

THE ASHES
of
Tamar

a journey from desolation to restoration

TONYA R. NEAL



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PARTICIPANT'S STUDY GUIDE

***The Ashes of Tamar:
A Journey From Desolation To Restoration***

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DEDICATION

God, this is for your Glory!

Mom, this is for you and all you have conquered.
You are a beautiful, loving and giving soul. Forever, will I
admire your strength, your elegance, your faith, and your
resilience. Thank you for showing me the true example of
living a restored life.

Yuel, my big brother, you've always done your best to
protect me. God knew exactly what he was doing when
He gave you me to look out for. I love you immensely.

Emmanuel, my bigger brother, I am so glad you are in my
life. You will never be alone—you have all of us. I love you.

Daddy, you raised me to love God's Word—I have
hidden it in my heart since I was a small child and now,
finally, I can pour out my love for God on these pages
and share it with those who are hurting.

Anijah Moore, my Poohbear, my exquisite Jewel,
you, sweetheart, have taught me so much about
loving life—continue to grow in God and you will
continue to grow in wisdom.

With Love & Gratitude,
Tonya



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INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS STUDY?

Domestic Violence. Intimate Violence. Sexual Abuse. Child Abuse. Dating Violence. Emotional Abuse. Spiritual Abuse. Sex Trafficking. The list continues. No matter which term is used or who caused the abuse, it is an injustice committed against women, men and children alike! It devastates lives, wrecks homes, and alienates families and friends. Simply put, it is oppression—prolonged unjust or cruel exercise of power and control. God has been misrepresented, underrepresented, or not represented at all. His position regarding Domestic Violence in some churches and organizations goes amiss. In many instances, God’s Word has been misused out of sheer ignorance. That is not what God desires for any woman, man or child! *The Ashes of Tamar* is an answer to the misrepresentation of God and the misuse of God’s Word regarding domestic abuse. It is an answer to the cry of women who are silenced by the lies they might believe about themselves and God. God is Love. Love reaches out to you. Love rescues you. Love restores you.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Bible gives an enthralling account of a young woman whose life resonates with the lives of the average 24 victims per minute, who experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the U.S.¹ It was not until I attended a singles conference during my early twenties that I was made aware of the young woman, Tamar. Close to 700 singles filled the sanctuary anxiously, awaiting a fresh encounter with the Word of God. Praise and worship saturated the building and the presence of God was in our midst. The music subsided and the pastor approached the podium, placed his Bible down and greeted us. He then asked us to open our Bibles to 2 Samuel 13. He began reading at the first verse concluding with the twentieth. Silently, I read the words with him, from the beginning while increasingly becoming uncomfortable, “Absalom had a lovely sister named Tamar; and Amnon, the son of David loved her.” I did not find anything wrong with the introduction. He continued to read. The story took

a turn, "...he took hold of her and said to her. "Come lie with me, my sister." The pastor continued, "So she said to him, 'No indeed!' However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her." Finally, arresting my attention was the very last verse: "So Tamar remained desolate in her brother Absalom's house." At that moment, I felt as though time had frozen. He announced the sermon title, "The Other Brother." I wondered, "What does that title have to do with what I had just read?" Honestly, I was not ready to move on to the sermon. I was still stunned by the details of the story. I was astounded the Bible contained this particular narrative. The pastor wanted to talk about "The Other Brother." I wanted to talk about Tamar! I felt a connection with her, but I did not understand why until later in my life.

The Ashes of Tamar: A Journey from Desolation to Restoration was inspired by my introduction to Tamar during that singles conference over twenty years ago. Tamar's story embraces the story of women all over this world, including mine. Tamar represents young women, ages 18-34, who experience the highest rates of intimate partner violence.² She is the global example of 35 percent of women who have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence. Some national violence studies show that up to 70 percent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner.³ Tamar symbolizes women of all cultures, races, ethnicities, and economic status, regardless of their religious backgrounds. Unfortunately, Tamar also embodies women who attend church on Sunday mornings, silently praying that someone will hear their cry for help. Their cries are often ignored or hushed.

IS THIS STUDY FOR ME?

The *ashes* of Tamar symbolizes the residue of a painful past encompassing shame, guilt, depression, rejection, fear and forgiveness due to abuse. The accumulation of these *ashes* is detrimental to women who desire to live an abundant life—fearlessly. This study is designed for women who find themselves in a desolate place, buried in the ashes of their yesterday. Is that you? If so, regardless of how you arrived in your desolate place, whether through domestic violence or a series of unfortunate events, *The Ashes of Tamar* will reveal the Ember of Hope that flickers brilliantly down your path toward restoration. The Ember of Hope is the Lord—our Guide. This study is also for those of you who empathize with fellow sisters because you too have been exposed to domestic abuse. You understand the importance of having someone supporting you who "knows what it is like," and you desire to be that someone for your sister.

One more thing! Return to your statements above. Before the very first word you wrote, add “**God.**” Congratulations! You have composed your first prayer for this study! This is your starting point. Your journey begins by sharing some of your most intimate feelings with God. I believe there is no true healing without God. Proverbs 3:5-6 urges us to, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. Acknowledge Him in all your ways, and He will make your paths straight.”

This study will challenge you to put it all on the table before God. Each day will be a process and you will gain momentum as you continue to dig deeper into God’s Word. Whether this is the first time you are taking a step of faith to trust God or you have trusted God with bits and pieces of your life; it will be equally challenging letting go and trusting God fully. Relationships take time to develop and grow. Do not get discouraged; this study will ease you into the process. Keep moving forward and do not look back. What lies ahead is so much better than what lies behind you. Trust God and allow Him to “make your path straight”!

NOW, HERE IS WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT!

Small Group Study

The goal of this study is for you to not only connect with God (individually), but also to connect with others (small group). Every week, the small group will meet for study, a time of sharing, and to engage in creative activities to enhance the lesson. There will be a review of the previous week’s homework and time for discussion. The small group leader will share from God’s Word, introduce the topic for group discussion for the week, and provide instructions. Below is a sample agenda. Your small group leader will modify the agenda to fit the needs of your particular group.

The Ashes of Tamar: From Desolation to Restoration Sample Weekly Agenda

- 🍷 Welcome & Prayer (5-10 minutes)
- 🍷 Discussion of the week’s lesson and previous week’s homework. (40 minutes)
- 🍷 Break (5 minutes)
- 🍷 Join your discussion group (30 minutes)
- 🍷 Closing Remarks and Prayer (5 minutes)

GROUP COVENANT

In order to make the small group a fulfilling experience for all participants, below are a few ground rules for your group to read and commit to by initialing in the spaces provided. By initialing, you are agreeing to the overall success of the group.

I agree to respect the members of our group by:

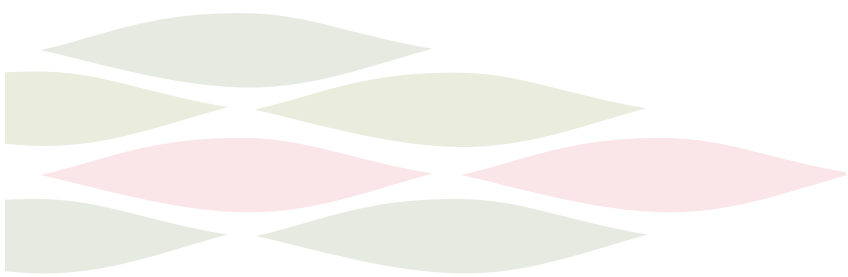
Keeping everything spoken within the group confidential. Our small group will be a safe place to share intimate details from our lives. If anyone chooses to share. Some women are open books and freely share everything, while others are not quite as comfortable, or ready for the world to know the details of their lives. We want everyone to be as transparent as possible, without the fear of members of the group sharing their personal business with others outside the group. _____

Listening to one another. Pay attention and avoid side conversations while others are speaking. Allow the person speaking to finish her thought. When sharing, be mindful of others who might want to share. Try to keep your comments brief but honest, ensuring that you share the main points you wish for others to hear. _____

Refraining from giving advice. Avoid trying to “fix” the problems of others. This is an opportunity for self-discovery; sometimes even a time to vent. This is a time to share God’s Word, our primary guide for our group discussion. Your group leader has resources available for anyone who requires professional help. Please do not hesitate to ask for assistance if needed. _____

Pausing. This study will challenge each of us emotionally. There will be times when sharing personal stories, our group, or someone in our group, may become emotionally overwhelmed. We might not be aware of how our stories affect one another or even ourselves while sharing them. Pause. Breathe. It is all right to be silent. Silence gives everyone a moment to digest the words spoken. We also can support one another with silent prayers. Your group leader is well equipped to help everyone during these special moments. _____

Doing my homework. Our lives are hectic and the last thing we need is one more commitment. However, as a courtesy to the group and the entire group experience, take the time to do your homework. Members of your group want you to truly commit to the group and its study. You are valuable to the group, as are your thoughts and spiritual



growth. We want you to contribute to the conversation. Our discussions will be most effective if you have given your time to study each lesson. _____

Arriving on time. Try your best to arrive to your small group on time, or even ten minutes early. Be respectful of others and their time.

What would you/your group like to add or change on the Group Covenant? It is important your voice is heard.

Individual Study

Your weekly homework is part of your path from Desolation to Restoration. This is a self-paced study that will take a commitment of approximately 1 ½ hours per week. Connecting with God is essential in this study. Consider adding the following elements to your individual time of study:

1. **Prayer:** My desire for you is that you know God by spending time alone with him in prayer. Begin each lesson with prayer asking God to reveal his Word to you. You may have days you don't know what to pray, I suggest revisiting the prayer you wrote in the beginning and read it aloud. Talk to God about the desires of your heart.

- 2. Worship.** Incorporate a worship song into your time of study. You can listen free on YouTube, or download from iTunes or another source. Choose worship songs that inspire you. Take time to listen to the words and prepare your heart for study.

Each lesson will open with a short study to introduce the lesson. Each will contain the following elements:



Know it: God’s Word is the Truth! It is our guide for living a Christian life. You will study the Scriptures to get to know God, God’s will for our lives, and to help guide others to God.



Own It: God is speaking to you through His Word. This will be your time to evaluate what you have learned from the lesson and relate it to your life. You will be asked questions such as: “What did you learn from today’s lesson?” and “How will you apply this teaching to your life?” God’s Word is what transforms your life—“Own It”




Work It: You will learn how to apply God’s Word by living out what you have learned from the lesson. In this section you will be given a specific task to accomplish, such as praying for someone, writing a letter, or serving someone as a result of what you learned from the lesson. This is your time to “Work It!”

LET’S DO THIS!

My desire is for you to approach this study fearlessly. Do not think of yourself as a victim. After all, you have decided to take this class—you are stronger than you know! You, Beloved Treasure, are an exquisite diamond, a valuable jewel who deserves the very best. I know because God gently wrapped His arms around me, whispered in my ear and told me to write this study for you, for us. As you prepare to engage in this study, I want you to know that I am praying for you. You have been on my heart for over twenty years. God knew this day would come.


You wrote your prayer during the introduction to this study. I want to share my personal prayer with you. I penned this prayer months before writing *The Ashes of Tamar*. I would not ask you to become vulnerable before God if I did not have the guts to do so myself.

MY PRAYER FOR US...



Lord, you have placed Tamar's story on my heart. I cannot shake it. I fear being like her—living a life of desolation, giving up on love, giving up on success and settling for a mediocre life. I think at times I am not worthy of achieving certain things. Nor do I feel like I am properly equipped at times. I want out of this desolate place and I want to see women free from the bondage of fear. You have given me your Spirit of POWER + LOVE + A SOUND MIND. You made me more than a conqueror. I am the apple of Your eye. You formed me in my mother's womb and You know the count of every hair on my head. You love me. You chose me. You are my protection—when I am weak, and when I am moving fearlessly in battle. You order my steps. You make a path for me. You spread a feast before me in the presence of my enemies. You are my life.

I ask that You forgive me of my sins. I ask that the leaders, You have selected to assist with this study, are revealed. I pray their hearts belong to You. I pray for the women who will benefit from this ministry. I ask that You begin to prepare their hearts. I pray for their protection. I pray that You calm their fears. I ask that You give them more good days than bad until their day of restoration. I pray that You bless my hands and my mind—they work only for You. Deliverance, healing, joy and peace is what I desire for myself and for the women you have connected me with in the Spirit. I've checked things out like your prophet, Nehemiah. I am ready to do the work. You have commissioned me. I commit my mind to do the work. I surrender my thoughts, my heart, my hands, and my feet to do this. This ministry will be unique. The studies, matchless. The outcomes, phenomenal. The leaders, exceptional. The students, willing learners. Any oppositions faced—I give them over to You to handle. I will not be fearful, or weary—I know all power is in Your hands and You will take care of everything. I will walk forward in the vision you have set before me, at this time. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.



Now, let's do it, together!



A LIFE OF DESOLATION OR RESTORATION, WHICH DO YOU CHOOSE?

Domestic Violence. Intimate Partner Violence. Sexual Abuse. Child Abuse. Dating Violence. Emotional Abuse. Spiritual Abuse. Sex Trafficking. The list continues. No matter which term is used or who caused the abuse, it is an injustice committed against women, men and children alike!

What comes of those of us who have been victimized by abuse. Recluse living? Bouts with depression and overarching fear? Deeply rooted bitterness and anger toward God and others? Controlling demeanor or an out-of-control lifestyle? How does it effect our relationship with God and others, if such relationships exist and are healthy?

For many of us, the impact continues long after the abuse. The ashes of Tamar symbolizes the residue of a painful past encompassing shame, guilt, depression, rejection, fear and forgiveness due to abuse. The accumulation of these ashes is detrimental to women who desire to live an abundant life—fearlessly. This study is designed for women who find themselves in a desolate place, buried deeply in the ashes of their yesterday. Is that you? If so, regardless of how you arrived in your desolate place, whether through domestic violence or a series of unfortunate events, *The Ashes of Tamar* will reveal the Ember of Hope that flickers brilliantly down your path toward restoration.

God has been misrepresented, underrepresented, or not represented at all on his position regarding Domestic Violence in some churches and organizations. In many instances, God's Word has been misused out of sheer ignorance. That is not what God desires for any woman, man or child! The Ashes of Tamar is an answer to the cry of women who are silenced by the false lies they believe about themselves and God. This 9-week study will take you on a tough, personal journey to discover and understand that God is Love. Love reaches out to you. Love rescues you. Love restores you.



TONYA NEAL is a compassionate leader, following God's call to join Him as he reaches, rescues and restores women to wholeness. Tonya holds a Master of Arts in Christian Education with an emphasis on Women's Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary.

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