

# THIS WAS NEVER THE PLAN

---

WALKING  
WITH GOD  
THROUGH THE  
HEARTACHE  
OF DIVORCE

FOREWORD BY  
PAUL DAVID TRIPP

---

VANEETHA  
RENDALL  
RISNER

“Vaneetha takes on a sensitive, deeply personal, potentially embarrassing reality with clarity and honesty yet without rancor or malice. As someone who has been through a divorce in similar circumstances to hers, I can attest to the painful yet healing accuracy of her wisdom in these pages. And I can attest to the unfailing hope she points the reader to in Christ, without flippancy or pat answers. Prior to this book, I knew of no books on divorce I would actually be willing to hand to a person navigating that devastating reality. Now I have one, and I am grateful for it!”

**BARNABAS PIPER**, Assistant Pastor, Immanuel Nashville;  
Author, *Help My Unbelief* and *Hoping for Happiness*

“No one begins a marriage saying, ‘I sure hope I’ll get to walk through a divorce,’ and yet so many of us end up facing the realities of shattered dreams and broken promises. Once again, my friend Vaneetha Risner has parlayed her suffering into deep understanding, scriptural fidelity, and gracious blessing. I strongly recommend this resource, for those who are facing divorce and also for those who are seeking to help.”

**ELYSE FITZPATRICK**, Author, *Friend of Sinners*

“Our God hates divorce. So do his people. We grieve the sin and profound hurt that lead to and come from divorces. As Jesus says, it was not this way from the beginning. Yet mourn them as we do, they happen, and so tragically often in our day, and many of Christ’s people are left aching and searching for Christian counsel in their devastation. Vaneetha has not only walked with faith through this devastation but has been courageous enough to answer the call to help other Christians who are hurting. This book is no celebration of divorce but an offer of real, solid Christian hope in the midst of one of life’s greatest anguishes. I pray this book will help you move forward in Jesus and draw closer to him in your pain.”

**DAVID MATHIS**, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor,  
[desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); Author, *Rich Wounds*

“In a season that is painfully lonely and isolating, Vaneetha’s words made me feel seen and even encouraged. With honesty and tenderness, she gave language to the layered ache, confusion, and grief of divorce—especially for a Christian—while offering practical handlebars for traveling through it with faith. This book helped me feel less alone in my pain, and I’ll be sharing it with friends who need the reminder that, even in the devastation of divorce, God will never leave us.”

**BRIGHTON BUTLER**, Lifestyle Blogger;  
Founder of Brighton the Day

“I wish I had had this book when I was first facing divorce. Vaneetha offers essential wisdom for anyone facing divorce, and her words are helpful for those of us on the other side of it as well. God is kind, and his words are trustworthy. Vaneetha reminds us, in a voice we can hear, of the value of trusting Jesus despite circumstances that seem to knock us off our foundation. I pray this book is shared far and wide.”

**WENDY ALSUP**, Author, *I Forgive You: Finding Peace and Moving Forward When Life Really Hurts*

“As someone who has personally walked through the devastation of divorce, I know the crushing weight of betrayal, the loneliness of an empty home, and the ache of wondering if life will ever feel whole again. For those of us who have endured this pain, resources often fall short—either too abstract and theological to touch the heart or too shallow to offer lasting hope. That is why *This Was Never the Plan* is such a rare and necessary gift. It is tender, timely, and profoundly hopeful. Vaneetha writes not as a detached expert but as a fellow sojourner. This is a trustworthy companion for anyone navigating the heartbreak of divorce.”

**SHANNON KAY MCCOY**, Counselor; Speaker;  
Author, *Help! I’m a Slave to Food*

“Biblically rich, wonderfully practical, and searingly honest, this is a book we so badly need. Through the measured use of her own experience, Vaneetha Risner provides a first-hand account of the struggles Christians face when their lives are upended by divorce. Where this book really excels, however, is in its description of the many ways Christ meets us in such struggles. This isn’t just a book for those who have experienced divorce; it needs to be read by their friends and by the pastors of their churches.”

**STEVE MIDGLEY**, Executive Director,  
Biblical Counselling UK; Board Member, CCEF

“If you’re holding this book, your heart is wrenching. Vaneetha is a tender guide in this tumultuous time. *This Was Never the Plan* comes alongside you as you grapple with the hard questions and social challenges of processing an unwanted divorce. Allow this book to serve you one page at a time as you walk with God one day at a time.”

**BRAD HAMBRICK**, Pastor of Counseling,  
The Summit Church, Durham, NC; Author, *True Betrayal:  
9 Steps for Processing Your Spouse’s Infidelity*

“I am so thankful for this book. Vaneetha offers comfort and hope as she lays open the Scriptures and her own heart. There are no well-worn platitudes or shallow promises but plenty of compassion, wisdom, and grace—and just the right amount of humour. Vaneetha’s experience enables her to speak tenderly, and she also offers practical guidance for those navigating the challenges of single parenting, dating, and belonging at church. This will be of enormous help both to those experiencing divorce and those seeking walk to alongside.”

**CAROLYN LACEY**, Women’s Worker, Woodgreen  
Evangelical Church, Worcester, UK; Author, *Say the Right Thing*



"If you are reeling from a divorce you never wanted, *This Was Never the Plan* is a lifeline. In these pages, you will see yourself in Vaneetha's story as she opens her heart and shares the raw, unfiltered emotions of her own unwanted divorce. But Vaneetha doesn't leave you in the pain. With honesty and compassion, she gently guides you along a pathway of healing—helping you move through the heartbreak you feel today toward renewed hope for tomorrow. Her journey is living proof that your heart can heal, your future can be restored, and that divorce doesn't get the last word."

**STEVE GRISSOM**, Founder of DivorceCare

"This book is deeply moving and profoundly courageous yet genuinely hope-filled. Vaneetha Rendall Risner's journey through the anguish of divorce is painful but vital reading for anyone who has had to trace a similar path, as well as for those walking beside them. You are not alone."

**DAVE AND SALLY GOBBETT**, Highfields Church,  
Cardiff, Wales; Authors, *Hallelujah*

"Compassionate, wise, and vulnerably honest, Vaneetha offers women facing divorce both a roadmap for healing and a blueprint for rebuilding. She shows readers not just how to mend a broken heart but how to emerge stronger and healthier—not in spite of their pain but because of it."

**LESLIE VERNICK**, Relationship Coach; Speaker;  
Author, *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*  
and *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*.

"With appropriate honesty and God-given grace, Vaneetha Risner shares the heartbreak of divorce and the deeper hope that can be found in Christ. *This Was Never the Plan* offers comfort that will help the wounded and truth that will inform the perplexed. Through it, she guides hurting believers to believe in God's purpose and rest in his love."

**TIM CHALLIES**, Author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

VANEETHA  
RENDALL RISNER

# THIS WAS NEVER THE PLAN

---

WALKING  
WITH GOD  
THROUGH THE  
HEARTACHE  
OF DIVORCE

the goodbook  
COMPANY

This Was Never the Plan  
© Vaneetha Rendall Risner, 2026

Published by:  
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk  
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Emphasis added is the author's own.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Vaneetha Rendall Risner has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Wilson.

Cover design by Faceout Studio | Design and art direction by André Parker

ISBN: 9781802544145 | JOB-008574 | Printed in India

*For Katie and Kristi,  
who lived this story with me  
and grew into women I trust and admire.*





**VANEETHA** is passionate about helping others find hope and joy in the midst of suffering. Her story includes contracting polio as a child, losing an infant son unexpectedly, developing post-polio syndrome, going through an unwanted divorce, and struggling as a single parent—all of which have led her to wrestle honestly with loss.

Vaneetha lives in Raleigh, North Carolina and is the author of several books, including *Watching for the Morning* and her memoir, *Walking Through Fire*. She's also a regular contributor to [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).

Vaneetha loves to laugh, speaks sarcasm fluently, and is obsessed with colorful office supplies and dark chocolate. You can find more from Vaneetha at her website,

**VANEETHA.COM**

# CONTENTS

---

Foreword <i>by Paul David Tripp</i>	11
1. The Undoing	15
2. Tears, Fears, and the Tenderness of God	31
3. Letting Go Without Giving In	47
4. The Lies We Believe and the Grace That We Need	63
5. Reassessing, Rebuilding, and Rekindling Joy	79
6. Parenting on Empty	95
7. The Church, the Crowd, and the Friends Who Stayed	111
8. Dating and the R Word	127
9. Hope on the Horizon	137
Questions for Personal Reflection or Discussion	147
Appendices:	
1. How to Show Up When a Friend's Marriage Ends	155
2. Some Helpful Forms for Communicating with Friends and Church	175
3. Helpful Biblical Resources	187
Acknowledgments	189



## FOREWORD

---

**A**s I read this wonderful book, I felt as if I were standing on holy ground.

It is a rare gift to be invited to eavesdrop on the most private, painful, and self-exposing season in a person's life. To be welcomed to look into the secret pages of a deeply personal journal, to witness a person's struggle with God, and to be there with them as thoughts and emotions come splashing out is a very rare opportunity. We all live such private lives, protectively holding the secrets that live behind private fences and closed doors. We often celebrate alone, grieve alone, and suffer alone, afraid of the judgment and shame that we think would accompany inviting others in. Because we guard our struggles from public exposure, we fail to know the essential help of walking with one another, of learning from one another, and of knowing the miracle of how, in the hands of God, when a weak one walks with a weak one, the result is often renewed strength.

God did not design us to live alone; the earliest history in Genesis makes that very clear. Everyone's life is a community project. Independent health, strength, wisdom, and righteousness are altogether a delusion. So, I

have a deep appreciation for how Vaneetha steps toward us with a transparency that hasn't been redecorated, walking us through the dark hallways of her shattered life. But what is here is not just a chronicle of bitterness, fear, and shame. You won't close this book burdened with grief. You won't leave hopeless, not knowing what to do. Ultimately, this book is about a hope that is deeper and stronger than the worst thing that could ever happen to you.

As I read, I kept thinking of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

The apostle Paul says something significant here about our suffering and God's comfort. God meets us with his comfort—a grace we could never have earned—but this comfort has a mission attached to it. God comforts us “so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.” I am so glad that Vaneetha chose not to hide her suffering or hoard the glory of the comfort she received from her ever-present, ever-steadfast, and ever-loving Savior. Paul says to his readers, who will experience the travails of life in this fallen world, “Our hope for you is

unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.” The comfort that we have received should motivate and mobilize us to be agents of that comfort in the lives of others, and the result of that is unshakable hope. Our plans may end up lying at our feet like shattered glass on a concrete floor, but what God plans to do with those shattered pieces is beautiful and comforting beyond what we could ask or imagine.

But there is another, even more deeply transformative message in this book that you do not want to miss. If I were to summarize the core message of this transparent, helpful, wise, and practical book, here is what it would be: your tragedies, weaknesses, and sins aren’t ultimate; God is. He is bigger than any tragedy you will ever face. He is more gloriously beautiful than any ugly thing you will have to endure. He is infinitely more powerful than the most powerful thing you could ever experience. He is never defeated. He is never confused. He is never taken aback or shocked. His plans are never thwarted, his love never runs out, and his forgiving grace is inexhaustible.

As I concluded reading, another passage came to mind:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the deer’s;  
he makes me tread on my high places.*

*(Habakkuk 3:17-19)*



These words were written to people living in an agricultural society. If there are no figs, no olive oil, no food in the fields, and no flocks and herds, then life as you have known it is gone. All the normal things you would depend on are no more. But this passage doesn't end with screams of terror; it ends with dances of joy. Why? The answer is clear: because loss isn't ultimate; God is. Because this is true: on the other side of loss, there is strength and joy to be found. So, as you read *This Was Never the Plan*, I hope that you find yourself able to open your heart and be reminded that there is life—real life—on the other side of whatever has died, because your Lord lives. And what he gives, and gives and gives again, is life—real life, which no one and nothing can take from you.

*Paul David Tripp*  
*October 2025*

## CHAPTER 1

---

# THE UNDOING

“**W**ill life ever be good again?”

That was the question I kept asking myself after my separation and divorce. I assumed I'd survive, but would I laugh again? Could I find joy? Or feel a sense of belonging?

The future I'd envisioned was destroyed. I felt lost and alone, trying to figure out who I was. For me, divorce had always been unthinkable. But there I was, standing in the wreckage of what was, wondering what I was supposed to do next.

It felt as if a fire had burned through my life. Perhaps you feel that way too. Maybe for you the flames are still raging, consuming your trust, your dreams, your sense of security. Maybe it smoldered quietly for years, wearing you down until there was nothing left to save. Or perhaps you made choices you deeply regret, and now you're sifting through the ashes, asking if redemption is even possible. And where you are right now—this was never the plan.

Through my separation and divorce, I searched desperately for something—anything—to help me make

sense of what I was facing. At times I wondered if God had abandoned me, convinced that faithful Christians weren't supposed to go through this. I needed to know that I wasn't losing my mind, that I wasn't alone, and that God was still with me.

That's why I put these pages together—to offer what I couldn't find. I wanted a guide to help me navigate this unfamiliar path, to warn me of dangers, and to offer reassurance along the way. I'm hoping this book will serve in that way, as if a trusted friend were walking beside you. And I want you to know that whether your divorce was sudden or slow, whether you saw it coming or never imagined it would happen to you, whether it feels like rescue or ruin or a strange combination of the two, you will get through this.

Right now, healing may feel impossible. Joy, or even just stability, may feel out of reach because you're focusing on survival. Maybe you're not sure how you'll fit into this new life or if rebuilding is even possible. The pain and hopelessness may feel all too real. Perhaps you can relate to these words: "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" (Proverbs 18:14). Or like Jeremiah, you've felt so overwhelmed that you've cried out, "My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, 'My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD'" (Lamentations 3:17–18).

Those words captured what I couldn't manage to express at the time. And the poem below gives language to that ache too. The words aren't mine, but they could have been:

*new normal.*

*i don't think we talk enough about  
how quiet the road gets. how long  
the waiting feels. how lonely healing  
can be. i don't think we talk enough  
about how undone we become in the  
valley of grief. or how enormously we  
must stretch just to fit ourselves into  
some kind of a new normal and dare  
to call it life again. and i don't think  
we talk enough about how we have no  
other thing left but to gather up our  
heavy limbs and carry on. because the  
earth keeps on spinning. the sun keeps  
on rising. and the days keep on bleeding,  
one into the next, regardless of the  
moment that made all the minutes inside  
of our heart stand still.*

—ullie-kaye<sup>1</sup>

## THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

When my own marriage fell apart, the grief didn't hit all at once. It came in waves—some expected, others catching me off guard. The loss wasn't just relational; it was the unraveling of everything familiar. I woke up in a world that looked the same, but now I wasn't sure how to live in it.

Before we go on, let me share a bit of my story. I met my husband when I was 25, and we were married a year later. After nearly 18 years of marriage, he came home from a business trip and announced he was in love with

---

<sup>1</sup> *Fires: Hardship, Grief and Perseverance* (Independently published, 2024), p. 112.

someone else and wanted to move on; our life together felt stifling.

I was stunned. I knew that he'd been distant for a while, but I had not foreseen this—never this. I later learned that they'd been involved for a year, and the fact that I hadn't suspected anything made me feel foolish on top of everything else. She lived in another state, and his extended work trips had been centered around seeing her.

After his announcement, everything changed. Our daughters, aged 10 and 13, were devastated as they struggled to make sense of what was happening. Weeks later, their dad moved 400 miles away, leaving me to parent alone while managing a neuromuscular disease that was steadily weakening my muscles. We were separated for three years—an excruciating season of uncertainty—before finally divorcing. Soon after, he married the woman he had left me for. I was relieved the waiting was over but gutted by all that had happened.

This wasn't the first time my world had fallen apart. Years earlier, I had buried my infant son, Paul, after a doctor's mistake led to his death at just two months old. His loss nearly crushed me. And now, I was facing another staggering reality—losing my marriage and the future I had once felt sure of.

In the first months after our separation, I remember shaking uncontrollably, wrapped in blankets, unable to get warm. I was in shock, terrified about the future, drowning in a sea of wordless emotions. Unanswerable questions filled my mind: Why wasn't I enough? How would the kids and I make it? Could I pull myself together enough to parent my daughters? What could I tell them—and what would I tell others? I felt afraid and angry, humiliated and helpless, bewildered and broken—all at once.

I've kept a journal for years, and during that season it became both a lifeline and a mirror—a place in which to wrestle with my thoughts and hold on to what I knew was true. Throughout this book, I'll share pieces of it—glimpses into those raw moments. One entry that stands out is from the time I ran into someone I hadn't seen in a while. I wrote:

*"The other day, I ran into [an old acquaintance] at an event. He asked about [my ex], and I gave my usual answer: 'He's fine.' But something in me snapped, and before I could stop myself, I added, 'We're no longer together. He left me a few months ago.'*

*"Dead silence. He didn't say a word. Just nodded, then slowly and deliberately turned away to another conversation. I know he felt awkward—he didn't know what to say. But his silence spoke volumes.*

*"I kept talking to people, careful to avoid a few, grateful for the ones I didn't have to. But when the conversations ended, I walked out by myself and got into an empty car. Darkness was falling, and the isolation settled in. I had the radio on but turned it off. I needed silence—to feel the stillness, not fill it with noise."*

In those early days, even small interactions could leave me reeling. Grief consumed me, leaving me incapable of focusing on anything for more than a few seconds. Simple tasks like driving, making a grocery list, or answering texts became monumental challenges. I wondered how long it would take to feel normal again—or if I ever would.

I cried at the most inconvenient times—mid-conversation, in the car, standing in line at the store. Sometimes it was triggered by a song, sometimes by nothing at all. Other times I was too numb to cry, just



staring blankly, trying to remember what life had been before it unraveled.

## HOW NOT TO TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

One of the disorienting aspects of walking through divorce is that what consumes your thinking is just a detail (if even that) to the rest of the world. A few weeks after my divorce, I went to see a new doctor for back pain. It was just another appointment for him. But for me, everything felt different. Sitting in the waiting room, I filled out the usual forms, checking boxes that now felt foreign. Marital status: single, married, divorced... I hesitated. I didn't feel divorced. I didn't want that to be my identity. But after staring at it for far too long, I finally checked the box.

When the doctor walked in, he glanced at my chart for what felt like a few too many seconds. Naturally, I panicked. *He knows. He sees the box. He thinks I failed at marriage.* So I did the only thing that seemed sensible—I launched into an unsolicited explanation.

"I just want to say that I really valued my marriage," I blurted out. "I take commitment seriously. I wasn't planning on being divorced. I didn't want this, and I—"

The doctor raised an eyebrow and then looked back down at his notes. "I was just checking to see where your back hurts."

Right. That.

Note to self: doctors do not review your medical chart to assess your worthiness as a spouse. Next time, just check the box and move on.

Maybe you, too, have found yourself explaining your divorce to people who weren't even asking—justifying your story, proving your worth, making sure they know you're not "that kind" of divorced person. It's exhausting. Most have no idea of all you've been through. It's one

thing to be hurt by a stranger, but when it comes from the one who vowed to love you, the pain is sharper. They knew your hopes, your fears, your best and worst moments—yet they still chose to hurt you. If you're anything like me, you spent months, maybe years, making excuses, giving grace, holding on, only to painfully realize you were the only one fighting for your marriage.

Maybe now you feel lonelier than ever before. I did. I found it especially lonely walking into church by myself, feeling as if everyone saw a giant scarlet "D" stamped on my forehead. When people asked, "How are you?" I wasn't sure what they really wanted to hear. Should I pretend I was fine? Should I admit that I really wasn't? Either way, I felt unknown in a place that had once felt like home.

Friendships changed after my divorce. Some people were supportive, but others backed away. Maybe they didn't know what to say. Maybe they assumed I needed space. But what I needed was someone to sit with—not to fix me but simply to stay and listen.

Divorce carries layers of pain, with betrayal, shame, and loneliness often intertwined. But you'll notice that several times in this chapter I've talked about the grief of it. This layer, I find, isn't always acknowledged.

Divorced people don't get the same support as those who have been widowed. A friend once told me about two women in her neighborhood, both in their 30s, both pregnant. One was widowed when her husband died of cancer. The other was abandoned when her husband left her for someone else. The first woman was showered with meals, childcare, financial support, and a community that showed up for her. The second woman? She got awkward silence. Pitying looks at the grocery store. And then, nothing.

Both women had had their lives upended. Both faced a future they didn't choose. But one grief was met

with casseroles and comfort, the other with whispers and withdrawal—as if betrayal was easier to bear than death. But loss is loss. And just because it comes with a forsaking instead of a funeral doesn't mean it hurts us any less.

## THE UNRAVELING AND THE WRESTLING

Divorce isn't just the loss of a relationship; it's the undoing of a covenant. On your wedding day, you stood before witnesses and promised unity: *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part*. A divorce decree, in contrast, legally declares the marriage dissolved, listing the division of assets, custody agreements, and financial obligations, and restoring both parties to single status. The promises of love and permanence are undone in a few legal sentences, reducing what was once a shared life to a court order and some paperwork. It is the great undoing—the reversal of what was once sacred. The paperwork may be over, but the pain certainly isn't.

Now there are things to wrestle with that you never thought you'd have to.

For me, that meant wrestling with what divorce meant for my faith, my future, and my standing with God. I wasn't the first—the church has grappled with these same questions for centuries. Before my divorce, I hadn't spent much time thinking about what the Bible actually said about it, except for knowing that “God hates divorce.” (Which was fine for me, because I wasn't going to be getting a divorce. Until I did.)

Now, as a divorced person or someone who is walking through that process, you may be wondering what God thinks about what has happened.

The church has long wrestled with what Scripture

teaches about divorce—how to fit together the places where the Bible speaks of it as contrary to God’s will or sinful (Mark 10:1-9; Luke 16:18), as a reluctant concession (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:8), as a necessary mercy (1 Corinthians 7:15), and as a breaking of a sacred covenant (Malachi 2:16; Matthew 5:32).

This is a complex and ongoing conversation that is beyond the scope of this book. In an appendix, I’ve included books and articles that reflect a range of biblical perspectives on the topic. Let me say this gently but clearly: I’m not encouraging anyone to leave a marriage without biblical grounds, nor am I discouraging someone whose spouse has deeply violated their vows from receiving the protection and freedom that Scripture offers. In this book, we’re looking at how the gospel speaks to everyone—regardless of how they got to where they are. The gospel is for all of us, offering grace in our failures and hope for redemption, wherever we find ourselves.

It’s important to note that while Scripture only explicitly mentions adultery and abandonment by a spouse as grounds for divorce, biblical ethics also calls us to ask: When does chronic abuse or addiction become a form of abandonment? At what point do these things violate the marriage covenant in the same way as adultery? As you may have discovered, these questions don’t always have clear-cut answers. Because what constitutes abuse is widely debated, it’s important to be clear about terms. “Abuse” can refer to a wide range of mistreatment—from controlling words to coercive behavior to physical violence—and the harm caused by such oppression can be devastating. However, not every situation labeled as abuse reflects a breaking of the marriage covenant. As biblical counselor Darby Strickland writes, “Labeling something as abuse when it is not will do damage ... to the people

involved and also to the women we encounter after they who truly are being abused.”<sup>2</sup>

Mislabeling can cause significant harm—both when genuine abuse is ignored and when difficult or disappointing marriages are wrongly classified as abusive. That’s why biblical counsel from trusted pastors, church leaders, or outside biblical counselors is so important. They can help discern whether someone is navigating the ordinary difficulties of marriage or facing abuse—and step in to offer support and advocacy when needed. (The resources in the appendix help readers understand the nature of domestic abuse and how the church can respond with wisdom and compassion.)

As the theologian Jim Newheiser says:

*“It’s best to look at spousal abuse as a particularly heinous form of marital neglect. In recent years, churches have explicitly recognized that we must take seriously all patterns of oppression and coercion, not just physical violence. As with the other grounds for divorce, we need discernment to recognize the difference between ordinary marital conflict and abuse.”*<sup>3</sup>

And as you and I know, this is not just a theological discussion—it’s personal. “Divorce is not simply a question to be answered but a journey to be walked,” writes counselor Brad Hambrick. “Questions can be resolved quickly—journeys take time, even when you know the direction.”<sup>4</sup> This is especially true for those

---

2 Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (P&R Publishing, 2020), p. 26.

3 Jim Newheiser, “What Does the Bible Teach About Divorce and Remarriage?” The Gospel Coalition, July 15, 2024; [thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-divorce-remarriage/](https://thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-divorce-remarriage/) (accessed July 10, 2025).

4 Brad Hambrick, “Summit Small Group: Understanding Adultery, Abuse,

who are trying to make sense of divorce after betrayal or abuse. Being pro-marriage does not mean ignoring adultery or abuse. God cares deeply about the institution of marriage, but he also cares deeply about the individuals within it.

Like Newheiser, most pastors do not consider divorce sinful in cases of adultery, abuse, or abandonment. Yet, despite this, divorce often reshapes a person's relationship with the church. Nearly 47% of those who divorce leave their congregation,<sup>5</sup> and many struggle to find a new church they feel able to settle in. For some, the church becomes a place of comfort; for others, it becomes a source of shame, making an already painful season that was not their fault even worse. If that has been your experience, hear this: God sees you, and he does not condemn you. He does not stand on the side of the treacherous. He stands with the wounded. And he stands with you.

But if you're reading this knowing that you were the one who caused deep hurt, I want you to know this too: God's grace is not beyond your reach. Forgiveness is on offer. Repentance opens the door to redemption, and healing is still possible—even if you were the one who broke what was meant to last.

## A FAITH SHAKEN

Divorce doesn't just shake your life—it often shakes your faith. Maybe you're struggling to pray. Maybe some days are okay, and on others you don't know where God is.

---

and Divorce"; [bradhambrick.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SummitSG\\_AdulteryAbuseDivorce\\_Handout.pdf](http://bradhambrick.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SummitSG_AdulteryAbuseDivorce_Handout.pdf) (accessed April 12, 2025).

5 Bob Smietana, "Threat of Divorce Hard to Spot Among Churchgoing Couples," Lifeway Research, October 29, 2015; [lifewayresearch.com/2015/10/29/threat-of-divorce-hard-to-spot-among-churchgoing-couples/](http://lifewayresearch.com/2015/10/29/threat-of-divorce-hard-to-spot-among-churchgoing-couples/) (accessed April 12, 2025).



Maybe you don't see the point of following God anymore at all. You trusted him, you believed in his goodness, and yet here you are, sifting through the ruins of a life you thought was secure.

I understand that. After my divorce, I didn't just grieve my marriage—I grieved the faith I thought I had. I had prayed for my husband, believed for change, begged God for restoration. But no matter how much I prayed, the outcome didn't change. What was the point of trusting God if he wasn't going to answer?

In the Old Testament book of Job, Job's friend Elihu captured what I was feeling when he intimated that Job felt this: "A man gains nothing when he becomes God's friend" (Job 34:9, CSB). Job didn't say those words, but I might as well have, because, in those first months, I wasn't sure what faith had given me except more pain.

Maybe you feel the same way. Maybe your faith in Jesus feels fragile and you're wondering if God even cares. I can assure you that God's love for you is deeper than you can comprehend. He knows all you've been through: all the tears you've cried and all the ways you've been wounded. He is for you, not against you, no matter how it feels at this moment. Though you may not sense his presence, in Jesus nothing can separate you from his love (Romans 8:31, 37-39).

These incredible promises are for those who know and trust Jesus—and if that's something you're unsure of, I'd encourage you to bring that question to him. He welcomes the weary and the searching.

If you have put your hope in him, the Lord will always be faithful. Like David, you can be confident that God has a plan and purpose for your life. The psalmist both declares and pleads, "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake

the work of your hands” (Psalm 138:8). He clings to the truth of God’s love while still asking for reassurance—and you can do the same.

The Hebrew word translated “steadfast love” here is *hesed*, a rich and layered term that speaks of God’s loyal, enduring, faithful love and kindness. *Hesed* is a love that never gives up, that acts on our behalf, and that we can always count on. This love isn’t based on our worthiness but on his covenant and character. Because of that, we can trust God to keep his promises—even when we fail.

Not only that, but God does work for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). Right now, you may not see how any good could come from this. And that’s understandable. You don’t need to rush to the part where everything feels better. Just know that God is present in this chapter of your life and will be in the next.

For a long time, I wrestled with God in my pain. But as the months passed, I realized something profound—my divorce hadn’t been only the breaking of my heart; it had also been the making of my faith. Before my marriage ended, I loved God. I studied Scripture, taught Bible studies, and believed his promises. But after my ex left, I totally depended on Jesus. When everyone else walked out, he stayed. When I felt abandoned, he was near. When I had nothing left, he carried me. Looking back, I can see how God met me in those moments, even though I didn’t always recognize it. In that same journal entry after running into that old acquaintance, I ended with this:

*“It’s in my emptiness that I meet God. My marriage had masked my need for him. I didn’t need God to be my best friend—I already had one. I didn’t need to give him my crushed hopes and dreams—they weren’t that crushed anyway. But my aloneness has made me lean into God*

*in a way that I couldn't have imagined. He is my best friend, my confidant and my counselor. And he will never abandon me."*

God's promises weren't just words on a page anymore; they were my lifeline. And somehow, in losing what I thought I couldn't live without, I found the one I truly couldn't live without.

## **BEFORE WE MOVE FORWARD**

Right now, rebuilding might feel far off. That's completely understandable. My aim in this book isn't to offer a quick fix—it's to walk with you through this journey. Feeling whole again takes time, and I'm praying this book will help.

A few things as we get started:

- I write from my experience as a woman, which means you'll hear about things I did—like sobbing in the car, excessively snacking on dark chocolate, rationalizing retail therapy, and overanalyzing text messages with friends. If you're a man reading this, you may need to "translate" a few things—but the underlying truths are universal.
- Throughout the book, I refer to my former husband simply as "my ex." It's just the shorthand I'll be using.
- Take your time. These chapters build on each other, but if you need to skip ahead or reread certain sections, that's completely fine. Read in your own way and at your own pace.

Now, let's talk about what it looks like to rebuild.

## **REBUILDING AND MOVING FORWARD**

Divorce may feel like an ending, and it is—but it is not the end of you. Moving forward doesn't mean erasing

the past; it means embracing what's ahead without letting the past define you. Maybe you don't know who you are outside of your marriage. Maybe rebuilding—finances, parenting, friendships, faith—feels impossible. Or maybe you're just exhausted from trying to hold it all together. That's okay.

Growth is slow, and it's not a straight line. On some days, you'll feel stronger. On other days, it'll seem like you're back at square one. So keep track of your small victories—because you're making progress even when it doesn't feel like it. Over the page, you'll find a tracking grid. Each week, try to rate how you're doing in these areas on a 1-to-4 scale—1 being struggling, 4 being doing well.

Don't overthink it—just place a check-mark where you land each week. If you want to go a little deeper, write a single word to describe why you put the check-mark there: “exhausted,” “hopeful,” “frustrated,” “stronger,” or whatever. Over time, you might notice small but real changes. If you'd like a printable version of this tracker, you can download one at [thegoodbook.com/never-the-plan-tracker](http://thegoodbook.com/never-the-plan-tracker). It's adapted from DivorceCare, though I've simplified it here.<sup>6</sup> It's simply a way to mark where you are—without any pressure to be moving upward—and to acknowledge the steps of the journey.

And if you don't see movement right away, that's normal too. On some days, your biggest victory might just be getting out of bed and acting like a semifunctional human. If all you managed today was putting on something resembling real clothes and eating a meal that didn't come from a crumpled takeout bag, that's still something. Technically, that counts as self-care. Go ahead and check “managing” under Physical Health—and maybe even write down what you ate, just to make it official.

---

6 *DivorceCare* (Church Initiative, 2020), p. 8.

	EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING	PHYSICAL HEALTH	CLOSENESS TO GOD	FRIENDSHIPS, COMMUNITY	SENSE OF HOPE
1					
2					
3					
4					

## NOT THE END

You may not feel it yet, but this is not the end of your story. Divorce doesn't get the last word. You can be better, not bitter. Free, not chained. Healing is possible. It won't happen overnight, but it can happen.

And in the meantime? You might break down in public, devour a pint of ice cream (or an entire rack of ribs), or dramatically toss old love letters (or that hoodie they conveniently left behind) into the trash or the bonfire. This season may have broken pieces of your life, but it has not broken you. One day, without realizing it, you'll step into a new chapter—not because the pain has disappeared but because you have kept walking forward. You can't change the past, but your future is ahead of you. And it's worth stepping into.