

Jenn Greenberg, Survivor of Abuse at The Hands of her Church-Going Father



I grew up in faithful Christian churches. As a child, I sat attentively through sermon after sermon every Sunday, and sometimes weekday Bible studies too. As soon as I could spell, I began taking notes and writing down questions to ask our pastors afterwards. They were all loving men. Good teachers. Faithful shepherds. They never guessed I was being abused. I remember my dad teaching me how to commit suicide when I was 5 years old, just in case I ever felt the need to escape. Around that same time, my pastor was teaching me tee-ball. I had a crush on his little boy, Peter, who I was in kindergarten Sunday school with.

I remember, when I was 10, my dad beating me repeatedly because I'd laughed and played dolls too loudly. Around that same time, I remember professing my faith to our church leaders, and an elder saying, "Never let anyone question your salvation because you don't remember the day on which you were saved. Being saved when you were too young to remember is an incredible blessing from God."

I remember, when I was 12, my dad threatening to shoot me if I ever tried to leave him. Around that same time, my pastor and his wife saying how mature I was for my age. I babysat their children, and she later boasted to the other moms at church that she'd come home to a clean kitchen and her laundry folded. She couldn't believe how helpful I was.

I never made any "cries for help." I was always the good kid. The overachiever. I made cries for acceptance. Cries for appreciation. Cries for acknowledgement. Cries for love. But while my father taught me that I had to earn his love, meet his standards, and beg for mercy he'd never grant, my pastors taught me about my Father in Heaven. His love was freely given, his Son met all the standards for me, and his Spirit was lavished irrevocably upon me.

Because you see, abuse revolves around a false doctrine of legalism; arbitrary rules, inevitable failure, manipulation, fear, and painful consequences. Because my pastors preached grace, they unwittingly contradicted my abuser's lies. And every Sunday I listened and dreamed of the day I'd finally feel accepted, belonging, and loved in Heaven.

This is my message to pastors and church leaders: get to know your covenant children. Be the person kids know they can go to for prayer requests, loving counsel, and personal advice. And keep in mind that abusers often change the meanings of words. So when a child says, "My parent spanked me," ask, "What do you mean?" Because spanking can mean anything from a swat-on-the-bottom to being beaten black and blue. I still remember examining my 10-year-old body and seeing hand-shaped bruises on my arms, legs, and back. When a teenager says, "My parent grounded me," ask "Really? How?" Because grounding can mean anything from loss of television privileges, to being locked in a room for two days without food.

I do not write this to discourage you, but to encourage you. Pastors, teachers, men of God; you are God's shepherds who guard Christ's sheep. Keep preaching the Gospel. Never waiver. Never relent. Never water it down because it is oxygen and life to the oppressed and the brokenhearted. Declare the mercy of the Father, the atonement of Jesus, and the wisdom of the Spirit without apology or hesitation because there are people in very dark places who are listening.

Thank you for your ministry, your sacrifice, and your dedication to God's children. You may never know how many souls you helped save, or how many children decided to stay alive because you preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jenn Greenberg was abused by her church-going father. Yet she is still a Christian. In her book, Not Forsaken, she reflects on how God brought life and hope in the darkest of situations. Jenn shows how the gospel enables survivors to navigate issues of guilt, forgiveness, love, and value. And she challenges church leaders to protect the vulnerable among their congregations.