

“What a needed message...This resource will help so many!”

—LYSA TERKEURST, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

OVERCOMING

FATHER

WOUNDS

EXCHANGING YOUR PAIN  
FOR GOD'S PERFECT LOVE

KIA STEPHENS

# OVERCOMING FATHER WOUNDS

*EXCHANGING YOUR PAIN  
FOR GOD'S PERFECT LOVE*

**KIA STEPHENS**



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I dedicate this book to you. Our stories are different, but our ache is the same. If you have ever felt unloved, unwanted, unimportant, or wounded by your father, this book has been crafted with you in mind. It is my sincerest prayer that God fills and overflows every father-shaped vacuum in your soul. May you complete the pages of this book knowing that you are

Loved.



Wanted.



Valued.



Important.



Beautiful.



Precious.



Cherished.



Healed.



& Fathered.

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# 1

## SOUNDING THE ALARM

The word *father* is enough to sucker-punch you without warning. It's a six-letter doozy loaded with connotations, good and bad. Immediately, it conjures up a series of spliced-together childhood memories of us and our fathers. And sometimes just us.

Like Pavlov's dog salivating at the sound of a bell, our bodies have an internal response to the mere utterance of the word. We may experience a tinge of disappointment or a surge of anger. We may even find ourselves encased within indifference (which is still a response). With little to no effort, we remember something about the man who gave us life, even if it is his absence.

And sometimes, that word leads us to this thought: *I wish I had a different father*. I'm convinced we say this in our minds more times than we'd like to admit. Nestled in that gray matter between our ears lie thoughts no one else is privy to: a perfectly crafted

comeback, our opinion of the well-meaning but out-of-line church lady, and a few beliefs about the greenness of our grass.

This isn't to be confused with literal grass, rooted in dirt and fleecing the lawns of golf courses like a thick, fluffy blanket. I'm talking about figurative grass, composed of all that we are. It's the stuff that separates us from everyone else—family makeup, socioeconomic status, and experiences or the lack thereof.

Sometimes when we stand on our tippy-toes and look over the picket fence dividing our yard from our neighbor's, the hue of their grass looks greener. We see their well-manicured yard filled with plush green blades, only to turn, firmly place both feet on the ground, and stare back at our own grass.

Now, with acute clarity, we see the patches of tan and scrawny turf scattered throughout our lawn. We notice the place where grass doesn't exist at all. It is here discontentment sets in as we long to have the yard of our neighbors.

I have compared my grass with unassuming neighbors' enough to know that this type of displeasure doesn't play fair. It reaches to the tender-to-the-touch areas of our lives, teetering over into circumstances completely beyond our control, like our family. Before we know it, we're entertaining thoughts of what our life would've been like if we had an alternative upbringing: a two-parent household or a more engaged father.

We question what would've been different had our father been there to teach us how to ride a bike, attend our volleyball games, interrogate dates, struggle through the sex talk, and tell us we were pretty. In the secrecy of our inner thoughts, we imagine a father who stayed, was sober, lived a long life, never went to prison, never knew addictions, and loved only our mother all his days.

What would've been a distinctive and noticeable difference in us had we grown up with a different father? Would we be the same

woman or an enhanced version of ourselves? More whole? More secure? More at peace? Here in the tangled labyrinth of our minds, we begin to contemplate the impossible: having a different father.

This, however, is not an option. We don't have the luxury of exchanging our father for a kinder or more attentive one. Our patch of grass, no matter the condition, is still ours. As a result, our father's attributes, good or bad, are embedded in the fabric of who he is. And although it's possible for people to change, we can't make our father who we want him to be. Every father-wounded daughter eventually faces the reality that she will not get a different dad.

**Although it's possible for people to change, we can't make our father who we want him to be.**

This is why, although we've never met, there is a part of me that knows a part of you intimately. We are sisters bonded together by a wound we incurred when we were most vulnerable. We are a vast multi-ethnic society of women.

Extending beyond class and race, father wounds do not discriminate. They impact women everywhere. For a myriad of reasons, women have experienced wounds from their fathers. The vastness of this epidemic prompted me to write for women with these wounds.

### **A Sorority of the Wounded**

"I'm going to start a blog for women who grew up without their fathers," I announced on separate occasions. Women responded first with their body language—widened eyes, turned heads, and a

barely audible “Hmm,” which all signaled to me they had a wound too. Then they spoke, confirming my suspicion.

“I just met my dad two weeks ago.”

“I don’t know who my father is.”

“My daddy was an alcoholic.”

“I heard my father call my mother a heifer.”

“My dad introduced me as his boy.”

Whether I was in the salon, on a playdate with my kids, or at work, women had something to say about their father-daughter relationships or lack thereof. Without hesitation, they recounted the memories (often painful) and words of their biological fathers.

Every woman seemed to have her father-daughter story filed in an easily accessible compartment ready to retrieve on cue. They divulged this information as if it were an uncomplicated sharing of facts.

Stoically, and with ease, they communicated painfully difficult truths about their fathers. Truths that, for many of them, drastically altered the trajectory of their lives. I understood their immediate and straightforward responses; I’ve given them too. Out of necessity, I meticulously crafted one-liners that quickly described the painful and difficult realities of my father-daughter story.

“My mom and dad got a divorce when I was a baby” and “I didn’t grow up with my father” were staples I used in conversation. These were necessary survival must-haves that kept my emotions at bay. I attempted to articulate my raw truth in a way that would keep me from getting emotional in public. Thus, the hearer wouldn’t feel the need to offer a kind but insufficient response. At all costs, I wanted to avoid the awkward silence that gut-honest truth elicits. Collectively, father-wounded women have

learned that the average person either can't handle the realities of our stories or simply doesn't want to.

Denna D. Babul, a registered nurse and coauthor of the book *The Fatherless Daughter Project*, describes the motivation behind these matter-of-fact replies:

Each time someone asks about your father, you probably have a brief story that you have kneaded and molded into a form that you can handle—and that others can handle—as you pushed through the significant years of your life without the security of a father–daughter bond. We need to protect our histories and our hearts from being hurt again in the retelling of what happened to our fathers. At the same time, we have felt compelled to protect those who are asking for an answer that might make them uncomfortable. We can become wary over time of the need to take care of someone after we have spilled a painful answer onto his lap, so we reshape the story and try out different versions to find one that works.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, survival instincts have taught us how to cope: by divorcing ourselves from emotional trauma in order to function. As a result, we craft our responses like injured soldiers headed back out to the battlefield. After all, life doesn't stop for the wounded—especially when the wounds can't be seen.

For more than six years I've been writing online about father wounds, and this intimate cyber conversation is still going strong, with voices continuously adding to the dialogue. During this time, we've exchanged “Me Toos” through blog posts and social media pictures, cried tears, revealed scars, and traded our stoicism for vulnerability. We've created a safe place amid the unsafe and very public domain of the internet.

It is in this conversation that I have grown, healed, taken risks, and discovered more about who I am, while simultaneously learning about the multi-ethnic society I'm writing for. From the beginning of my blogging journey, I've tried to make my writing an even exchange. I wanted readers to feel like my blog was a safe place, so I bared my soul first. With every blog post, I took the scary plunge into the vulnerability pool on their behalf. In fact, when I ventured onto the blogging scene, I told a good friend of mine, "I feel like I'm walking down Peachtree Street butt naked." There's no way to discuss father wounds without tackling a few of my biggest hurdles: self-esteem, relationships with men (Help me, Jesus!), and insecurities.

I knew that if I wanted to talk about exchanging father wounds for the love of God the Father, I was going to have to bring all of myself to the task. I would have to share my unfiltered truth. A blog about father wounds required me to be brutally honest about my flaws, faults, and issues.

This is why I felt completely bare on the internet when I pressed Publish on my very first blog post. Truth be told, it was probably just my mama reading in the beginning, but vulnerability is attractive. Like sugar water to a colony of ants, vulnerability draws women of every demographic and compels them to say, "Me too."

As women with father wounds began to visit the blog, they emailed me their stories, which were painful and difficult to digest but not surprising.

The women confirmed what I instinctively knew: father wounds were impacting women and they were suffering in silence. This fact birthed in me a desire to quantify what I knew anecdotally. To substantiate this reality, I needed to depend on my least favorite subject: math. I knew there was tremendous value in being able to quantify the scope of the problem.

## **A Sobering Survey**

As a result, I decided to add a running survey to my blog and began to accumulate data from every woman who was willing to share it.

Initially, I checked the data weekly, because in my researcher mode the information was fascinating to me. But the more and more I checked the data, the more I was reminded that I wasn't just looking at numbers on a page. Each number represented a woman with a painful father wound.

I was looking at real women, each of whom had deep-seated emotions attached to every answer. As the number of survey respondents increased, it lodged a mammoth-sized weight in my heart. I was grieved for the number of women who'd been impacted by this issue, and it further solidified my resolve to do something about it.

To date, 925 women have completed the survey. That number is staggering, considering 99% of them admit to having father wounds. The ages of the women range from 18 to 75 and older. Their relationship status varies, although 47.8% of them are married.

When asked whether they considered themselves a fatherless daughter, 58.1% said yes and 28.8% said no. In response to this question, there were several reasons why women didn't choose either yes or no. Some women identified God as their father, others said their father was deceased, and some said their father was in their life, but they didn't have a great relationship with him.

When asked about their upbringing, 66.4% said they were not fathered growing up. Twenty-nine percent of survey respondents indicated their father was not fathered growing up, and 28.9% said their mother was not fathered. Of the survey respondents, 17.2% of them are raising kids without fathers. This data revealed how

the circumstance of parents with father wounds may predispose their kids to growing up without a father as well.

I also asked the survey respondents the cause of their father's absence. Twenty-nine percent of women grew up in divorced households, 26% experienced abandonment, 24% had a father who was addicted to either drugs or alcohol or both, and 9% lost their father due to death. Additionally, 44% of the women who completed the survey said their father was physically present but emotionally absent.

In response to the type of father women had, 32% said they grew up with an authoritarian father, 26% said their father was abusive, 35% indicated their father was distant or passive, and 38% said their father was absent. I also discovered 42.9% of women had experienced verbal abuse and 7% knew sexual abuse at the hands of their father. When asked about the status of the current relationship with their father, 34% said they had a deceased father, 23% said they had no relationship with their father at all, and the remaining women described their relationship as either close, somewhat close, distant, or inconsistent.

The most devastating data came from a question I wrestled with for most of my adult life. Toward the end of the survey, I asked the women if they'd been able to heal from the hurts in their father-daughter relationship. Of the survey respondents, 43.8% said they had not.

This percentage broke my heart. There were women among the survey respondents who had suffered for their entire lives—some of them possibly accepting the lie that they could never heal. The overwhelming majority of women were filling out the survey not because they particularly liked surveys. I wasn't offering them a gift card or entering their name into a giveaway. They freely took my survey because they were looking for something to help them heal.

Displayed through bar graphs and pie charts, their desperation leaped off the computer screen and tugged at the core of my heart. Increasingly, this data became more sobering to me. Each percentage represented a group of women with lives that had been devastated by father wounds. It was alarming and overwhelming at the same time.

*Why aren't more people talking about this?* I asked myself. *Why aren't there easily accessible support groups and counselors on hand? Where is the church? Why hasn't someone sounded the alarm?*

This data was cause for concern, at least for me. It represented more than just numbers. These were the women I was writing for. These were the women I was called to encourage. These were the women who were just like me.

This is why, without ever meeting you, I can say with confidence, “I understand.” There is no need for you to explain or say, “It’s complicated.” I get it. I too have experienced an ache for the love of my father. I know the gnawing feeling of rejection that hijacks a woman’s thoughts and influences what she tells herself when no one’s looking. I know the suffocating fear that snuffs out dreams like a hit man. I know the ambition that drives you to achieve more in order to substantiate your self-worth. I know the never-ending need for validation of your outward appearance by men. I know what it’s like to give too much of yourself too soon in hopes that it will be reciprocated—and what it’s like when it’s not. I know the disappointment of only getting a broken heart in return.

Now, without ever having conversations with women, I began to notice how many carried father wounds. I saw these wounds everywhere: in the faces of the young girls I taught as an elementary school teacher, in overwhelmed mothers at the grocery store, in hurting women at church, and in the lives of women I read about

in the Bible. One of those biblical women is often overlooked because her story exists in the shadow of her sister's.

## The Story of Leah

Leah was the older sister of Rachel who found herself in a complicated polygamous marriage. Her story begins in Genesis 29, when Jacob, the youngest son of Isaac and one of the patriarchs, went to Harran to find a wife from his mother's family. He set out on his journey and providentially arrived at the right well, at the right time, in Paddan Aram.

Prior to Rachel's arrival, Jacob asked the men at the well if they knew Laban, his uncle. As Jacob was talking with them, Rachel was on her way to the well. The men pointed her out in the distance and told Jacob she was Laban's daughter.

Jacob wasted no time. *"He went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud"* (vv. 10–11).

As far as Jacob was concerned, his search for a wife was over. Rachel was the one for him. This would've been a great happily-ever-after ending, but then things got a little complicated.

Once Rachel realized Jacob was her relative, she took him to meet her father, Laban, who hurried to meet Jacob and brought him to his home. He even gave Jacob some affirmation by saying, *"You are my own flesh and blood."* Things were looking promising.

Jacob stayed with Laban for one month before he asked for Rachel's hand in marriage, probably spending as much time with Rachel as he could. His affection for her was likely obvious. Finally, Laban asked Jacob what his wages should be.

His response was indicative of his love for Rachel: *"I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel"*

(v. 18). Scripture says those seven years “*seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her*” (v. 20).

Once Jacob served his time, he boldly said to Laban, “*Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her*” (v. 21). He had abstained for seven years and one month, and now he was ready to make Rachel his wife. That night, however, after the wedding feast, Laban took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob instead. He made love to the wrong woman.

When Jacob woke up the next morning and discovered he had been given Leah instead of Rachel, he was enraged. What a painful experience this must’ve been for Leah. She had just consummated the marriage with her future husband only to have him express his disappointment in getting her instead of her sister. She must have felt humiliated, unloved, and devastated. This massive rejection was on top of the fact Leah had grown up overshadowed by her sister’s beauty. Scripture describes Leah as having “*weak eyes*” and Rachel as having “*a lovely figure*” and being “*beautiful*” (v. 17).

It does appear that Leah played a role in the fiasco. She had to put on the bridal clothing and disguise herself as her sister, but I’m struck by the words in verse 23: “*He took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, to deceive Jacob.*” The verbs *took* and *brought* highlight Laban’s intentional actions. He used his own daughter in a scheme to deceive Jacob. She was just a pawn in her father’s plan.

Laban should’ve protected her and had her best interest in mind, but he took advantage of her instead. Surely he knew how much Jacob loved Rachel. Surely he knew Leah’s weak eyes had been compared to Rachel’s beautiful features all her life. Surely he knew the pain she would endure in this marriage, and yet Laban put Jacob’s free labor above his daughter’s well-being. As a result, Leah suffered in her union for years.

After Leah's bridal week ended, Scripture says, "*Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years*" (v. 30). The Bible doesn't say this, but I believe in addition to Leah's jealousy of her sister, she also had a wound from her father.

She may have questioned how he could place her in that situation. She may have wondered why he didn't tell Jacob he had to wait until Leah was married. She may have been ashamed by the fact that her father resorted to tricking Jacob into marrying her—communicating his doubt that she would ever get married on her own.

**The good news is, for every woman who's ever contemplated what it would be like to have a different father, whether real or imagined, there's an exchange that is possible.**

When I read Leah's story in the Bible, her father-wounded state stood out to me. She was placed in a difficult situation at the hands of her father, and as a result she had to determine how to continue to live despite what had been done to her. Like Leah, every father-wounded woman must figure this out.

Our symptoms may vary, but they stem from a relentless root cause that latched itself onto our psyche at some point during our matriculation to adulthood. Unsuspectingly, we opened our hearts to the man we wanted to always protect, always love, and always cherish us. Instead of receiving the former, whether knowingly or unknowingly he took our heart, which we so willingly offered, and wounded us. Though we may attempt to tuck that wound deep within the untouched crannies of our soul, we always know it's there.

This may be why you picked up this book. Maybe you wanted to get some help in processing undealt-with emotions. Maybe you, like me, have perused the aisles in bookstores scanning the list of titles in search of one that fits your ache like a good pair of jeans.

The good news is, for every woman who's ever contemplated what it would be like to have a different father, whether real or imagined, there's an exchange that is possible. Not in the sense where you exchange your father for a better model who possesses all the qualities your father doesn't have. The type of swap I'm referring to is an uneven exchange of father wounds for the extravagant love of God the Father. I stumbled upon it without knowing it was a swap I needed to make.

### **The Uneven Exchange**

My uneven exchange was initiated by five unexpected words from a previous counselor. "Have you forgiven your father?" she asked to my surprise. At the time, I hadn't, nor did I think I needed to (even though I did). Her words were the catalyst to a long and difficult journey to swap my pain for God's love. Several years ago I resolved to do this. It was a path that was oftentimes lonely, seemingly impossible, and one I wanted to quit on many occasions.

On this journey, what I longed for most was a nice, tall, refreshing glass of empathy—someone who understood and could just sit in silence, offer an encouraging word, or provide me with a hug or two without instructions. That's so simple yet so hard to come by. You can't find a prepackaged bottle of empathy at a neighborhood grocery store or anywhere else for that matter. Many times, I went without it.

For years I never made mention of my wounds; they became my best-kept secret. Masterfully, I presented myself as the

high-achieving success story. People often saw me as a go-getter, but that was only camouflage in a world that applauds productivity. If anyone ever looked beneath the facade, they would've discovered that I'd become a pro at looking confident when I was scared, happy when I was sad, and beautiful when I didn't think I measured up.

Living like this enables you to talk yourself out of needing to talk about it at all—deceiving yourself into thinking, *I don't have a problem*. You dismiss the sadness that periodically appears when you see a father lovingly interact with his daughter at Target. You ignore the twinge of jealousy when a friend talks about her daddy. You reject the painful memories of your father-daughter relationship, all in an attempt to project an “I'm okay” persona.

It's easier to keep your wounds hidden out of public view. This way you can convince yourself a conversation about your pain is irrelevant and unnecessary. Deep down, you know it's not.

Undealt-with pain will never just go away. It lingers. We can try—unsuccessfully—to suppress it, but eventually it'll resurface. Maybe you've already discovered this.

I want you to know, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you didn't have the upbringing you wanted. I'm sorry for all the ways you've suffered.

For every time you've ever felt rejected, forgotten, or unloved by your father, I'm sorry. For every event he missed, and your every unnoticed reach for his affection, I'm sorry. If your father was so busy with work that he never made time for you, I'm sorry. If you experienced any form of abuse at the hands of your dad, know that I weep with you. I mourn for the innocence lost, fear injected, and wounds left unhealed.

Where you have experienced far more pain than any woman should ever have to, I'm sorry. If the painful fracture caused by divorce, the stinging loss of abandonment, or the devastating

effects of drug and alcohol addiction have left you in despair, know that I'm agonizing over it with you.

Maybe your father left your mother for another woman. Maybe his private life caught up with him and the consequence was incarceration. Maybe he died a premature death and left you longing for a dad who will never come back.

Whatever your situation is, I'm grieving with you. Know that my heart for you reflects the compassion God offers His beloved daughters. He cares about every tear you've ever cried concerning your father, and He grieves with you. As it says in 1 Peter 5:7, "*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*" He knows the pain you suffered in this relationship is not your fault but rather a by-product of the sin in our world. There's no way you could've caused or prevented your father wounds.

God knows the depths of your pain, and yet He urges you to move toward it in order to be healed. He knows that though what happened to you is extremely painful, it's not the end. Nestled deep within your ache lies resilient hope.

It is this hope that gets you up in the morning. It is this hope that keeps you loving, living, breathing, and believing that the next day will be better than the day before. This is the hope I'm offering you in this book.

It is not a hope of perfect scenarios and happily-ever-after endings. I'm talking about a hope that stares disappointment in the face and chooses not to be defined by it. The hope I'm referring to is a fighter, defiantly defeating every obstacle it faces. This hope is not debilitated by circumstances but overcomes in spite of them.

This is the hope that I pray you discover as you journey through this book. Before we begin, I think it's fitting to acknowledge your pain and give you the necessary time to grieve. Don't

keep reading for the sake of putting another coveted check on your “to-do list.”

So often we feel an unceasing pressure to keep going despite the loud and deafening internal sirens signaling a problem exists. We keep going, though we need to stop. Today, if that’s you, I give you permission to pause. Your healing demands it.

Whether grief hits you two pages over, halfway in, or somewhere near the end of this book, resist the urge to dismiss it. Ignore your phone, turn off the TV, and eliminate every distraction so you can take the necessary time to mourn what’s been lost. If you’ve been holding your emotions hostage because you felt you had to keep it all together, know that you don’t have to any longer.

It’s time to acknowledge the grief and let it go. I know it’s tough. I’ve walked this tightrope too, teetering somewhere between sorrow and anger, all the while hoping I didn’t spiral down to the bottom. But guess what? I’ve walked through tremendous grief and come out on the other side. This means you can too.

May this book be like your best girlfriend sitting with you in silence and letting you cry as much and for as long as you need to. Grab a box of Kleenex, get a little chocolate, and grieve, sis. You’ll thank yourself for it later. I’m giving you this permission because where we’re going, grief can’t survive. We’re leaving the land of “what if” and “if only” and making peace with the beautiful imperfect.

### *Practical Ways* **to Begin the Grieving Process**

- Express your feelings about your father in a journal.
- Discuss your emotions with a trusted friend.

- Answer the questions for reflection at the end of each chapter. Whether you reflect on them within a group, with a friend, or on your own, take the time to consider your answers and write them down.
- Pray to God about your pain.
- Read and memorize Scripture. You'll find verses that have been helpful to me in the questions for reflection at the end of each chapter.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. Describe your father. What was he like as a dad?
2. Describe your father-daughter relationship.
3. Have you ever wanted to swap your father out for someone else? Why or why not?
4. How has your father-daughter relationship impacted you and your life?