moment, but they serve us well as a form of protection—to help us escape or mitigate the threat and find safety. The challenge comes when what is meant to be a temporary survival response becomes a permanent one—when our body responds as if it remains under threat even when it's not. When the context for the threat is religious in nature, the lasting impact results in symptoms of spiritual trauma.

SYMPTOMS OF SPIRITUAL TRAUMA

When spiritual trauma gets stuck in your body, you'll find yourself in a perpetual trauma response. You might default to a *fight* response by raging against God, confronting others, or even wrestling with yourself. You may take *flight* by withdrawing from others, avoiding spiritual practices or God, or by avoiding your emotions. You might *freeze* by feeling paralyzed in what you believe, constantly replaying past scenarios, or struggling to make decisions about God. You may *fawn* by trying to appease God or please others to secure acceptance or safety. Or you might *collapse* by continually feeling spiritually hopeless or dead inside, unable to see a way forward.

Again, it's important to understand that these responses are not just "all in your head"; they're in your body. Like other forms of trauma, spiritual trauma can have an overwhelming impact on mind, body, and soul. Listed below are some common symptoms of spiritual trauma. As you review the list, consider which you relate to most or recognize in someone you care about.

- *Intrusion.* These are unwanted thoughts, memories, nightmares, emotions, or physical sensations related to the trauma. They might take the form of mental flashes of an abuser's face, coercive phrases repeated by spiritual leaders, or sudden emotions or physical sensations that make you feel like you are reliving the event.
- *Avoidance.* This can take many forms, including avoidance of thoughts and feelings or avoidance of anything that reminds you of the trauma, such as the Bible, prayer, church, spiritual community, spiritual conversations, or God.

- *Hyperarousal.* The *hyper* in hyperarousal indicates a heightened state of attention or awareness that leaves you feeling overwhelmed. Hyperarousal might be marked by restlessness, a constant sense of danger or being on edge, spiritual cynicism, anxiety, irritability, or outbursts of anger related to a spiritual or religious context.
- *Hypoarousal.* The *hypo* in hypoarousal indicates a diminished state of attention or awareness that leaves you feeling numb. Hypoarousal is marked by feeling emotionally and spiritually detached, ashamed, shut down, or helpless related to a spiritual or religious context.
- *Identity crisis.* This is a painful experience of losing a sense of self and one's place in the world. It is marked by confusion, doubts, and questions about one's beliefs, faith community, or God. This is often what others refer to as "deconstruction," but it's important to note that trauma by default deconstructs the self, naturally leading to an identity crisis.

This list is not exhaustive, but if I had to condense spiritual trauma down to a handful of symptoms, this would be it.

Your body is designed by God to help you survive, adapt, and ultimately heal. When you experience spiritual trauma, your body recognizes the threat and responds accordingly to keep you safe. And when your body gets stuck in a trauma response, it takes your soul along with it, leaving you feeling confused and lost. You might lose the ability to connect with God or your spiritual life. Your soul might go into hiding and emerge only when conditions seem safe enough for your body to acknowledge the pain and grief

of what you experienced. All of this is normal for the somatic soul that has experienced spiritual trauma.

THE PATH FORWARD

If the deepest parts of us reside in our soul, then spiritual abuse is among the most damaging forms of oppression of who we are created to be. The shattered soul can feel divided, lost, and confused about how to find the path toward wholeness and a rebuilt faith. As you learn how trauma impacts the mind and body and, therefore, the soul, my hope is that you will find relief. Your faith might not be lost, at least not yet. Instead, your trauma has merged with your spirituality, keeping you stuck in a trauma response where faith practices, church, and even God can feel triggering.

How do we restore wholeness and rebuild our faith when our spiritual life feels painful? The best path forward isn't one of extremes—void of Christ and Christian practices on one hand, or full of forced prayer and Bible prescriptions on the other. Instead, there is a space between the extremes that is gracious to mind, body, and soul. In that space, we can rediscover and gather the beloved pieces of our soul that have been shattered. When it comes to healing spiritual trauma, less is often more. Slow—and I mean *slow*—is more fruitful than pushing forward at full speed.

There in that space between extremes, your soul, though hidden for its own protection, longs to reunite with you. And though it may be hard to believe right now, it is in that space that Christ longs for you to see him as he truly is—loving, compassionate, and gentle.

I've walked this path and have also traveled with many others

who've done the same and come out on the other side. I don't know how long your healing journey will be or what turns it might take, but it won't always feel this way. As my therapist once told me in some of my darkest moments, "There is a beginning, a middle, and an end."

Let me invite you to begin.

invitation —————

Every chapter in *The Shattered Soul* concludes with an invitation—a suggested practice or two to help you process what you read or to feel grounded rather than anxious as you work through what happened to you. I often encourage my clients to keep a journal to process their experiences and emotions, and I encourage you to do so as well if it's tolerable. Journaling through handwriting (rather than typing) has been shown to be beneficial in processing emotions and difficult parts of a traumatic experience.⁵ You might write about what comes up for you as you read each chapter or engage the practices.

Use one or both of the following practices to help you return to a state of calm when you feel emotionally dysregulated.

Letter of belief and compassion. This chapter was a lot to take in, so pause for a moment and breathe gently. Let yourself settle, just enough to be present.

Imagine you are writing a brief letter (it can be just short phrases) to the part of you who has been wounded by spiritual harm. This is the part of you who once trusted and believed, and who may now feel confused, angry, ashamed, numb, or deeply alone. You don't have to have all the answers; you are simply offering this wounded part of you belief, kindness, and compassion.

If you find it difficult to show yourself compassion right now, imagine that someone who knows and cares about you is writing the letter.

Begin by acknowledging belief in your story and the trauma you experienced; it's your story, and your body carries the lived knowledge of your experiences. You might do this by offering this part of you some kind words:

I believe you.

You have endured so much.

It makes sense that you feel this way.

Your pain is real, and it matters.

It's okay to be sad.

Conclude by acknowledging the courage it took to get to this point and the ways you've survived:

You may not feel brave, but it takes a lot of courage to face what you've experienced.

You've been doing what you can to survive.

Showing up even when you're afraid isn't a lack of courage, but rather the beginning of courage.

Believing the story your body tells and offering yourself kindness and compassion are beautiful and essential gifts you'll need for the healing journey ahead. Use this practice when you feel discouraged and need comfort and care.

Five senses countdown. Settle into a quiet place and give yourself a moment to get still. Let your breathing be soft. You don't need to change anything—just notice. Allow yourself a spacious amount of time, five to ten minutes, to look around and name:

- *Five things you can see*, such as light, color, texture, and shape. Let your eyes move slowly.
- *Four things you can feel*, such as the chair beneath you, your hands on your lap, your breath, your clothing. Notice the textures.
- *Three things you can hear*, such as distant sounds, hums, or the silence between noises. Let your ears open gently.
- *Two things you can smell*, such as the scent of a candle, fresh air, your clothes, your skin. If you can't smell anything, that's okay—name that too.
- *One thing you can taste*, such as the taste in your mouth, a sip of tea, a piece of gum. Savor the taste.

Pause. Allow yourself to feel the moment—not as something to control but as something to receive. If it helps, whisper, “I am here. My body is here. This present moment is here.” Allow your senses to return to the present, one sense at a time.