

“Steve has done a brilliant job at pulling together a topic that is complex and difficult. He has captured beautifully the importance of church in caring for those who have experienced deep suffering. This book is written sensitively, compassionately and clearly, and shows how the beauty of Christ both challenges our perspectives on trauma and ministers to those impacted by deep suffering.”

Karen Sleeman, Biblical Counsellor, Christ Church Cockfosters, London; Visiting Lecturer, Oak Hill Theological College

“When faced with the complex pastoral needs of those who have experienced trauma, we can err either by rushing forward to care for these sufferers without requisite knowledge and skill or by outsourcing all care to secular trauma specialists as if the church has little to offer. Steve’s wise and thoughtful book charts a better way. Working from the conviction that Scripture provides the deepest perspective on the experience of trauma, he summarizes current trauma research, builds a biblical understanding of the multifaceted suffering associated with trauma, and demonstrates in practical ways how the church can and must play a central role in the care of those who have endured extreme suffering and its aftermath.”

Michael R. Emlet, Faculty Member and Counselor, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF); Author, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners*

“Dr. Steve Midgley tells us that there are two errors we can make regarding trauma. We can think trauma is too confusing and complex and so do nothing to help; or we can be overconfident in our capacity to be agents of healing. If you want to avoid both of these dangers, this book will help you. Midgley provides clear and concise descriptions of the problem of trauma, how it impacts the entirety of human experience, and how the church can be a place of hope and healing. Don’t miss the wonderful reflection questions after each chapter and the practical helps in the last section.”

Phil Monroe, Psychologist, Langberg, Monroe & Associates; Cofounder, Global Trauma Recovery Institute

“A wise and reliable guide for church leaders and members that deeply understands trauma. Steve presents an inspiring and biblical vision of love and care that will bless many. Practical, realistic and achievable in numerous church contexts.”

Dr Karl Hood, Lead Counsellor, Melbourne East Christian Counselling Centre; Lecturer, PTC National Centre for Biblical Counselling, Australia

“Even in a small church of 20 people, it is highly likely that a handful of people in the congregation have experienced trauma, the effects of which may still be felt in their own lives and the lives of those close to them. Imagine, then, how many people in your church are affected. The impact of trauma can be isolating and confusing, and as God’s people, we have an imperative to provide a place where help can be found and hope can be ministered. I am deeply encouraged by Steve’s caring and insightful book and how it will deepen and enrich the gospel care we provide to those among us who have experienced profound suffering.”

Laura Perbet, Founder, Grace and Hope Biblical Counselling

“Addressing overwhelming and life-altering suffering, Steve Midgley speaks with a considered, caring and tender voice. With a combination of personal stories and clear theological anchor points, he opens our eyes to the complexities of trauma and then offers us a way forward to care with Christ’s gospel of grace front and centre. When I face such things in future, I will do so more thoughtfully and more hopefully because of Steve’s insights.”

Ste Casey, Pastor, Speke Baptist Church, Liverpool; Author, *I Prayed and Nothing Changed*

“All those seeking to support those who have experienced trauma should read this book. It is biblically rooted, medically accurate and practically helpful. I will be recommending this to all of our missionaries.”

Jason Roach, Director of Ministries, London City Mission

“Compassion and courage are both necessary for anyone who wants to care for those who have been disoriented by trauma. Steve Midgley provides both to his readers. The wisdom found in this book will help church members and church leaders understand the experiences of people who have faced severe suffering, and give them courage to help those who are navigating the dark waters of trauma.”

Curtis W. Solomon, Executive Director, the Biblical Counseling Coalition

“Steve Midgley masterfully tackles the complexities of trauma with biblical wisdom, offering practical guidance for those caring for victims. His work is infused with the profound hope that both victims and churches long for. This book is essential for pastors, church leaders, and believers who seek to support trauma survivors with the same grace and compassion that Jesus extends to his suffering people.”

Darby Strickland, Faculty Member, CCEF; Author, *Is It Abuse?*

“Trauma is not selective; neither is it a new phenomenon. This thoughtful, informative and compassionate book explains the events, experience and effects of trauma and the significant role the church has in responding and supporting those affected. Dr Steve Midgley is uniquely placed in guiding us in this complex area, given his background as a medical (psychiatric) doctor and current roles as a pastor and biblical counsellor. I strongly urge anyone with an interest in trauma-focused care, but particularly those with leadership or pastoral roles within the church, to read this book; I guarantee you won't regret it!”

Dr Rebecca Jacob, Consultant Psychiatrist, Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge, UK; Affiliated Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge

“It takes skill and wisdom to tackle a complex topic and make it understandable and accessible for the average lay person. Steve has done that in this book; with his characteristic warmth and compassion, Steve provides a thoroughly biblical perspective on an issue we all need to grow in our understanding of.”

Jonathan D. Holmes, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling;
Visiting Faculty Member, CCEF

“Our culture is increasingly alert to the reality and impact of trauma, so it is vital that the church becomes more trauma aware. There is no better guide than Steve Midgley. He has combined his expertise as a psychiatrist with his experience as a pastor and Bible teacher to produce a resource that will help churches and leaders become sensitive to others and avoid causing unintentional additional harm through ignorance. Packed with helpful case studies and biblical insight, it is accessible and readable, and should be essential reading for Christians wanting to care well for others.”

John Stevens, National Director, FIEC, UK

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

A Biblical Introduction
for Church Care

Dr Steve Midgley

Understanding Trauma: A Biblical Handbook for Church Care
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*In memory of my parents, who would have so loved
to see this book.*

*For my children and grandchildren,
who have brought me more joy than I will ever be able
to tell them.*

To Beth, whose companionship I will ever treasure.

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INTRODUCTION

Trauma captures our attention. And rightly so. The experiences of extreme suffering and the way such suffering can impact individuals and communities is something worth being concerned about—and these things should be of particular concern to Christian believers and to the church.

The sweep of Scripture takes us from the account of creation in Genesis through the fall of mankind and on to God's glorious plan of redemption, which culminates with the renewal of all things in a new heaven and earth. On that journey we see the arrival of sin and suffering, but we also see its final eradication. We live after that arrival and before that ending. Trauma involves an experience of exceptional suffering—an experience that overwhelms a person. Christian compassion—a compassion shaped in imitation of Jesus himself—will cause us to move towards such suffering and pain.

We should not, however, assume that it is easy to do this either wisely or well. Something in us will always tend to pull away from pain. Drawing close to those who suffer makes considerable demands of us, and we will often resist that. Growing in an imitation of Christ is a key part of the way in which self-interest is gradually overcome by self-forgetful love. But while compassion is the foundation of a Christian response to suffering, something more than compassion is needed. Those who want to care well for people affected by trauma need a certain kind of knowledge as well.

Sadly, in our churches, our care has often been less than it should have been. Lacking knowledge or, worse, lacking compassion, we have not been wise in our care of those who have experienced trauma. We have often made it hard for people who have experienced trauma to engage with our churches. Not feeling truly welcomed, they have not felt able to truly belong. For my own part, I do not have to look back many years to see ways in which my lack of understanding led me astray. There were times when I was far less supportive than I should have been toward some whose struggles, I now realise, probably arose from past trauma. Many of us will sense that apologies are needed and that there is much ground to make up. I hope this book can make a contribution to that.

The word of the decade

Thirty years ago, when I was training in psychiatry, trauma barely featured in my training. Trauma studies was still relatively marginal to the mainstream of the mental-health world. Today, studies about the role trauma plays in emotional and psychological wellbeing have become one of the fastest-growing areas of research. In fact, trauma has been described as the word of the decade.

Conversations about trauma are no longer confined to the arena of scientific research. Trauma has become part of our cultural language. This popularisation is such that concerns are beginning to arise about the way the language of trauma is being used. Once simply missing a bus and getting caught in a rain shower can be described as “traumatic”, how can the same word be an adequate one to describe the experience of a soldier enduring the worst atrocities of the battlefield? Triggering, flashbacks and dissociation—technical terms to describe post-traumatic experiences—have all entered popular speech. When our culture is using

the language of trauma to describe its whole range of experiences of suffering, Christians and churches will need to understand that language in order to engage well.

Why this book?

In writing this book, I have had four central aims.

1. *To engage in an area of important pastoral concern.* In our churches, there will be people who have experienced severe suffering. We do not need to be pastors to feel a pastoral concern for them. The overall responsibility for pastoral care may rest with pastors, but the provision of that care involves the whole church. Every believer should want to care for those affected by trauma as well as they can. Taking time to think about the ways trauma can affect a person will help us to do that.
2. *To summarise secular insights on the experience of trauma.* Because in recent years there has been a huge increase in the study of trauma and the way it affects a person, in Section 2 I have tried to provide an accessible summary of this research. Understanding how our culture thinks about trauma is important if we are going to communicate well in this area. Those who have spent lots of time engaging with people who have suffered trauma will also observe things about the experience that we may not otherwise notice.
3. *To provide a biblical perspective on trauma.* As with most areas of psychological research, trauma studies has developed its own set of technical terms. These are not, obviously, terms we will find in the Bible. In order to identify links between trauma studies and biblical thinking, we need to identify connected ideas which

are used in the Bible. This will allow us to make connections between the language and perspective of trauma studies and the language and perspective of Scripture. I write as one persuaded that the Bible provides the final and deepest perspective on these matters—and, indeed, on everything that really matters—which means that it is through the lens of Scripture that we must both learn from and critique these recent understandings and approaches.

4. *To provide practical pointers toward the care churches can offer to those who have experienced trauma.* It is always important for Christians, and churches, to recognize the limits to their ability to offer care. This will vary from person to person and from church to church. But there will always be a point where wise pastoral carers will know that they have reached the boundaries of their competence. At this point, wisdom dictates that the loving thing to do is to recruit others with more expertise and experience. But before that point is reached, churches can, and should, aim to make a real difference. Even when others with more expertise are involved, churches will still want to do all they can to provide a supportive and loving community.

It is also wise at the outset to identify some of the things that this book is *not*.

First, it is likely that, in places, this book will not be an easy read for people whose own experience has involved severe suffering. It is entirely possible that stories I will use to describe experiences of trauma will, for some, act as unwelcome reminders of their own suffering. It feels important for me to highlight that at the outset. If that does happen, it will make sense to seek support by talking with someone you trust about the issues that it is raising for you.

Second, this is not a counselling manual. It will not equip anyone to provide technical or specialist care. I am not an expert in trauma—it is a field in which I have developed a growing interest, but I have never taken courses in trauma nor have I trained as a trauma therapist. I hope that my coming to this as a non-expert will make this an accessible introduction. I have engaged with relevant literature on this topic and done my best to summarise and explain current theories accurately. I have also tried to do this summarising and explaining in a way that avoids being over-complex or using language that is over-technical. I am aware that this leaves me in danger of falling off either side of that ridgeline. Several friends who have received training in trauma therapies have kindly read early drafts of this book. I am grateful to them for pointing out where I had made factual errors and also for showing me where I needed to revisit sections which were unclear or misleading. Of course, where any such failings remain, the responsibility for them is entirely mine.

Third, therefore, this is not a comprehensive survey of contemporary thinking in the field of trauma studies. That field is too large and is developing too rapidly for this short volume to be anything other than the very briefest of introductions.

Fourth, in writing this book, it is Christian believers that I have had in mind. If you have come to this volume without a faith in Christ then I am, of course, delighted. I hope the exploration of biblical themes and the relevance of the Christian faith to trauma will be of interest to you. I hope it might encourage you to explore the Christian faith further for yourself. However, because I have written this with Christian believers and the church as my primary audience, this inevitably means that I have made certain presumptions about prior thinking and understanding.

For some, what follows will be frustratingly simplistic.

They will notice all sorts of detail that is lacking and which they consider vital. Others, by contrast, will find the material unnecessarily complex and be frustrated by how long it takes to arrive at what they see as the simple truths of the gospel. I have been well aware of both possibilities—you can judge the extent to which I have successfully navigated between them.

Whenever a topic becomes prominent in our culture, it is important that Christians seek to understand it accurately and engage with it wisely. When that topic concerns people who have gone through experiences of severe suffering, there is even more reason to engage as well as we possibly can, and to do so within a biblical framework. I hope that what follows will help us to do precisely that.



SECTION 1

**SEEING TRAUMA IN
SCRIPTURE AND LIFE**



