

“I was honored to read this copy of the book, *You Have Set Us Free: Scriptural Reflections for Trauma Survivors*. It makes a profound connection between Scripture, the suffering of Jesus, and the pain of trauma survivors. The associated prayers add further meaning and may help survivors find a path for healing and perhaps a way to God. The description of trauma is very helpful for laypersons or professionals working in trauma recovery.”

— Mary Jane Doerr, Director  
Office for the Protection of Children and Youth  
Archdiocese of Chicago

“I heartily endorse Father Schmidt’s reflection and encourage anyone who has experienced a major traumatic event in their life to see in this book a pathway to unite oneself with the traumatic events of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. It was by those saving actions that Jesus was able to free us from the debilitating effects of traumatic, sinful, and evil actions in the world. It is my hope and prayer that by a prayerful reading of this book, trauma survivors truly will be set free to live with the Joy of Jesus’ life within them.”

— Bishop Paul J. Bradley  
Bishop of Kalamazoo

“I found the Trauma Model very useful in helping people come in touch with their trauma by naming the trauma, processing and integrating their emotions, thoughts, and behavior. The reflections are very inspiring and touching.”

— Sr. Tecla Chepng’eno, FMSJ  
Section Manager  
International Missionary Benefits Society (IMS),  
East Africa Section



YOU  
HAVE  
SET US  
*free*

Scriptural Reflections  
for Trauma Survivors

Kenneth W. Schmidt



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This book is dedicated to my colleague

**Sharon Froom**

whose experience, wisdom, and insight  
are expressed throughout these pages.

It's been a joy and blessing to minister with you.



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# Introduction

The goal of this volume is to integrate spirituality and psychology, two realms of a human's personhood that are profound and have a major influence on how we understand ourselves, how we think, how we feel, and how we behave. The psycho-educational foundation is the Trauma Model, a paradigm for understanding and healing of childhood trauma based on the work of Dr. Colin Ross.

*Trauma* is an event or series of events combined with an individual's unique vulnerability that creates an obstacle in normal human development. The effects of trauma tend to be more obvious when the abuse or neglect occurs during childhood, but trauma can occur at any age. Some people suffer a series of traumas throughout their lives, and the lack of healing from earlier traumas interferes with healing of subsequent traumas regardless of when they occur.

Many people do not acknowledge the trauma in their history because they are ashamed. They believe that what happened was normal or expectable or what they deserved. Some believe that it was given to them by God or merely a coincidence. Nevertheless, they are still traumatized because of the impact on their neurological development and the interruption or adverse effects on their emotional development.

So what constitutes trauma? The event or events can be any form of abuse, be it physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual. Trauma may also be the result of severe neglect or negligence: the absence of care, protection, nurturance, and safety, or even

the absence of the necessities of life including food and shelter. Abandonment, whether real or unintentional, can be traumatic: be it a parent who leaves, or a significant person who dies or who ends his or her own life, or a significant absence for a length of time, for example, due to a hospitalization or a mental illness. Natural disasters and tragedies can also be traumatic: hurricanes and tornadoes, floods and earthquakes, or vehicle accidents, house fires, or other mishaps. Being of minority status within a rejecting culture can also be traumatic: differences of culture, religion, language, ethnicity or race, sexual orientation or gender identification—anything that results in a person not feeling safe or having some sense of belonging. Medical problems can be traumatic as well, be they one's own or the issues of another significant person in one's life.

However, it is not the event alone that constitutes trauma but the event coupled with the vulnerability of the person who experiences the event. Children in the same family can respond differently to the same situation. One's age can influence how one experiences and interprets the traumatic event, as well as one's temperament. The context or time at which the event occurs can also influence its effects. If, for example, one lives in an alcoholic home, or experiences the tenuousness of life due to poverty, or witnesses the physical abuse of a sibling, there is already a sense of vulnerability in one's life, and the event may be the thing that tips the balance.

Finally, it might be helpful to consider that it's not necessary to determine whether some event "fits the definition" of trauma. People experience the effects of traumas as a continuum, a range of symptoms and consequences, rather than drawing a hard-and-fast conclusion that "it is" or "it isn't."

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## **The Trauma Model**

The major premise of the Trauma Model is that healing occurs at the level of naming, processing, and integrating one's emotions,

thoughts, and behaviors. The goal is to help individuals improve their functioning by helping them learn tools to stabilize their internal world (their thinking and feeling) and external world (their actions, and the situations in which they live). This model helps trauma survivors identify conflicts and unlearn specific distortions related to the effects of the trauma. The model focuses on exercises that foster the development of self-awareness and processing the trauma on a feeling level with an emphasis on regulating those feelings.

The model also teaches the importance of learning about the effects of trauma and why they are long lasting. Many people assume that the effects of the trauma simply disappear with the passage of time, but that is not the case. The memories have been formed neurobiologically and they are retained by the brain whether they are conscious or not.

A person can be “triggered” by any person, object, sound, taste, smell, or reminder of the trauma, and then reacts based on the filter of one’s trauma history rather than the reality of the current situation. In fact, we know from research that memory recall is unreliable, at best, and trauma memories can be skewed by the emotions attached to those memories. Healing does not take place by recalling or reliving memories, but by learning new healthy skills related to one’s feelings, thinking, and behaving in the present.

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## Signs of Unresolved Trauma

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*Inability to tolerate feelings or conflicts:*

- Blunt feelings or numbness, withdrawal, no obvious affect in appropriate situations
- Movement to intense or overwhelming feelings suddenly and rapidly (e.g., rage)
- Depression (problem sleeping, eating, poor energy, low motivation, poor self esteem, poor memory, anxiety)

- Panic feelings (trouble breathing, feeling as if having a heart attack, fearful, anxious, etc.)

*A pattern of out-of-control and self-injurious behavior:*

- Addictive behaviors (over/under-eating, gambling, drinking, smoking, etc.)
- Patterns of repeated behavior to avoid feelings (promiscuity, internet use, sleeping, etc.)
- Chaos in life (problems with relationships, employment, finances, etc.)
- Self-harmful behavior (often “alluded to” but not obvious such as scratching and cutting, nail biting, burning self, hair pulling, etc.)

*Intense self-blame and feelings of unworthiness or belief they are “ruined”:*

- Belief that they were responsible for original trauma
- Irrational/illogical beliefs about responsibility for events in the present
- Belief that they are bad, a failure, unlovable, a loser, damaged, insignificant, worthless
- May induce others to treat them badly

*Staying stuck in the victim, perpetrator, or rescuer roles:*

- Seek out relationships with abusive people
- Induce abuse from others rather than waiting for it to happen
- Perceive abuse which confirms the belief that they are unworthy and unlovable
- Hurt others (different than appropriate self-protection)
- Act aggressively toward others who are weak and vulnerable

- Compulsively driven to help others, often to their own detriment
- Acts of generosity not in accord with the relationship

*Disorganized attachment patterns:*

- Inability to tolerate their ambivalence toward the perpetrator even after the trauma ceases
- Inability to tolerate their ambivalence toward other trusted figures, such as failed rescuers or those who denied the trauma
- Inability to tolerate their ambivalence toward significant persons currently in their lives

*Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships:*

- Avoid relationships altogether
- Avoid close relationships because of inherent risk
- Avoid situations that might lead to closeness
- Protect themselves, e.g., unfriendly to others before others are unfriendly to them
- Have intense but brief relationships
- Remain attached even when the relationship is unhealthy
- Perceive the relationship in a distorted manner

*Black and white thinking and other cognitive distortions:*

- Child-like, concrete, and magical thinking
- What they think is normal and real does not coincide with “real life”
- Derive “life rules” and “automatic thoughts” from childhood distortions
- Cling to the distortions despite challenge or contrary evidence

- Provoke a non-existent reality into being in order to verify a distortion
- Collect evidence to support the distortion while ignoring evidence to the contrary
- Patterns of distorted thinking (such as generalizations, all or nothing, discounting, jumping to conclusions, assuming, labeling, and emotional reasoning)

*Intrusive thoughts, images, feelings, memories, and nightmares about the trauma*

*Pathological dissociation:*

- Loss of (long) spaces of time (can't remember what they said or did)
- Appear to "switch" personalities, or be different people, even in speech and behavior
- Trances or sleepwalking
- Childhood companions, "voices," "too much noise in my head"
- Inability to recall important information, usually of a stressful or traumatic nature
- Confusion about personal identity or assumption of a new identity

*Extensive comorbidity / multiple diagnoses, which may include addictions, mood disorders, and personality disorders*

*Suicidal ideation:*

- Talk about suicide
- Wish they were dead
- Have a plan to end their life

## **Using This Book**

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This book is intended to introduce core concepts of recovery from trauma in the context of a survivor's practice of prayer and spirituality. It will also be helpful for people living or working with trauma survivors (who may not identify themselves as such). Healing from trauma is a long process, even for healthy people, and requires patience, gentleness, understanding, and compassion.

This book is not intended for praying in one sitting, but to serve as a prayerful guide to recovery and healing. The themes may be new or surprising or even upsetting. Some readers may experience the contents as jarring and yet liberating.

The volume is designed for extended prayer (reflection), increasing awareness (illumination), and then practicing new ways to think, feel, and behave (purification), into a healthier human being who was made in the image and likeness of God (deification). As Irenaeus tells us, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

A pattern might be to start with the opening prayer, read one section, reflect on the experience in one's own life, take some quiet time to listen to what God has to say about what you read and reflected on, and then end with one of the closing prayers.



# Opening Prayer

Creator God, you showed your generous love  
by giving Jesus to the human race.

Then you created me,  
a marvelous mystery, a wonder to behold.

You understand my pain  
because Jesus also suffered.

Now I present myself to you as one of your created ones,  
but one who has been grievously injured.

I ask for an abundance of your healing love,  
so that I may be restored to a fullness of health,  
in my body, in my mind, and in my spirit.

I offer this prayer in the power of your Spirit,  
through Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

—Trauma Recovery Associates, 2003

# 1

## Jesus Enters Jerusalem

### Scripture

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When they drew near Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tethered, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them here to me. . . ." The disciples went and did as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the ass and the colt and laid their cloaks over them, and he sat upon them. The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and strewed them on the road. The crowds preceding him and those following kept crying out and saying:

"Hosanna to the Son of David;  
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord;  
hosanna in the highest." (Matt 21:1-2, 6-9)

### Reflections

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It was a triumphant day of excitement and joy when Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem. People there acclaimed him as the Son of David. Was he able to forget the people who had clashed with him or walked away? Was it a moment that he could simply enjoy without the burden of the past or worrying about the future?

Jesus was a man who showed a wide variety of emotions throughout his public ministry. He wept when he heard about the death of his friend Lazarus; he was angry toward the Phari-

sees and the vendors in the temple; he showed compassion to the sinful woman dragged before him in shame; he celebrated with his friends at the wedding in Cana; he enjoyed close friendships with Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and his disciple John; and he also felt the pain of betrayal by one friend and desertion by others. Jesus showed us that part of being human is to show our feelings.

However, when people have experienced trauma, they have a difficult time managing their emotions. Trauma survivors usually do not stay grounded in the present moment when they encounter emotional experiences that remind them of their hurtful past. They fear that they will not be able to tolerate their feelings in the present moment. Some may experience intense emotions when triggered by hurtful memories. They may shut down their logical thinking and can get lost in their emotions. Others deal with their emotions and triggers by numbing their feelings and relying only on their thinking.

When survivors learn to stay grounded, they are able to process their experiences and react in proportion to their situations in the present moment. And like Jesus, they are able to experience a variety of feelings with a wide range of emotional intensity.

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## **Prayer**

God, grant me the gift of healing so that I may be able to live a grounded life. Help me to enjoy the good things that are part of my life, and also to feel the human emotions that come with difficulties and distress. Help me to understand and believe that my feelings will not destroy me, but are a part of my humanity, and truly a gift from you.