


UNSTUCK


MOVING BEYOND DEFEAT

AMY HERNANDEZ

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UnStuck: Moving Beyond Defeat

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Introduction

Maybe you have wanted to work on your spiritual life for a variety of reasons, but whatever your motivation, eventually you grow discouraged. Why is it so hard? Why doesn't it stick? Why do you always end up back where you started? You've made progress before, but something keeps pulling you back as if you were bungee walking. Is this normal? Will you always find yourself back at the beginning again?

That's not quite what you were looking for, is it? You were hoping to be free from sin, pain, struggle, and doubts. You were hoping to arrive with the other spiritual giants and never be criticized or judged. You were hoping never to feel bad about yourself again.

Have you ever watched other believers, comparing your progress to theirs, as though they were spiritual competitors? Have you ever let your eyes gaze on those who seem far ahead, who seem never to struggle, and wondered, "What's wrong with me, why can't I stay strong like that?"

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit are in opposition. From this, I conclude that the Spirit and the flesh constantly work against each other, constantly oppose one another. Most of us don't like opposition, even when it is good for us. When my daughter tells me, "Mom, you really don't want to eat that donut; you know it won't help you lose weight," suddenly I want to eat that donut more than ever just because someone told me I shouldn't.

Opposition is exhausting. We instinctively avoid it, but in the spiritual life, opposition is good. If the Spirit is gaining control, the flesh will resist, and if the flesh is insisting on fulfilling its desires, the Spirit will tug against the natural self-satisfaction of your flesh. Either way, the struggle is healthy. It is better than giving in or giving up.



Ever since Eve ate the fruit in the garden, Satan has been deceiving us, but hasn't been the only one. Our flesh blinds us, and misleads us. Our flesh creates clever counterparts so that, even though we have the Spirit and all the power that comes with Him, we find ourselves stuck in a loop repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

The apostle Paul wrote,

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

—Galatians 5:25

How does this work? Do you walk by the Spirit first and thus achieve death of the flesh? Or do you put the flesh to death and thus achieve walking by the Spirit? How can you know if you are walking by the Spirit or if you are putting confidence in your flesh? Can you be certain that your effort is completely powered by the Spirit? Does it count if it is half and half?

As a missionary in Mexico, I encountered a young woman whose struggles with sin resembled mine. Though I believed with all my heart that Christianity offered her the answer, I realized that I personally had not experienced enough victory in my own life to help her. All I could do was share her frustration and constant struggle. I felt like a child pretending to be a grown-up. That discovery must have signaled something in heaven, because the Lord put me in a trial that turned up the heat, put me in the press, squeezed the juice right out of me. The Lord and I got really honest in that trial where He showed me the ugly truth about my flesh and how I was keeping it alive, feeding it so that it would be my strength instead of Him.

I have written this book in three parts to help you expose the flesh and the many ways it is lurking about—all for the goal of crucifying it.

➤ **Prepare the Flesh for Death**

The first step is tackling the opposition, ie. the flesh. Because Satan can pinpoint your flesh tendencies with sharp accuracy, you need to be aware of them as well. You must know where your flesh is most vulnerable. You must know your flesh's weaknesses better than your enemy does.

➤ **Die to Self Daily**

Once identified, your flesh must be crucified. That's where you take up your cross every day. We will examine in Scripture four tools God uses to help us put the flesh to death. We will also explore how the flesh distorts the God-given purpose of those tools.

➤ **Walk Empowered by the Spirit**

Finally, by examining the role of the Spirit in our lives, we will learn why we must walk in complete dependence on the Spirit for truth, love, gifts, and prayer. We will also learn to recognize signs that the flesh is digging trenches that trap us and keep us stuck.

My prayer is that you will want to follow Christ by taking up your cross daily, by living every day with a death sentence. Dying to self is key to becoming unstuck, to becoming free to walk by the Spirit.

“
Dying to self is key to
becoming unstuck.”

Only the blind can see. Only the dead can live.

When Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath, the religious leaders couldn't see past their perceived broken law to the obvious: that only God could do such a miracle. Explaining the problem of their spiritual blindness, Jesus said to them, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” The religious leaders who heard this said, “We are not blind too, are we?” And Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would have no sin, but since you say, ‘we see,’ your sin remains” (John 9:39-41).

Admitting you are blind is the first step to seeing.

Admitting you are dead is the first step to living. Sounds counter-intuitive, doesn't it? Get used to it! Welcome to a walk of dying, where paradox is the norm, and where everything seems upside down.

Part 1

Preparing the Flesh for Death



Chapter

1

Our Obsession

Identity Theft

Pendulum: a “mass hung from a fixed support so that it is able to swing freely under the influence of gravity.”¹

A pendulum has swing. Once a little movement is begun, gravity pulls the pendulum down. Kinetic energy keeps it swinging up again in the other direction. For a second it hits the heights, and then comes back down for another swing in the opposite direction. A pendulum has swing.

Our identity can act like a pendulum, can feel, for example, as if it is on a park swing. As believers in Jesus Christ, we say that our identity is in Him, but we don’t always feel that way.

Imagine you are the “mass” of the pendulum sitting on a park swing and Jesus Christ is your fixed support. You look up, see Him, and think “my identity is in Christ; He defines who I am.” But you are swinging, swinging back and forth from being good to being bad, from success to failure, from loved to ignored, from important to worthless. You are living life on a pendulum, on a swing, because your identity hangs on a chain, each link something that makes you feel good about yourself.

Someone ignored you. Bump. Your swing just got a little push from behind. Feeling a little irked, you begin to wonder why you aren’t worthy of his notice. It is a tiny thought at first, but it stings just enough to make you feel bad about yourself. “What’s wrong with me?” you think. “Why wouldn’t he acknowledge my existence?”

What should you do?

If you are anything like me, you won't do the smart thing. Instead, you'll dwell on how bad it feels to be undervalued, lean back on thinking about how wrong he is to misjudge you, lean forward, feet tucked under, trying to understand why you're not worth his attention.

Back and forth, in full swing, the argument in your head intensifies. Negative thoughts about yourself pull you down to a darker place where you encounter anger, accusation and blame. You become consumed with convincing those around that you are worthy of their attention, with convincing yourself that you do matter. Success may come, but it will never last. You are swinging, and what goes up always comes down.

Where is Christ in this?

So engrossed in the swing, you've forgotten the support that is holding you, forgotten that Christ is your center! You are content to simply swing by Him, waving and shouting with each pass of the swing, "Hey Jesus, good seeing you. Glad you're still there. Catch you on the way back."

You've entered the pendulum effect where your value is constantly swinging, constantly fluctuating. You may think your identity is in Christ alone, but if you've got chains, you've got swing, and no matter how determined you are to be centered in Christ, you can't maintain that security. Seeking your identity in Christ when you feel bad about yourself is only half of the swing. What happens when you feel good about yourself? What happens when others make you feel loved, make you feel valuable? That value swings your identity in the other direction. It feels so good to be up high, free from those nagging doubts. Wouldn't it be great to always stay up here? But you can't because you are swinging and remember, what goes up must come down. What's going to happen when the swing drops? Will it stop in the center; will it return you to your identity in Christ? No it won't! You are going to swing right back to that awful side you hate to go to. Values you find in yourself apart from Christ are links in the chain that hold your swing. The longer the chain, the farther you will swing away from your center in Christ.

“

*Your true value
in Christ does
not fluctuate.*

”

But your true value in Christ exists on its own. It does not fluctuate, does not swing.

The Self-Worth Tank

As a child I desperately wanted to be liked. In the middle of my first grade year, we moved from Virginia to Tennessee. I discovered a loneliness I had never known before. The rest of the school year not a single student talked to me. Then that summer my family moved to another city and I entered a new school, this time dragging insecurity with me like a shadow. Inexplicably, the cutest, most popular girl in class befriended me. Through that experience, I learned the importance of being included by the right person, the value gained from being with the cool kid.

When we moved to Louisiana before my 7th grade year, my new best friend was not only the prettiest, most popular girl in the class, she was also the smartest. Again, I gained a sense of value and security through my friendship, but I could not trust that it would last. By this age, the conviction that everyone would eventually reject me was deeply rooted. I sought friendships because they were my biggest source of self-worth, but they were also my biggest threat of rejection. Quite unconsciously, I sought out people to make me feel more valuable, and it worked.

I was reading through Jeremiah and came to chapter 2, verse 13, when the words suddenly seemed to point directly at me, as if the Lord was saying, “You, Amy, have committed two evils, you have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out cisterns for yourself, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

How ironic! I was so absorbed in fearing rejection, so busy seeking fulfillment through things or people outside of Christ, that I never considered that I was rejecting Him. I instinctively looked to others to infuse value into my insecure little being. I was constantly building cisterns that couldn’t hold water, and then feeling sorry for myself because I could never keep them full.

“
The “self-worth” tank
is full of cracks.”

”

There is a flaw in this “self-worth” tank: it is full of cracks. You know this by experience. No matter how high the level of worth rises in your tank, it never stays there. That’s because self-worth can’t exist on its own. It needs the constant re-affirmation of others.

I lived like a self-worth junkie going through the highs and withdrawals of an addict, all the while entertaining the delusion that I found my value in Christ alone!

What a farce!

This obsession with our own value isn’t just irony, or folly, or even insanity. It is evil!

“
Obsession with your
own value isn’t just
folly; it’s evil!
”

Our Value System

One afternoon, when I was in college, I returned to my room and was shocked to find my roommate’s bed buried in 3 feet of clothing! It looked as if her closet had blown up. She was the most recent victim of the “I can’t find anything to wear” syndrome.

You know what we really mean when we say, “I have nothing to wear.” We mean there is nothing to wear that makes us feel good.

Your value system is like a closet. On any given day, you open it to see what you could put on to make yourself feel better. “Hmmm,” you say to yourself, “maybe I’ll try this,” and you pull out “being needed.” “No,” you think, “I need something better today.” So you start looking through the closet, moving the hangers one by one, “looking beautiful,” “attention from the opposite sex,” “something I own,” “the best grade,” “popularity,” “being useful,” “recognition,” etc.

What’s in your values closet? What do you pull out to make yourself feel good? Are any of these in your closet?

- beauty
- body image
- abilities
- the admiration of important people
- being appreciated

- getting praise
- being treated fairly
- seeing justice done
- attention from men
- getting a boyfriend or girlfriend
- marriage
- having a father who loves you
- being a [good] parent
- having a family
- the best possessions
- a good education
- a high paying job
- involvement in ministries
- spiritual gifts
- a position of importance
- good behavior
- being right
- keeping a standard of perfection
- not disappointing others
- others' good opinion of you
- receiving approval
- making friends
- being preferred by your friends
- being popular
- having lots of money
- accomplishments

Are any of these good substitutes for your value in Christ? Do any of them make you content? Is there anything hanging in your “closet” that you should keep?

The Irony of It All

There is an ironic side to this value system.

I started noticing a correlation between what I valued and what I feared. Since I wanted people to like me, my biggest fear was rejection. Being useful made me feel valuable. Consequently, I feared not being needed. Because giving my opinion made me feel significant, not being consulted brought out my fear that I was insignificant. I liked being the one others confided in, so when I wasn't first to hear the news, I felt insecure.

Here's the irony of it all.

Usually, we assume that to avoid loss we must accumulate more, but have you ever considered that the more you gain the more you have to lose. Hence, rather than solving the problem of loss by amassing possessions, we magnify it. We can never fully achieve, never fully have all those things that make us feel good about ourselves. If anything increases our sense of worth, then the loss of even the tiniest amount of that thing can decrease it.

Were you hoping to gain confidence, to be more secure? I'm guessing that's not working out well for you.

Look back in your value closet and see the fear tucked behind each item.

- With beauty comes the fear of whatever makes you feel ugly.
- With a body image comes the fear of looking fat, having pimples, or experiencing a bad hair day.
- With your abilities comes the fear of someone being better than you.
- With the admiration of important people comes the fear of what others say about you.
- With others showing you appreciation comes the fear of being overlooked.
- With getting praise comes the fear of criticism.
- With fair treatment comes the fear of injustice.
- With attention from the opposite sex comes the fear of abandonment or of never getting married.

- With having a family comes the fear of being barren, of criticism of your children, of the death of a child.
- With making lots of money comes the fear of being poor.
- With involvement in ministries comes the fear of your ministry being taken away.
- With a position of importance comes the fear of not being consulted.
- With being right comes the fear of being wrong.
- With being perfect comes the fear of being less than perfect.
- With not disappointing others comes the fear of making mistakes.
- With others' good opinion comes the fear of what others think.
- With receiving approval comes the fear of disapproval.
- With making friends comes the fear of rejection.
- With being preferred comes the fear of being excluded.
- With being popular comes the fear of being mocked.
- With accomplishments comes the fear of failures.

With each item that gives you value, a fear is included. Can you ever get enough significance, build up enough value, to block all fears?

Fears are tricky. We often push them away to some dark corner where we never have to see them again and pretend they don't exist, but then, at the tiniest mention of them, tears well up in our eyes. Why do fears have such influence on us? Why do they control us?

Staring Down the Dog

My husband and I often find ourselves embroiled in a fierce argument, only to conclude that we are actually in agreement. Since I'm the argumentative one and most likely at fault for keeping the argument going, I feel quite silly realizing, at last, that we agree.

When you try to prove that a lie is not the truth, you are caught in a silly argument. Think about that for a moment. A lie, by its very definition, can't be the truth. A lie is a lie; it doesn't need to be proven

false. You could spend countless hours and immense energy on a pointless attempt to prove a lie false!

Don't try to conquer a fear by arguing with it!

Look at your fear!

Stare it down and call it what it is: a big fat lie!

When you live guided by fears, you live by lies, which continue to feed your fears and eventually lead you to sin. I'll demonstrate with a few of my old lies.

LIE #1: I must be perfect.

Being perfect makes me acceptable. Mistakes are unacceptable. I can be perfect.

RESULT: I fear failure. I fear being less than perfect. I respond with outbursts of anger and self-pity when others point out my imperfections.

LIE #2: I deserve to be treated fairly.

I can judge what is just and fair. Injustice is unacceptable. I deserve better.

RESULT: I am argumentative and defensive. I lash out at others. I feel war going on inside me.

LIE #3: If people really knew me, they would reject me.

Eventually everyone rejects me. I need to fix myself so people will like me. I'm worthless.

RESULT: I fear rejection. I am jealous. I view people as threats.

LIE #4: Guilt and remorse are the same as repentance.

Feeling bad about myself and feeling sorry for my sin are the same. I ought to feel bad about myself.

RESULT: I don't confess my sin. I don't live by grace. I don't show grace to others. I'm unforgiving.

Am I Good Enough?

Once upon a time there was a little pig that lived in the barn and played in the mud every day. She was happy and content, free to wander and roll in her favorite mud ponds.

One day, however, she spied a little pig playing outside with the children. This other little pig lived in the house and had such beautiful pink skin. She was loved and cherished and pampered. The children hugged her and called her sweet names. She got to spend all day with them. They fed her special treats and gave her little gifts.

The little barnyard pig looked on, thinking “I’m not much different from that little pig. I wonder why no one treats me like that.” The little pig’s happy contentment vanished, and in its place came an intense longing to be just like the house pig. Then she noticed that, unlike the clean, pretty pink pig, she was covered in mud. Of course, she concluded, clean, pink skin would make me worthy of living in the house. The little pig went in search of water where she could wash off the mud and find happiness.

Suddenly an awful thought stopped her. What if underneath the mud she was not pink? What if, after washing, she discovered she was not as beautiful as the other pig, not worthy of being chosen? Fear wrapped around her little heart and paralyzed her. “It’s not the mud that makes me unworthy,” she thought with horror, “I’m just not good enough.” More than anything, she wanted to have pink skin, to be loved like the other little pig. Without that love she could never be happy.

Soon the fear of discovering that she was unlovable grew greater than her desire to be loved. That fear drove her back to the mud pit. Her only refuge was to put on more mud and hide behind a thicker layer. She couldn’t stray far from the mud. It was her one place of security. As long as she stayed there, she wouldn’t have to face that awful fear again.

At times she felt trapped and longed to be free, but at the slightest hint that she was losing a layer of mud, she resigned herself to her fate. She lived as she always had, only now the mud, instead of making her happy and content, reminded her that she would never, ever be good enough to be loved.



Like that little pig, we can resign ourselves to eternal wallowing. We add layer upon layer to hide the ugliness we fear. We find security in building walls to keep in what little love we think we have. Our walls might be fat, depression, anger, rebellion, self-harm, alcohol, drugs, or obnoxious behavior. Our walls keep others away and distract us from the real pain, the real fear. We provide others with an excuse to reject us. That way we can't be rejected for the feared unworthiness that we've worked hard to hide. But no matter how deep we bury our fears, we remain desperately unhappy, afraid of being seen for who we are. We wish someone would know and love us anyway, but we are confident no one will, because we don't deserve love.

But what is the awful fear? How do we know if it is true?

Deep down, all of us have feared that we don't matter, that we are not worthy of love. In response, we may have become obsessed with our own worthiness, with feeling good about ourselves. It should not surprise us that the world is also obsessed with worth. We are drawn to seek our own self-worth and find our own significance because we want to be valued, wanted and, ultimately, loved.

The truth is that in Christ we are loved far beyond anything we can imagine or deserve. Can anyone love us more than our Creator who died for us? The truth is that everything we have is given to us in grace. Why do we act as though we deserve more? The truth is that there is nothing good in us apart from Christ. Why are we distressed when people think we're bad? We aren't perfect. Why do we try to make others think we are? That's a lie!

The truth is that Christ has bought us with His precious blood and we are not our own. We have no more right to call ourselves worthless than to claim honor for ourselves. How we feel about ourselves today, whether good or bad, has no bearing on who we are in Christ.

In Christ, we find all that we are, all that we need, all that gives us value. He is the only Person who makes us significant. Our identity is in Him and He is our Rock, solid, unchanging, and secure.

Considering this value that we have in Christ, I have to ask the question: is self-worth worth having? Furthermore, is self-worth a product of the Spirit or of the flesh? By the flesh I mean anything we are or have apart from Christ.

The flesh prompts us to seek our worth outside of Christ; the flesh deceives us into believing that we need to be more valuable, need to find more love and acceptance, need more satisfaction. When we seek to add to our value, we are saying, essentially, that Christ's value is not enough. That is not living by the truth of who we are in Christ. Finding our identity in Christ means He is our only source of value and worth. It doesn't mean that He makes us valuable to others, or that

“

*This obsession with
self-worth is a snare
of lies and fear.*

”

He increases our value as if we had any to begin with. It doesn't mean that He makes us feel good about ourselves. That is what the flesh wants.

Paul wrote, “If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13b). But instead of executing the flesh, we often pamper it. We keep it alive because we rely on it to feel good, to do the “good” that others can see, to build our confidence and sense of self-worth. This obsession is what trips us up, makes us feel that we aren't growing spiritually, and makes us tired of ourselves. This obsession with self-worth is the flesh's crowning triumph of deception. But for us it is a snare of lies and fear.

A Walk of Dying

Study Guide



There's a weed in these parts called a pokeweed. It grows 12 feet tall and produces grape-like berries that will give your digestive tract a nightmare if you try to eat them. When the weed is tiny, it slides right out of the ground with an easy tug, but leave it to grow just 8 inches tall and the plant snaps right off when I pull on it. To get rid of it, I have to get the shovel and dig hard at the roots.

We've all let the flesh grow too tall. If we really want to get unstuck, we're going to need to find those roots and do some digging.

It took writing most of this book before I realized that learning to walk by the Spirit isn't to remake me or realize me—it's about the end of me. But "me" is deeply rooted in the flesh and isn't about to lay down and die without putting up a fight.

This study guide is about asking questions that help you dig deeper. It may be too personal to share in a group. On the other hand, it may be the perfect study for a group if what you are looking for is genuine vulnerability and growth with others.

Use it anyway you like, just know that . . .

. . . every day is a good day to die.

Chapter 1

Our Obsession

1. Do you need a little “pick-me-up” now and then to feel okay or worthwhile? What would those be?
2. When you feel undervalued, or question your worth, in what ways do you typically try to increase your value or restore your worth?
3. Review the list on pages 14 and 15, and identify the contents of your value closet. Which items do you look to, or try to improve on, in order to gain value?
4. How does your need to boost your worth influence your relationships? Try to think of specific ways.
5. How do you react when your value is threatened? Do you . . .
 - become defensive
 - blame others
 - draw attention to yourself
 - try to convince others you’ve got it all together
 - get angry
 - lash out
 - mope
 - sink into self-loathing

6. How do you define self-worth and should you have any? Why or why not?

7. Do you ever feel that you aren't good enough? How do you react to that feeling? Do you react with . . .

- anger
- depression
- food
- sex
- sleep
- self-inflicted harm
- distractions
- chemical substances
- self-hate

8. What does it mean to say your identity is in Christ? When are you likely to want to affirm your identity in Christ? When your identity is in Christ, should you expect your value to fluctuate? Explain your answer.

Chapter 2

Deadly Desire

1. What is your flesh capable of doing for you? (Checkmark all that apply.)

- help you find truth
- deceive you

- desire what is good for you
- convict you of sin
- lead you out of an emotional storm
- satisfy your wants

2. In what ways does your flesh offer solutions for what is wrong with you? Have any of these “fixes” been achievable?

3. When we trust the flesh to want what is good for us, we will question God’s goodness. In what ways do you doubt the goodness of God in your life right now? In what ways have you trusted your flesh to know what is good for you? Would the Spirit ever cause you to doubt God’s goodness?

4. Is feeling good about yourself a flesh goal or a Spirit goal? Explain your answer.

Does the Bible say anything about feeling good about yourself? Give examples if you say yes.

5. Think of some instances in which you have made feeling good about yourself your goal. What has typically been the outcome of those times?

6. Would the flesh ever make bad things look appealing? What might those things be in your life? (ex. sin, drugs, self-harm, sex, self-condemnation, etc.) Be specific.

7. How does the flesh enslave us?

8. Feelings are voices of the flesh that give misleading directions. How have you been, or are being led, by your feelings? What are some examples?

9. When I want to look good is that the Spirit or my flesh talking? When I try to do good is it always the Spirit leading me? What else could it be?

If what I achieve as “good” is really done in the flesh, can that good have any power to overcome the flesh? Why do you think this?

10. What are the four things the flesh does? (Review the chapter subtitles.)