

Understanding Trauma: How it can impact you & those around you.

An Overview of Trauma and its Effects

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Week 1 – Understanding Trauma: Suffering in a Fallen World

Understanding the Creation, Fall, the Curse and Redemption.

- **Constructing a theological lens through which to understand and respond to trauma.**
- **Genesis 3; Romans 8:22–23**

I. Creation: Shalom, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing

- **Key Text: *Genesis 1:26–31; 2:15–25***
- **Theological Insights:**
 - **The concept of Shalom** is more than peace; it's the holistic, harmonious flourishing of all creation—physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual.
 - Humanity was created in the image of God (Imago Dei) with dignity, purpose, and capacity for covenant relationship.
 - Creation was declared “very good” (Genesis 1:31). There was no trauma, pain, or death.
 - Relationships—between God and humanity, man and woman, and humans and nature—were marked by intimacy, trust, and joy.

I. Creation: Shalom, Wholeness, and Human Flourishing

Clinical Parallels:

- **Secure attachment** reflects Eden's original design: safety, connection, and co-regulation.
- Trauma disrupts this sense of *safety*.
- Pre-fall life represents the human longing for safety, voice, and **agency** (*the capability to think*)—key elements often lost through trauma.
- Human nervous systems are wired for connection and safety—which aligns with God's design for community and trust.

II. The Fall: The Shattering of Shalom

- **Key Text:** *Genesis 3:1–24*

Theological Insights:

- The entry of sin through Adam and Eve's rebellion ruptured every relationship—vertical (with God) and horizontal (with self, others, and creation).
- The immediate results include shame (v. 7), fear (v. 10), blame (v. 12), and hiding—all classic trauma responses.
- The curse introduced pain, toil, relational conflict, and death into the human story (vv. 16–19).
- The image of God was marred, not erased. **People are now born spiritually dead, and all creation is subjected to futility (Total Depravity).**

II. The Fall: The Shattering of Shalom

Clinical Parallels:

- Trauma often produces shame, fear, secrecy, and blame, echoing Genesis 3.
- The serpent's deception fractures truth, mirroring how trauma fractures perception, identity, purpose and meaning.
- The hiding and relational dysfunction introduced at the Fall mirror dissociation and disconnection often seen in trauma survivors.
- The ground is “cursed,” reflecting that suffering is now embedded in the environment—even the systems that were once safe (family, community, church) can become sources of pain.

Romans 8:18–23 (ESV)

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope

21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

III. The Curse: Groaning, Futility, and Longing for Redemption

• Key Text: *Romans 8:18–23*

Theological Insights:

- **Vs 18:** Paul acknowledges the reality of **suffering**—he does not minimize it—but places it within the hope of future **glory**.
- Vs. 19-21 – Paul teaches that all of creation is now subjected to futility, meaning it is unable to fulfill its intended purpose. Yet, there's hope of **liberation**.
- Vs. 22 – The language of groaning speaks to ongoing, unresolved suffering that permeates the created order.
- Trauma fits this framework as both an effect of living in a cursed world and a form of suffering awaiting final redemption.
- **Verse 23:** Believers also **groan** inwardly, even with the Holy Spirit's presence, because we still await **full redemption**—our final healing and glorification.

III. The Curse: Groaning, Futility, and Longing for Redemption

Clinical Parallels:

- The persistent effects of trauma (hypervigilance, flashbacks, shame) reflect ongoing groaning—where healing is partial and incomplete this side of glory.
- Even in healing, many survivors carry long-term effects—a reality that matches Paul’s teaching on the non-finality of suffering in the present age.
- Hope and endurance are central themes in trauma recovery, just as they are central in Romans 8. Christians live in the tension of “already justified” but “not yet glorified.”

Summary

- Trauma must be understood within the larger story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. God created humanity in His image, designed for safety, connection, and flourishing — our nervous systems, emotions, and relationships were made to thrive in love, not fear. But through the Fall, sin fractured this design, introducing abuse, betrayal, neglect, and fear into a world that now wounds the very people it was meant to protect. Trauma is not merely a clinical diagnosis but a profound evidence of life in a fallen world — it disrupts identity, trust, and regulation. Yet in Christ, redemption enters the story. Jesus, steps into our suffering not only to forgive sin but to restore what sin and trauma have shattered. Through His death and resurrection, we are invited into healing — spiritually, physically, emotionally, and relationally — as the Spirit begins the slow work of reordering what has been disordered, reconnecting what has been torn apart, and giving hope that our pain, while real, is not the end of ***our*** story.

Key Takeaway's

- **Total Depravity:** Humanity is now inherently sinful and unable to save itself. Sin affects every part of the person—mind, will, emotions, and body.
- **Federal Headship:** Adam's (Humanity's rep.) sin is imputed to all, just as Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers (Romans 5).
- **Covenant Theology:** Adam broke the **Covenant of Works**; Genesis 3:15 introduces the **Covenant of Grace**.
 - **Covenant of Works** - The Covenant of Works refers to the arrangement God made with Adam in the Garden of Eden.
 - **Covenant of Grace** - The Covenant of Grace is the overarching covenant God established after the Fall (first revealed in Genesis 3:15).

**Questions about the
framework?**

The Origin of the Word "Trauma"

- The word *trauma* comes from the **Greek word "τραῦμα" (trauma)**, which means "**wound.**"
- In **ancient Greek**, it referred specifically to a **physical injury or wound to the body.**
- Over time, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, medical and psychological fields began using *trauma* to describe **emotional or psychological wounds**, not just physical ones.
- The shift occurred particularly during and after **World War I**, when doctors began to recognize what was then called "**shell shock**" in soldiers—symptoms of anxiety, nightmares, and emotional numbing in response to the horrors of war.
- This was later formalized as **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** in the late 20th century.

Is the word 'Trauma' in the Bible?

- Yes! The word τραῦμα (trauma) does appear in the **Greek New Testament**, but not exactly in the way we use it today. It literally means "**wound**" or "**injury.**" For example, it can refer to cuts, bruises, or wounds caused by battle or accidents.

How This Connects to Spiritual and Emotional Trauma

- While in the **New Testament Greek**, it doesn't explicitly use *τραῦμα* to mean psychological trauma, the Bible **richly portrays emotional and spiritual wounds** through metaphor, story, and poetic language (e.g., a “broken heart,” “grief,” “deep sorrow”).
- This shows us that **trauma as a concept** is broader in Scripture, encompassing **body, soul, and spirit** wounds, even if the exact Greek word for “trauma” isn't used in the emotional sense.

1. Verses Using τραῦμα (wound/injury) Literally:

- **Luke 10:30** — The Parable of the Good Samaritan
- “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and **beat him**, and departed, leaving him half dead.”
(Greek uses words related to wounds/injury to describe his physical state.)
- **Isaiah 53:5** (often quoted in the New Testament, e.g., 1 Peter 2:24)
- “But he was pierced for our transgressions, **crushed for our iniquities**; upon him was the **wound** [τραῦμα] that brought us peace, and by his bruises we are healed.”
This prophecy speaks physically but also spiritually — Christ’s wounds heal our deepest brokenness.

2. Verses Addressing Emotional and Spiritual Wounds Metaphorically:

- **Psalms 34:18**
- “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”
(No direct use of *τραῦμα*, but this verse powerfully communicates God’s care for emotional/spiritual wounds.)
- **Psalms 147:3**
- “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”
(Again, metaphorical language about God’s healing beyond physical injury.)
- **Isaiah 61:1**
- “He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...”
(Jesus quotes this passage in Luke 4:18 as part of his mission to bring healing.)
- **Matthew 11:28-30**
- “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
(An invitation to bring your burdens, your emotional wounds, to Jesus.)

Summary

- While the Greek word *τραῦμα* in the Bible primarily means **physical wounds**, the Scriptures richly describe **emotional and spiritual brokenness** using imagery like **broken hearts, crushed spirits, and binding wounds**.
- This connects Christ's **physical wounds** (Isaiah 53) to his power to heal our **whole person—body, mind, and soul**.
- Trauma is not only a clinical or physical reality—it is also a deeply spiritual experience that God understands, Jesus enters into, and the Holy Spirit is present to heal.

What is the definition of Trauma today?

- Trauma refers to an emotional, psychological, or physical response to an event or series of events that are overwhelmingly distressing, harmful, or life-threatening.
- It involves situations that exceed an individual's ability to cope or process, leading to lasting effects on their spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health.

Types of Trauma

- **Physical Trauma:**
 - Injury or damage to the body caused by accidents, surgery, or violence.
- **Emotional/Psychological Trauma:**
 - Distress caused by life events that affect mental well-being, such as loss, abuse, or witnessing a violent act.
- **Developmental Trauma:**
 - Long-term emotional or psychological harm, especially in childhood, which can affect cognitive, emotional, and social development.
- **Complex Trauma:**
 - Repeated or prolonged exposure to traumatic events, often occurring in childhood, such as ongoing abuse or neglect.
- **Spiritual Trauma:**
 - Harm caused by religious authority or settings that distort God's character or Scripture.
- **Relational Trauma:**
 - Brokenness in relationships (e.g., betrayal, divorce, conflict).

Causes of Trauma

- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Witnessing violence
- Neglect
- Accidents
- Natural Disasters
- Loss of a loved one
- War or Combat exposure
- Chronic Stress
- Toxic Environments
- Bullying
- Witnessing or experiencing a crime

- This could be a Single Event or a Reoccurring Event

Symptoms of Trauma

Emotional Symptoms:

- Intense fear, sadness, or anger
- Anxiety, panic attacks
- Flashbacks or intrusive thoughts

Physical Symptoms:

- Fatigue, trouble sleeping
- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems (nausea, digestive issues)

Behavioral Symptoms:

- Avoidance of reminders or situations
- Increased use of substances (alcohol, drugs)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

Long-Term Effects of Trauma

Mental Health Impact:

- PTSD
- Anxiety and depression
- Dissociation and emotional numbness

Physical Health Impact:

- Cardiovascular issues (high blood pressure, heart disease)
- Gastrointestinal problems (IBS, ulcers)
- Chronic pain (e.g., fibromyalgia)

Summary & Questions

1. Definition of Trauma

- Individualized

2. Types of Trauma

- 6 general types

3. Causes of Trauma

- Singular vs. Reoccurring

4. Questions

How Trauma Affects the Brain

*Bridging Neuroscience and Reformed
Theology for Healing*

1. God Created the Brain with Intricate Design

Clinical Insight:

- Trauma responses are not signs of weakness—they are part of God's-designed system for **survival**.
- Trauma responses—such as heightened anxiety, hypervigilance, emotional numbness, or dissociation—are often misunderstood.
- Many people who experience these symptoms mistakenly believe they are weak, broken, or morally flawed. This misunderstanding can lead to **deep self-blame and shame**, compounding their suffering.

1. God Created the Brain with Intricate Design

Theological Insight:

- Humanity is made *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27)—body and soul.
- The **Westminster Confession of Faith** (WCF 4.2) emphasizes God's providence in the governance of all things, including how our bodies respond to danger.
- After the Fall (Genesis 3), the image of God was **marred but not lost**—our bodies (including the brain) still reflect divine craftsmanship, though they are now subject to weakness, sin, and disorder.

2. Trauma Triggers the Brain's Survival Systems

Clinical Insight:

- The **amygdala** plays a vital role in processing emotions, related to survival and social interactions. It's often referred to as the brain's "**emotional center**" because it helps in detecting and responding to emotional stimuli, especially **threats**.
 - **Fight:** Responding to threat with aggression or confrontation to protect oneself.
- **Flight:** Attempting to escape or run away from danger to find safety.
- **Freeze:** Becoming immobilized or "shutting down" when escape or fight feels impossible.
- **Fawn:** Trying to please or appease the threat to avoid harm, often by compliance or people-pleasing.

2. Trauma Triggers the Brain's Survival Systems

Theological Insight:

- The WCF 6.2 notes that sin affects the whole person. Our **neurobiological systems** are not exempt. Even the body's instinctive responses can misfire due to the Fall.
- Trauma reveals our longing for safety—a signpost pointing us back to the God who is our refuge.

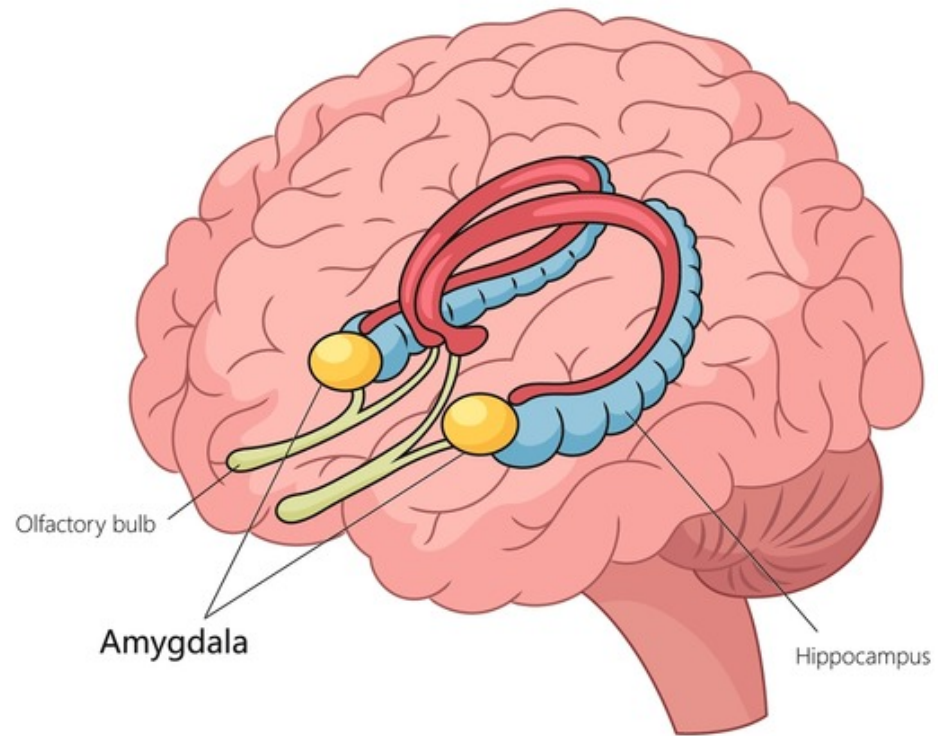
Psalm 46:1 (ESV):

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

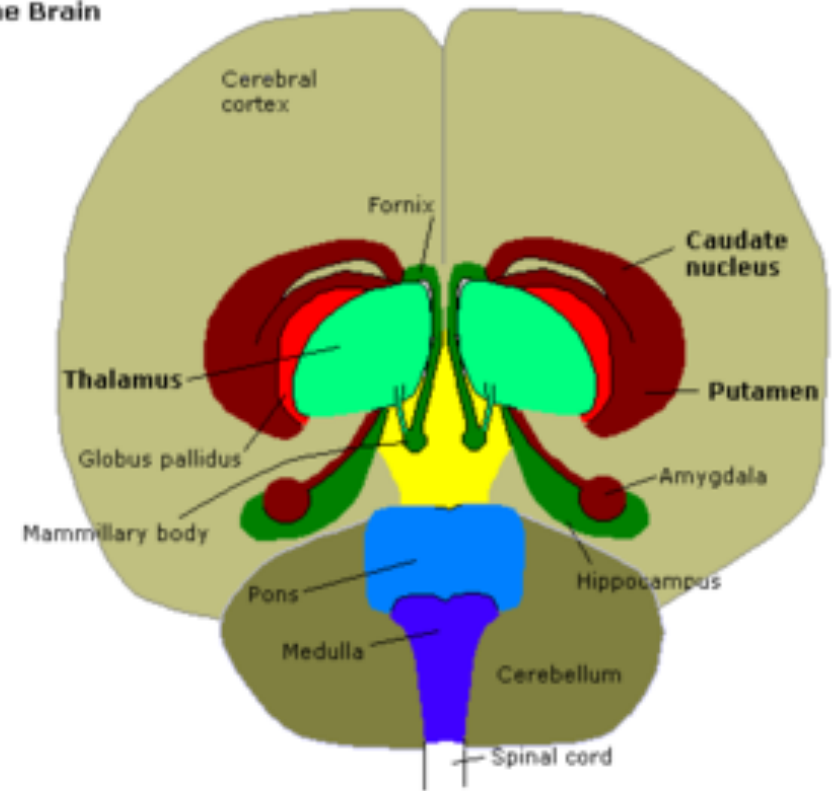
In Summary:

- The amygdala is essential for emotional processing, particularly fear, and plays a role in how we respond to both danger and rewarding stimuli.
- Trauma can lead to an overactive amygdala, which results in heightened emotional responses, an exaggerated fear reaction, and difficulties in managing emotions.
- This hyperactivity can contribute to conditions like anxiety, PTSD, and ongoing difficulties in processing and regulating emotions.

Amygdala



The Brain



3. The Prefrontal Cortex Goes Offline

Clinical Insight:

- **Decision Making:** The PFC is involved in evaluating options, making judgments, and predicting the outcomes of actions.
- **Emotional Regulation:** The PFC helps modulate emotions by exerting control over reactive areas of the brain.
- **Impulse Control:** The PFC is essential for preventing inappropriate behaviors and responses.
- **Executive Functions:** This includes planning, organizing, problem-solving, and working memory.
- **Social Behavior:** The PFC plays a role in regulating social interactions and maintaining appropriate behavior in different contexts, including understanding social norms and empathy.

In trauma, it's overridden by survival circuitry. This explains why someone may “shut down,” feel numb, or have trouble processing conversations during or after distressing events.

3. The Prefrontal Cortex Goes Offline

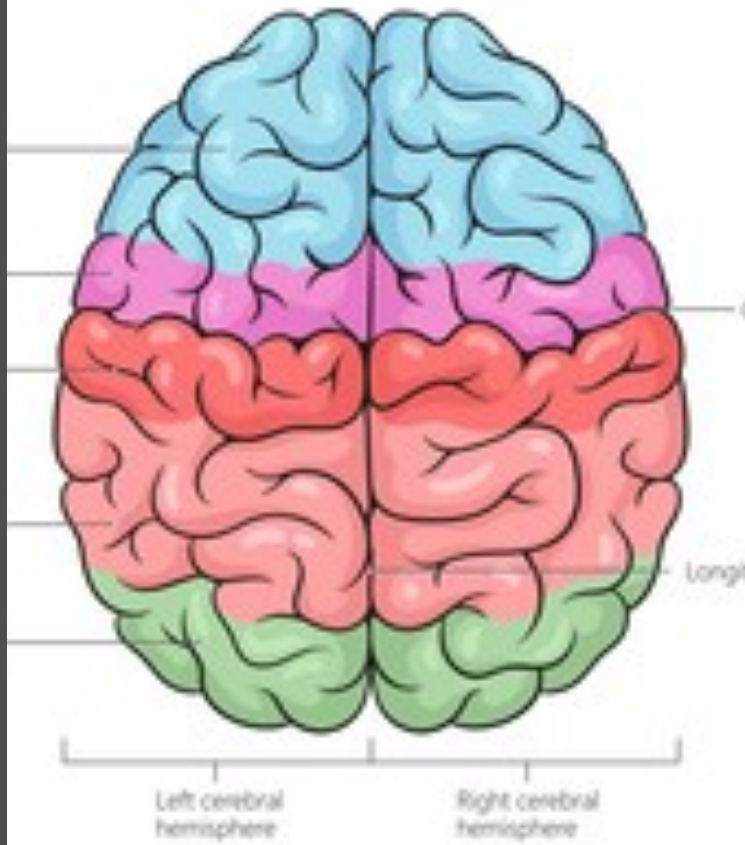
Theological Insight:

- The **prefrontal cortex**—the brain’s center for reasoning, planning, and moral judgment—reflects this high calling. It allows us to weigh choices, pursue wisdom, and live responsively before God.
- In moments of intense trauma, our prefrontal cortex “goes offline,” meaning we may lose access to the very functions we associate with wisdom, judgment, and reflection. This is not moral failure; it is human frailty under the weight of suffering.

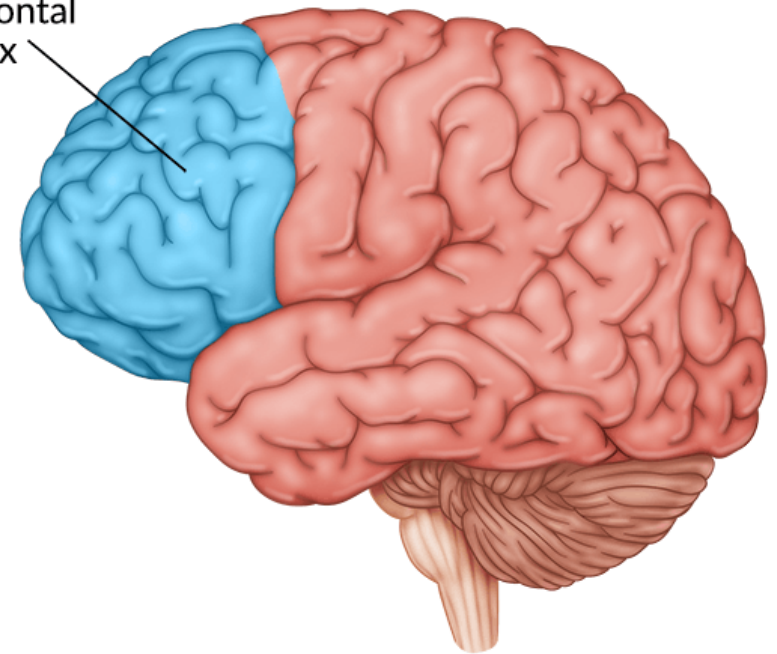
In Summary:

- The Prefrontal Cortex is crucial for thinking, decision-making, and emotional regulation.
- Trauma can impair its functioning, leading to difficulties with controlling impulses, processing emotions, and thinking clearly.
- Over time, this can have long-lasting effects on mental health and overall functioning if trauma is not addressed.

Human brain
(Top view)



Prefrontal
cortex



4. The Hippocampus and Memory

Distortion Clinical Insight:

- **Memory Formation:** The hippocampus is primarily responsible for converting short-term memories into long-term memories.
- **Spatial Navigation:** The hippocampus is involved in spatial memory, helping you navigate and orient yourself in physical space.
- **Contextualizing Emotions:** The hippocampus works with the amygdala to provide context for emotional experiences.
- **Regulating Stress Response:** The hippocampus helps regulate the body's stress response, which governs the release of stress hormones like cortisol.

Trauma can distort memory: instead of filing it away as “past,” it remains emotionally “present.” This explains flashbacks, triggers, and dissociation.

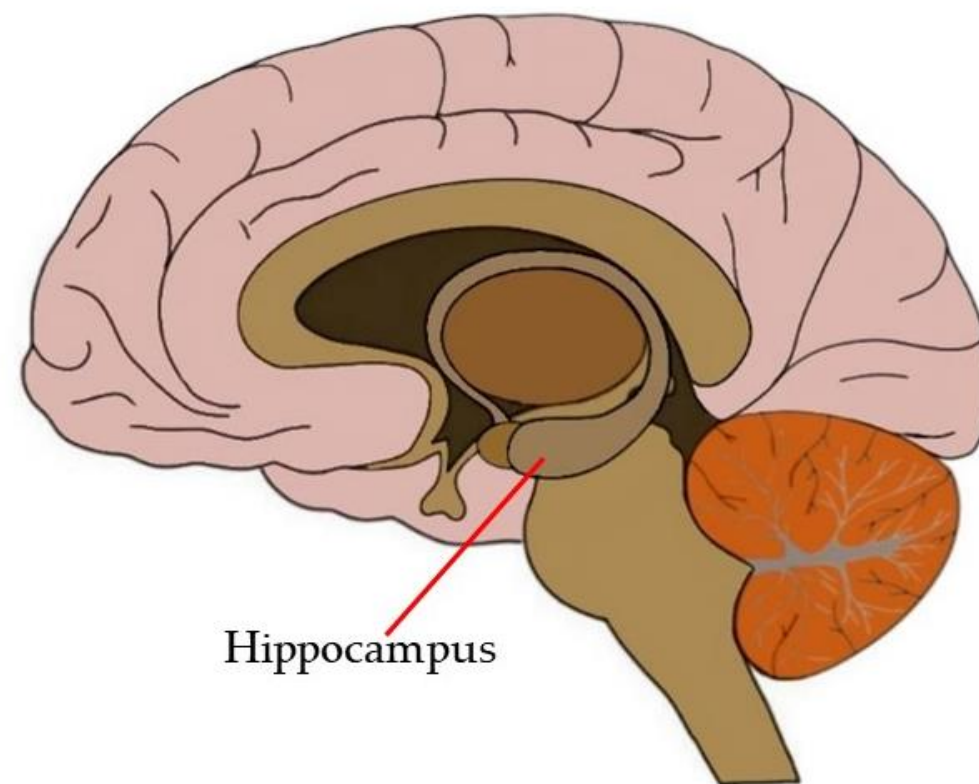
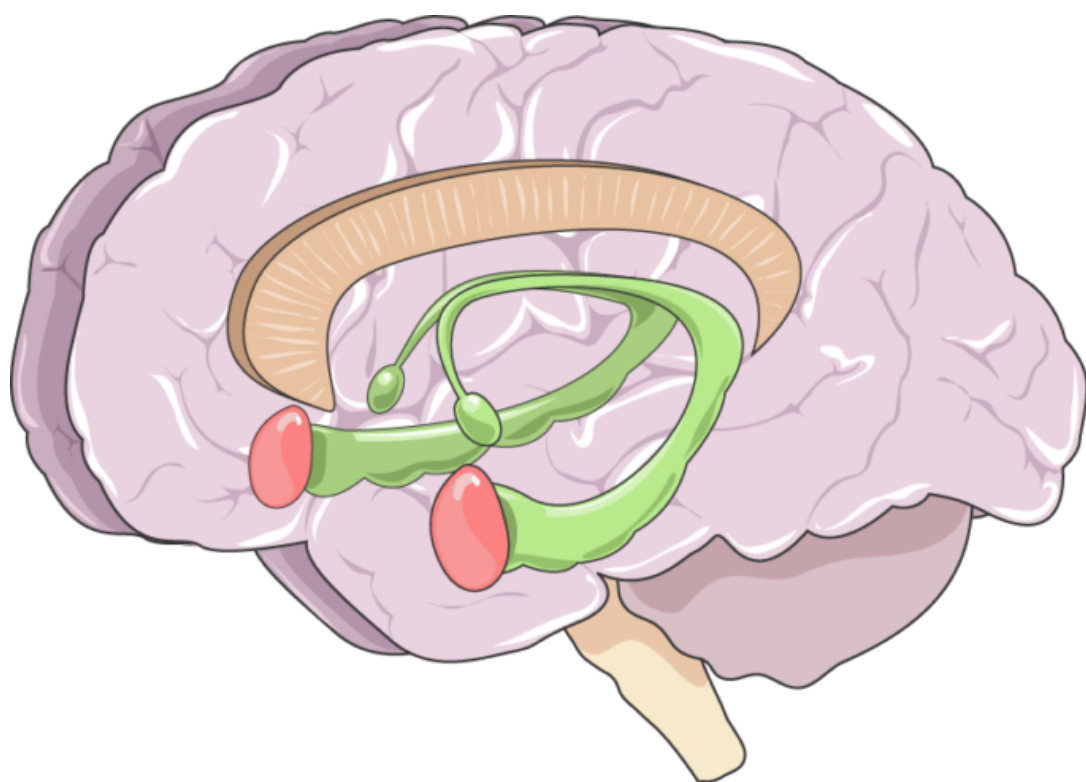
4. The Hippocampus and Memory Distortion

Theological Insight:

- In a fallen world, our ability to remember and interpret events is compromised. We groan for renewal (Romans 8:22–23).
- God's covenantal promises do not rely on our ability to remember rightly but on **His faithfulness** to remember us (Psalm 103:14; Isaiah 49:15–16).

In Summary:

- The hippocampus is crucial for forming, storing, and recalling memories, navigating space, and helping contextualize emotional experiences.
- Trauma, especially when it's long-lasting or severe, can lead to structural changes in the hippocampus, such as shrinkage, which can impair memory processing, emotional regulation, and stress management.
- These effects are commonly seen in individuals with PTSD and can contribute to difficulties in managing both everyday situations and emotional responses.



5. Trauma Changes Brain Wiring (Neuroplasticity)

Clinical Insight:

- The brain adapts—sometimes in unhealthy ways after trauma. But it can also **rebuild healthier patterns** through therapy, safe relationships, spiritual practices, and community.
- This rewiring process can reflect **sanctification**—gradual healing and renewal of the whole person.

5. Trauma Changes Brain Wiring (Neuroplasticity)

Theological Insight:

- God's common grace is evident in the brain's capacity to **heal**. The Reformers acknowledged that even in a fallen world, creation retains goodness (Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.3).
- Neuroplasticity is a modern evidence of how God **renews the mind** (Romans 12:2) through both spiritual and natural means.

6. Spiritual and Clinical Implications

Clinical Summary:

- Trauma care is **not just about coping**, but restoring trust, relationships, and meaning—all of which are deeply spiritual and clinical.
- **The church can be a place of healing attachment.**
A trauma-informed church reflects what clinical models describe as safe environments:
 - **Predictability** (routines, non-reactive leadership)
 - **Attunement** (listening and reflecting others' emotional states)
 - **Containment** (setting limits and boundaries compassionately)
 - **Integration** (helping people make sense of their pain in light of God's story)

6. Spiritual and Clinical Implications

Theological Summary:

- **Total Depravity** doesn't mean people are as bad as they could be, but that **every faculty** (including the nervous system) is affected by sin.
- **Federal Headship** reminds us that we inherited brokenness through Adam—but also that **healing and righteousness** are ours through Christ.
- **Covenant of Grace** assures us that even in our most dysregulated moments, God's promises to hold us fast—not our ability to perform or “feel okay.”

**Questions about how
trauma affects the brain?
Final Questions?**

Review Questions

- Will
- Situations
- Childhood

Review: Theological Framework

- **Creation:**

God created the world good (Genesis 1). Humanity was made in His image (Genesis 1:26–27) with dignity, purpose, and perfect relationship with God, others, and creation. This original design reflected peace, safety, voice, and agency.

- **The Fall:**

Sin entered the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience (Genesis 3), fracturing those relationships. The image of God in us was **marred, not erased**. The fall introduced fear, shame, guilt, suffering, and brokenness into human experience.

- **The Curse & Redemption:**

As a result of the fall, all creation was subjected to futility and pain (Romans 8:20–22). But God promised redemption through the coming Messiah. Jesus Christ bore the curse of sin on the cross (Galatians 3:13) to restore what was lost. Redemption is ongoing—healing begins now and will be complete at Christ's return.

Review: Clinical Integration

- **Creation – Original Design:**

Human beings were created for safety, connection, purpose, and belonging. From a clinical lens, this reflects our hardwired need for secure attachment, emotional regulation, and relational harmony. The brain and body function best in environments of trust and stability.

- **The Fall – Disruption and Trauma:**

Sin introduced rupture and fear into the human experience. As relationships fractured, so did internal security. Clinically, the Fall corresponds to the introduction of trauma, toxic stress, and emotional wounding. Shame, guilt, and fear became deeply embedded emotional patterns.

- **The Curse & Redemption – Ongoing Impact and Healing:**

Trauma became a generational reality (Genesis 3; Romans 8). People now live with the effects of trauma in the body and mind—hypervigilance, dissociation, anxiety, and relational mistrust.

But healing is possible. Redemption in Christ initiates restoration. Clinically, this mirrors the process of trauma recovery: recognizing the wound, reconnecting with others, regulating the nervous system, and reclaiming identity. In Christ, healing is holistic—body, mind, and spirit.

Week 2

- **From Survival to Wholeness: Trauma's Impact and Hope in Christ**

Trauma Reactions

- **Objective:**

- Understand that trauma responses are automatic, biological survival mechanisms—not signs of weakness, lack of faith, or character flaws.

Survival Mode: The Body's Built-In Alarm System

- When a person perceives threat, the brain activates the **autonomic nervous system (ANS)** to respond—this is not a conscious decision.
- The amygdala (“alarm system” of the brain) fires rapidly, signaling danger and preparing the body for **fight, flight, freeze, or fawn**.
- This response is adaptive in danger, but in trauma survivors, the system can become **overactive**—like a smoke alarm that goes off when toast burns – it is not an immediate threat.

Triggers: Unwanted Replays of the Past

- Triggers are **reminders** of the original trauma—sensory (5 senses), emotional (feeling helpless), or relational (being dismissed).
- The brain doesn't differentiate between **real threat and perceived threat**, so the body reacts ***as if*** the trauma is happening again.
- **Examples of trauma reactions:**
 - Panic attacks in crowded places
 - Irritability or sudden anger
 - Emotional shutdown or dissociation
 - Hypervigilance (constant scanning for danger)

These Reactions Are Not a Choice

- Survivors often feel shame or confusion about why they "can't just get over it."
- Emphasize: these responses are **biological, not moral**. They reflect a brain that has learned to protect itself.
- Responses can persist long after the trauma is over because the nervous system hasn't learned safety yet.

Example: The Slamming Door – A Veteran’s Body Remembers

- Jacob is a former combat veteran. He served two tours overseas, where he experienced intense firefights, roadside bombs, and the constant tension of being under threat. One of the most searing moments of his deployment was when an IED exploded just after his unit had kicked in the door of a compound. The explosion killed two of his friends. The sound of that door slamming shut just before the blast was burned into his memory.
- Now home, Jacob lives with his wife and two children in a quiet suburban neighborhood. He loves his family. He works. He laughs. Most people wouldn’t know anything was wrong.
- But one afternoon, Jacob is standing in the kitchen when his teenage son, in a rush, **slams the back door**.
- Instantly, Jacob’s body reacts. His **heart races**. His **muscles seize**. He drops to the ground and **covers his head**, breathing hard, confused and disoriented. He’s not thinking — he’s **reliving**. He doesn’t see his kitchen anymore — for a split second, **he’s back in the desert**. His brain isn’t differentiating between past and present.
- His wife runs in, confused and frightened. “Jacob, are you okay?” He hears her voice, but it sounds far away. His body is telling him, *“You are not safe. Survive.”*

Clinical Reflection:

- Jacob's reaction was not a choice. It was a **reflex wired into his nervous system** through trauma.
- The **sound of the slamming door** triggered a **sensory memory** associated with death and terror.
- His **amygdala** (alarm system) bypassed his rational brain. This is what **implicit trauma memory** looks like: it lives in the body, not in words.
- **Hyperarousal, flashbacks, and startle responses** are classic signs of **post-traumatic stress**.

Theological Integration:

- This example shows how deeply trauma can live in the body — not just in thoughts or beliefs, but in the **nervous system** itself.
Jacob isn't broken. He isn't faithless. His body is trying to protect him, even when he's safe.
- The church is called to be a place where people like Jacob are not judged, but gently helped toward **regulation, rest, and redemption** — through both **clinical care** and **spiritual compassion**.

Why Did Jacob React That Way?

The Four Trauma Responses:

- **Fight:** Responding to threat with aggression or confrontation to protect oneself.
- **Flight:** Attempting to escape or run away from danger to find safety.
- **Freeze:** Becoming immobilized or “shutting down” when escape or fight feels impossible.
- **Fawn:** Trying to please or appease the threat to avoid harm, often by compliance or people-pleasing.

1. **Fight** – "I will overpower the threat"

- The body prepares to confront the danger.
- Muscles tense, fists clench, voice may raise.
- Adrenaline floods the system.
- **In trauma survivors**, this might look like: irritability, aggression, or over-controlling behavior.
- Jacob might go into **fight** mode if his body interprets the slamming door as an attack and prepares to strike or defend.

2. **Flight** – "I will escape the threat"

- The body tries to flee to safety.
- Heart rate increases, eyes scan for exits, energy floods the limbs.
- **In trauma survivors**, this might appear as: anxiety, restlessness, perfectionism, or a chronic need to stay busy or avoid.
- Jacob might go into **flight** if his body's impulse is to get out of the house immediately, even if he can't explain why.

3. **Freeze** – "I will go numb or play dead"

- The body shuts down to survive.
- Muscles may become immobile, breathing slows, awareness narrows or dissociates.
- Often seen in **overwhelming or inescapable trauma**, especially abuse or war.
- **In trauma survivors**, this might show up as: dissociation, emotional numbing, difficulty making decisions, or feeling “stuck.”
- In Jacob’s case, collapsing to the floor and disconnecting from his surroundings is a **freeze** response — his nervous system has gone into lockdown.

4. **Fawn** – "I will appease the threat to stay safe"

- The body tries to stay safe by pleasing, complying, or caretaking.
- This is especially common in relational or developmental trauma (e.g., childhood abuse).
- **In trauma survivors**, fawning looks like: people-pleasing, avoiding conflict, chronic caretaking, or ignoring their own needs to prevent rejection.
- While Jacob's story illustrates **freeze**, others who experienced relational trauma — like a child with an abusive parent — may default to **fawn** to survive emotionally.
- In other words, Fawn does not necessarily apply well in this example.

Example: The Smell of Burnt Toast – A Trauma Reawakened

- Marissa is a 42-year-old woman and mother of three. In her early twenties, she survived a devastating house fire. Though the flames didn't touch her body, she inhaled thick smoke, felt the searing heat, and believed she was going to die. Her body carries that memory, even if her conscious mind doesn't think about it much anymore.
- Today, life is steady. She has a family, a job, and is actively involved in her church. Trauma seems like something in her past — until one ordinary morning.
- She walks into the kitchen and catches the **sharp scent of burnt toast**. Her teenage son had forgotten about the toaster. A thin stream of smoke curls toward the ceiling. The moment the smell hits her nose, her body **instantly remembers**.
- Her chest tightens. Her stomach drops. Her heart races. Her vision narrows. She drops her coffee mug, backs up toward the hallway, and shouts at her son:
 “Get out! Get out of the house!”
 There's no fire — but internally she is on fire.

What's Happening?

- Smell is one of the most **powerful sensory triggers for trauma**.
- The olfactory system connects directly to the **amygdala** (which processes threat) and the **hippocampus** (which encodes memory). So, when Marissa smells burning, her brain doesn't wait for logical analysis (PFC) — it launches into **survival mode**.

Her Trauma Responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn

- In a moment like this, a person may cycle through one or more trauma responses — automatic strategies the brain uses to protect against danger.

1. **Fight** – "I will overpower the threat"

- Marissa's voice sharpens. She yells, takes control, and reacts with urgency.
- She's not trying to hurt — she's trying to *protect*. Fight mode is about regaining power in the face of perceived threat.

2. **Flight** – "I will escape the threat"

- Her instinct says: *Get out*. She steps backward, toward an exit, heart pounding, brain screaming for escape.
- This is the nervous system trying to flee from danger — even if that danger is no longer real.

3. **Freeze** – "I will go numb"

- For a moment, her body locks up. Her breath catches. Her mind blanks.
- This freeze response is a temporary shutdown — a way to pause and assess or prepare for helplessness.

4. **Fawn** – "I will appease the threat to stay safe" - (often overlooked, especially in women)

- Later that day, Marissa apologizes repeatedly to her son and husband. She minimizes her outburst, downplays her emotions, and redirects attention away from herself.
- This is fawning: an adaptive survival strategy rooted in **placating, appeasing, or caregiving** to avoid further threat or rejection.

Clinical and Spiritual Insight

- **Marissa's reaction was not a weakness — it was protection.** Her body interpreted a **smell** as a life-threatening danger, and her nervous system launched her into a trauma loop.
- **These responses are not choices** — they're instinctual, learned through past danger and often reinforced by repeated survival situations.
- Trauma lives not just in the mind, but in the **body** — and it can be triggered without warning.
- From a clinical perspective: Her brain's limbic system hijacked her rational brain (PFC).
- From a Christian perspective: She is a beloved image-bearer who carries the scars of a broken world — and God's redemption includes her body, too.

How Can the Church Support Survivors Like Marissa & Jacob?

- **Slow down** and validate people's experience: *“You’re not overreacting. That was real for you.”*
- **Create safety**, both emotionally and physically, where trauma survivors don’t feel judged or rushed to “move on.”
- **Encourage professional care** (trauma-informed therapy) as a means of God’s common grace.
- **Remind people of redemption** — where God is not only making all things new, but making *them* new, day by day.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”

— 2 Corinthians 4:16

Questions About Trauma Reactions and the Examples?

What is PTSD?

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop after a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence.
 - **Not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD**, but for those who do, the trauma causes intense, ongoing symptoms that interfere with daily life.
 - PTSD reflects how trauma impacts the brain and nervous system, leading to persistent difficulties in processing the traumatic memories and regulating emotions.

Common Symptoms of PTSD – 4 Categories

1. Intrusive Symptoms:

- Flashbacks — vivid, distressing re-experiencing of the trauma as if it is happening now
- Nightmares related to the traumatic event
- Distressing thoughts or memories that come unwanted.

2. Avoidance:

- Avoiding places, people, or activities that remind them of the trauma
- Trying not to think or talk about the traumatic event
- Use of alcohol, excessive sleep, drugs, pornography, etc.

Common Symptoms of PTSD – 4 Categories

3. Negative Changes in Thoughts and Mood:

- Persistent negative beliefs about self, others, or the world (“I am unsafe,” “No one can be trusted”)
- Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions – may lead to depression

4. Changes in Arousal and Reactivity:

- Hypervigilance — always “on alert” for danger
- Exaggerated startle response
- Irritability, anger outbursts
- Difficulty sleeping or concentrating

Symptom	PTSD	Anxiety	Depression	OCD
Intrusive thoughts	✔ Re-experiencing trauma	✔ Excessive worry	— Often ruminative	✔ Obsessions (distressing images/thoughts)
Avoidance	✔ Trauma reminders	✔ Avoid situations	— May withdraw socially	✔ Avoidance of triggers/compulsions
Sleep issues	✔ Nightmares, insomnia	✔ Restlessness, difficulty falling asleep	✔ Early waking, hypersomnia	✔ Sleep disrupted by compulsions or anxiety
Hypervigilance / Startle	✔ Constant scanning for threat	✔ Heightened arousal	— Less common	— Sometimes, related to fear of contamination or harm
Irritability / Anger	✔ Common	✔ Can be present	✔ Common	— Less common
Guilt or Shame	✔ Survivor’s guilt, shame	— Can be present	✔ Common	✔ Often tied to obsessions (moral, religious, etc.)
Loss of interest (Anhedonia)	— Possible	— Possible	✔ Core symptom	— Rare unless comorbid depression
Fatigue / Low energy	✔ From chronic stress	✔ From muscle tension	✔ Core symptom	✔ Often due to time-consuming rituals
Difficulty concentrating	✔ Due to re-experiencing	✔ Due to racing thoughts	✔ From cognitive slowing	✔ Obsessions interfere with focus
Physical symptoms	✔ Muscle tension, GI distress	✔ Heart racing, dizziness	✔ Headaches, body aches	✔ Tension from compulsive behaviors
Compulsions (behaviors)	— May use coping rituals	— Avoidance-type behaviors	— Not typical	✔ Repetitive actions to reduce anxiety
Emotional numbness	✔ Common in chronic PTSD	— Less common	✔ Feeling “empty,” detached	— Sometimes occurs post-ritual
Fear of losing control or harm	✔ Triggered by trauma memories	✔ Generalized or panic-driven	— Not typical	✔ Often central (e.g., fear of hurting others)

Clinical Insight: Trauma Often Masquerades as Other Disorders

- Trauma is a **root issue** that often manifests through overlapping symptoms across multiple mental health diagnoses. What appears to be anxiety or depression might actually stem from unresolved trauma. For example:
- Intrusive thoughts aren't always just "OCD" — they may be **trauma flashbacks**.
- Avoidance and withdrawal aren't only depression — they may be the nervous system's attempt to **feel safe**.
- Even compulsive rituals can reflect attempts to restore **control** in an unpredictable or unsafe environment.
- Clinically, this is why trauma-informed care is essential — treating the **person as a whole**, not just as a diagnosis.

Theological Insight: The Fall Disordered the Mind and Body — But Christ Redeems the Whole Person

- The symptom overlap reminds us that human suffering is **complex**, not reducible to a single sin or simple fix. The Fall fractured every part of our humanity — thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. But God's redemptive work in Christ is **comprehensive**:
- **Justification**: In Christ, we are declared righteous and forgiven of our sins, restoring our standing before God (Romans 5:1). This is the foundation of peace with God amid our brokenness.

Theological Insight: The Fall Disordered the Mind and Body — But Christ Redeems the Whole Person

- **Sanctification:** The Spirit renews our minds (Romans 12:2), reshapes our desires, and heals our emotional wounds (Psalm 147:3). This ongoing process moves us from disorder toward wholeness and peace.
- **Glorification:** Ultimately, Christ will fully restore our minds and bodies, bringing complete healing and eternal shalom (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
- Trauma recovery echoes this gospel trajectory: we move from disorder to peace, from chaos to shalom, not by effort alone, but by grace and truth.
- The Church must become a place where compassion and competence meet — where people are not just told to “have more faith,” but are invited into spaces where they can safely heal, day by day.

Questions About PTSD?

Healthy Coping and Support Systems: Restoring the Wounded through Grace and Grounded Care

- When someone experiences trauma, their nervous system can become dysregulated, and their sense of safety, identity, and agency can be disrupted. Recovery requires not just survival, but **rebuilding trust, regulation, and connection**. Coping isn't just about avoiding pain — it's about creating space for healing. The Church has a role in this process.
- Here are **practical coping strategies** that honor both clinical wisdom and Christian truth:

Grounding and Emotional Regulation (Clinical Practices)

- **Deep Breathing / Body Awareness:** Helps regulate the nervous system during flashbacks or anxiety.
- **Safe Sensory Tools:** Weighted blankets, essential oils, calming music — tools that help bring someone back into the present moment.
- **Routine and Structure:** Predictability creates safety. Trauma often brings chaos, so even small daily routines (meals, sleep, exercise) can restore balance.
- **Naming Emotions:** Trauma survivors often feel “numb” or “flooded.” Learning to identify emotions (sadness, fear, anger) builds emotional awareness and resilience.

Spiritual Practices (Christian Wisdom)

- **Prayer:** Not just asking for healing, but learning to lament, express grief, and cry out honestly to God (see Psalm 13, Psalm 42). Trauma recovery needs safe space for raw prayer.
- **Scripture Meditation:** Gently engaging with passages about God's nearness, sovereignty, and care (e.g., Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 43:2; Matthew 11:28–30).
- **Confession and Forgiveness:** Not blaming trauma victims for their pain—but offering a rhythm where believers can bring all their burdens and sins to the cross and hear that they are cleansed and loved.
- **Worship and Music:** Singing allows survivors to express truth beyond words. Worship can reconnect mind and heart, especially when words fail.

Relational and Communal Support

- **Therapy / Christian Counseling:** Professional help can address specific trauma wounds with clinical skill and theological depth. Therapy isn't unspiritual — it's often a means of God's common grace.
- **Trusted Relationships:** Safe friendships are critical for healing. Survivors need people who listen without judgment, fix-it answers, or spiritual clichés.
- **Support Groups / Church Community:** Healing happens in relationship. The Church can reflect God's design for interdependence by creating spaces where vulnerability is welcomed, and people walk together in grace.

Summary

- **Healthy coping** after trauma means caring for the whole person — body, mind, and spirit. God uses clinical tools, spiritual practices, and Christian community to bring restoration.
- Healing takes time, but we are not alone. Christ walks with the wounded, and the Church must become a refuge of both truth and tenderness.

Final Questions?

Week 3

• Review

○ Week 1:

- A Reformed Theological perspective of Creation, the Fall, the Curse, and Redemption and how sin/trauma have impacted humanity and all of creation.
- Definition of trauma
- Types, causes, symptoms, and how trauma has affected the brain.

○ Week 2:

- Trauma Reactions and how they are built in mechanisms after the fall. These are subconscious in order to protect the brain and body.
- Triggers, the definition of PTSD, and then 2 examples of how Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn operate.

Week 3 - Shame and Injustice: When Trauma Destroys Identity and Trust

- **Big Idea:** Trauma distorts both our sense of *self* and our view of *power/trust*. God sees our pain, confronts injustice, and restores our identity in Christ.

Opening Reflection Questions

- **Q1:** *What kinds of things do trauma survivors often come to believe about themselves?*

Examples:

- *“I’m broken.”*
- *“It was my fault.”*
- *“I’m weak.”*
- *“I’m too much.”*
- *“I can’t trust anyone.”*

Opening Reflection Questions

- **Q2:** *Where do those beliefs come from?*
 - *The abuser's words or actions*
 - *The silence of others*
 - *Misunderstood theology (“God must be punishing me”)*
 - *Cultural or church shame narratives*
- These questions **draw out the theme** that trauma doesn't just cause pain—it rewrites a person's sense of **self** and **trust**.

Outline:

- **Part 1 – Defining Safety, Trust, and Identity.**
- **Part 2 – Understanding Identity from a Humanistic perspective, then from a Reformed view, & how they integrate.**
- **Part 3 – Section 1 – Shame & Identity after Trauma**

Safety (Relational & Individual)

In Relationships:

- Safety is the felt sense that I am emotionally and physically secure with another person.
It means:
 - *I won't be harmed, mocked, shamed, or manipulated.*
 - *I can express emotions without fear of rejection.*
 - *I am allowed to have needs and boundaries.*
- In trauma, this sense of safety is often shattered—especially when harm comes from someone we trusted.

Safety (Relational & Individual)

Individually (Internal Safety):

- Safety is the internal sense that I can exist without being in constant survival mode.
That includes:
 - *Emotional regulation*
 - *Feeling grounded*
 - *Having agency (a sense of choice)*
- Trauma wires the body to stay hyper-alert, anxious, or numb—even when external danger is gone.

Trust

In Relationships:

- Trust is the confidence that another person will act for my good, tell the truth, and not betray me.
 - *Built slowly over time through consistency, care, and honesty.*
 - *Broken quickly by betrayal, manipulation, or neglect.*
 - *Repaired only when harm is acknowledged and safety is restored.*

Trust

Individually (Self-Trust):

- Self-trust is the belief that I can listen to myself, advocate for myself, and discern what is safe or not.
 - *Trauma often disrupts this: “Was it really that bad?” Causing self-doubt.*
 - *“Can I trust my feelings?”*

Summary:

- When safety and trust are violated—especially by someone in power—it doesn’t just affect our relationships. It also affects something deeper: our identity.

Identity

From a Humanistic Perspective:

- Identity is the internalized sense of who I am.
 - Formed through life experiences, relationships, culture, values, and personality
 - *Includes self-worth, autonomy, purpose, and belonging*
 - *At its best, identity includes a sense of personal meaning and dignity*
- Trauma can fracture this by embedding false narratives like:
 - “I’m a problem.”
 - “I don’t belong.”
 - “I’m only valuable if I perform or please.” (Fawning)

Identity

From a Reformed Christian Perspective:

Identity is received—not achieved.

- Rooted in being made in the **Imago Dei** (Genesis 1:27)
- Defined by God's declaration: "*You are mine.*" (Isaiah 43:1)
- Redeemed and restored through Christ: "New creation" (2 Cor 5:17)
- Given dignity, purpose, and adoption: "He calls us children of God" (1 John 3:1)

• **Theological Truth:**

As Christians, we don't build our identity from what we've done—or what's been done to us—but from what God has done *for* us in Christ on the cross.

How Humanistic and Christian Identity Perspectives Complement Each Other

1. Human Experience & Formation

- Humanistic psychology acknowledges that identity **develops through relationships, experiences, and personal meaning-making**.
 - Trauma, culture, and environment shape how we *see ourselves*—often deeply impacting our self-worth, autonomy, and belonging.

How Humanistic and Christian Identity Perspectives Complement Each Other

2. Divine Grounding & Ultimate Truth

- Christian theology builds on this by showing that **our true identity is ultimately rooted in God's design and redemptive work in Christ.**
 - While human experiences shape us, our **ultimate worth, dignity, and purpose come from being made in God's image and adopted as His children.**

How Humanistic and Christian Identity Perspectives Complement Each Other

3. Integration

- We recognize that **our experiences matter** and have a profound impact on our sense of self (humanistic insight).
- We also affirm that **God's grace redefines and heals our identity beyond the brokenness caused by trauma.**
- Healing means **reclaiming our story through Christ's story**, acknowledging wounds, and resting in the identity God offers.
- The Christian identity doesn't erase personal experience but **transforms it** by providing an unshakeable foundation in Christ.

Summary

- We are shaped by our experiences and relationships, but we are *not* defined by them.
- Our true identity is found in the God who created us, loves us, and makes us new. This is the hope and healing we want to explore as we understand trauma and restoration.

**Questions about Trust,
Safety or Identity?**

Section One — Shame and Identity After Trauma

1. What is Shame?

- **Definition:** Shame is a deep feeling that “I am bad” or “There is something wrong with me.” (Identity)
- It’s different from guilt, which says “I did something bad.” Shame attacks *who* we are. (Behavior).
- **In trauma:**
 - Shame often *isn’t about something we’ve done*—but something that’s been done *to us*.
 - Survivors often carry the *emotional weight* of the abuser’s actions: feeling dirty, broken, or responsible.
 - Shame often becomes internalized after trauma, especially when someone is *violated, ignored, or blamed* for what happened.

Scripture Connection: Genesis 3:7–10

- **Shame enters the story:**
- **Genesis 3:7** – “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”
- **Genesis 3:8–9** – “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’”
- **Genesis 3:10** – “And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’”

Key Themes and Interpretation

1. Vs. 7 – “The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.”

- Before the fall, Genesis 2:25 says they were naked and *not ashamed*.
- But once sin entered, “knew they were naked” signals vulnerability, fear, and exposure.
- **This is the emotional birthplace of shame:** “There’s something wrong with me (Identity – Shame Response). I need to cover up.” (Behavior – Guilt Response)
- It’s not just about physical nudity—this is the fear of being **seen** and **judged** - by God, by others, by friends, by family members, by your church, by your significant other. (Fight, **flight**, freeze, or fawn response)

Key Themes and Interpretation

2. “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”

- So, why the loins?
- The **loins** refer to the reproductive area—the part of the body associated with sexuality, intimacy, and generativity (life-giving).
- This area is **deeply symbolic**: it represents both **physical vulnerability** and **relational exposure**.
- Covering the loins shows an **instinctive shame** response around something that was originally created as *good* and *without shame*.
- (Genesis 2:25: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed”).
- Now becomes a **symbol of exposure and brokenness**.

Key Themes and Interpretation

2. “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”
 - The fig leaves are a **human attempt to hide shame**—to manage it, control it, or cover it on our own.
 - The first move to cover the loins reflects an immediate, bodily awareness of *something lost*—the loss of purity, trust, and protection.
 - It's also the **first human act of self-protection** in response to sin and shame.
 - We still do this: through perfectionism, people-pleasing (Fawning), Isolation, overachievement, or numbing.
 - Fig leaves represent **self-protection**—but they don't actually heal the shame.

Key Themes and Interpretation

3. “...they hid from the Lord God...”

- Their instinct wasn't to run toward God—it was to run *away* from Him. (Flight)
- Trauma survivors often feel this instinct deeply: “If God saw me... if others saw me... I'd be rejected, judged, or unlovable.”
- **This is what shame does**—it isolates, disconnects, and lies to us about God's heart.
- The lie is that we are disconnected and so we remain in secrecy and in darkness. Is this not where the enemy wants us? To be alone, isolated, and vulnerable.
- **Biblical Pattern:**
- Cain hides (Gen 4), Jonah flees (Jonah 1), Peter denies and retreats (Matt 26), the disciples lock themselves away (John 20).
- The default setting for humanity when we experience shame is now to **distance from God**, instead of seeking him out.

Key Themes and Interpretation

4. Vs. 9 “Where are you?”

- God’s first response is *not* punishment—it’s pursuit.
- He asks a question—not because He doesn’t know where they are, but to **draw them out of hiding**.
- This is the heart of the gospel: **God comes looking for the ashamed.**

Reflection:

God doesn't start with a lecture or a demand—He starts with a question. He meets our shame not with accusation, but with invitation.

Key Themes and Interpretation

- v. 10 – “I was afraid... because I was naked... and I hid.”

Emotional translation:

- *Fear* → *awareness of nakedness* → *hiding*
- This is a pattern all trauma survivors will recognize.

Interpretation:

- Fear is now the emotional baseline in relationship with God.
- Fear is rooted in shame—not just guilt. Adam does not say, “I disobeyed.” He says, “I was naked.”
- He doesn’t confess a **wrong action**; he confesses a **felt vulnerability**.

Theological Insight:

- The Fall created spiritual, relational, and emotional rupture.
- God’s presence now feels dangerous rather than delightful—not because God has changed, but because *shame filters humanities perception*.

Summary: The First Experience of Shame

- Genesis 3:7–10 is not just the record of humanity's first sin—it's the record of **humanity's first experience of shame**.
- Shame leads to hiding, fear, self-protection, and broken connection.
- But God's response is **not condemnation**, but *pursuit*.
“Where are you?” is the first echo of grace.

Application for Trauma Survivors:

This is your story too. You didn't choose shame, but you carry it. And the God of Genesis doesn't leave you there—He comes into the garden still asking, ‘Where are you?’ Not to accuse you, but to pursue you and then to restore you in Him and by Him.

Summary: Covering the Loins Anticipates the Need for Redemption

- The fig leaves were a **fragile and temporary** solution to a deep spiritual problem.
- This is not the end of the story.
- Genesis 3:21 - "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them".
- God provides **garments of skin**—a more lasting, gracious covering.
- This foreshadows how God will one day **cover human shame permanently** through a sacrifice—ultimately pointing to Christ.

Interconnection: The Cycle of Trauma, Identity, and Shame

- These three elements form a powerful feedback loop that can keep people stuck in pain unless they're intentionally interrupted through healing, support, and therapeutic work.

1. Trauma Often Plants the Seed of Shame

- **Violation of dignity or safety:** Traumatic experiences — leave survivors feeling degraded, powerless, or exposed. These feelings quickly turn inward and manifest as shame.
- **Messages received during trauma:** Especially in childhood or in relational trauma, survivors may receive spoken or unspoken messages like “You’re the problem,” “You deserved this,” or “You’re too much.” Over time, these get internalized as beliefs about the self.
- **Lack of safe support:** When trauma is not acknowledged or when others blame, disbelieve, or minimize the survivor’s pain, shame intensifies. They may feel “stupid,” “overdramatic,” or “invisible,” further reinforcing self-blame.

2. Shame Begins to Shape Identity

- **Internalized beliefs:** Over time, the shame born from trauma doesn't stay a feeling — it becomes a belief system. People start to *believe* they are inherently broken, defective, unworthy, or unlovable.
- **Identity fusion with trauma:** Survivors might define themselves primarily by what happened to them. Phrases like “I’m just damaged goods” or “No one could love the real me”. This reveals how shame becomes entwined with self-concept.
- **Adopted roles and defenses:** To survive shame and avoid further rejection, individuals may adopt protective roles — people-pleasing, perfectionism, aggression, avoidance, humor, isolation. These roles can mask pain but make it hard to develop an authentic identity.

3. A Shattered Identity Reinforces the Trauma

- **Re-enactment:** Survivors with shame-based identities may unconsciously re-enter harmful relationships or environments that echo the original trauma, repeating the cycle. For example, someone who believes they are worthless may tolerate abuse or disrespect, believing that's all they deserve.
- **Avoidance and numbing:** People stuck in trauma and shame often numb themselves with addictions, disordered eating, overworking, or dissociation — short-term relief that delays healing.
- **Stalled healing:** Shame makes it incredibly difficult to seek help. Admitting vulnerability or asking for support may feel dangerous or humiliating. As a result, trauma remains unspoken and unresolved, reinforcing the pain and identity damage.

Summary

- This cycle is **not permanent**, but it often becomes entrenched without intervention. Healing involves bringing all three pieces into focus — **naming the trauma, challenging shame, and rebuilding identity.**

A Hopeful Conclusion

- Trauma distorts. Shame isolates. Identity crumbles. And for many, this cycle can feel inescapable. But the Christian story does not end with what was lost—it leads us into what can be redeemed.
- The same God who meets us in our brokenness also leads us toward wholeness.
- Even in the deepest places of pain, God is not absent. He is present. And He is not only a witness to our suffering—He is a healer, a restorer, and a redeemer.

Gospel Preview:

The story begins in shame—but it ends in restoration.

And even more: it ends in glorification.

- Just as God clothed Adam and Eve with compassion, and Christ now clothes us in righteousness, there is coming a day when we will be clothed with *glory*—where every scar will be healed, every tear wiped away, and our full dignity as image-bearers will be revealed without fear, shame, or threat.

Scripture Connection:

- **Romans 8:30** – “Those He justified He also glorified.”
- **Philippians 3:21** – “He will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body...”
- **Revelation 21:4** – “He will wipe away every tear... and death shall be no more...”
- “Glorification is the final word: the promise that what trauma has broken, God will one day restore completely—body, mind, spirit, and story.”

Isaiah 61:10: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...”

Application to Trauma:

- Many trauma survivors live in a version of Genesis 3—carrying shame that makes them want to hide from people, from church, even from God.
- But just like in the garden, **God comes gently, asking, ‘Where are you?’**
- He is not deterred by their shame or ours. He seeks to *clothe it, heal it, and restore the relationship with him.*
- **Reflection Question:**
- **Where are you this morning?**
 - **Are there places in your heart where you’re still hiding—trying to cover pain, shame, or fear with fig leaves?**
Or are you learning to let yourself be wrapped in the righteousness, compassion, and covering of Christ?

Section Two — Church Hurt, Power, and Injustice

1. What Is Church/Institutional Hurt?

- **Clinical Insight**

- *Church hurt* refers to psychological, emotional, or spiritual harm caused by a church, faith leader, or religious community.

- It can include:

- **Spiritual abuse** (control, manipulation, coercion in the name of God)
 - **Neglect or betrayal** (when leaders fail to protect or respond to abuse)
 - **Shaming** in response to vulnerability, mental illness, or trauma
 - **Silencing victims** of abuse for the sake of image or hierarchy
 - **Distorted teachings** used to justify oppression (e.g., misusing "submit," "forgive," or "suffer")

- **Clinical Insight:**

When a trauma survivor experiences harm in a sacred space, it creates spiritual betrayal trauma—a deep confusion between *God's character* and *the actions of His supposed representatives*.

2. A Reformed Theological View of Power and Responsibility

- From a Reformed perspective, all authority is *delegated* by God and must be used in service of His justice, truth, and covenantal love—not for self-gain.
- **Key Points:**
- All human power is **under God's rule** (Romans 13:1), and those who wield it are **accountable to Him**.
- Spiritual leaders are **shepherds** called to reflect **Christ the Chief Shepherd**, not exploit His flock (1 Peter 5:2–4).
- When leaders harm the vulnerable, **they betray the covenant community** and provoke God's justice.
- **Ezekiel 34:2–4** – “Woe to the shepherds... who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat... but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened...”
- In the Reformed tradition, God is not passive in the face of corruption. He is **sovereign over the church**, and He promises to **discipline** those who abuse His name.

3. God's Justice and His Heart for the Oppressed

- Throughout Scripture, God makes it clear: **He sees. He hears. He acts.** **He has** *special concern* for the wounded, the voiceless, the abused.
- **Key Scriptures:**
- **Psalm 10:17–18** – “You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted... You will do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed.”
- **Isaiah 1:17** – “Seek justice, correct oppression...”
- **Psalm 34:18** – “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”
- **Exodus 3:7** – “I have surely seen the affliction of my people... I have heard their cry...”

4. Jesus and Power: A Radical Reversal

- Jesus didn't just speak about justice—He embodied it.
He *entered* a broken world, stood with the powerless, and was Himself the victim of injustice.
- **Examples:**
- He welcomed and defended those the world rejected—women, children, the unclean, the outcast (Mark 5, Luke 7, John 8).
- He confronted religious abuse (Matthew 23), calling out hypocrisy and spiritual control.
- On the cross, Jesus suffered **as an innocent victim**—abandoned, falsely accused, physically abused—yet He used His power not to destroy, but to save.
- **Philippians 2:6–8** – “Though He was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped... He humbled Himself... even to death on a cross.”
- **Key Message:**
Jesus understands misused power—not just intellectually, but personally.
He stands with the wounded—not over them.

Final Questions

Week 4: From Wounded to Witness: The Story of Joseph

- **Genesis 50:20**

- *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”*

- God does not waste our wounds. Through the life of Joseph, we see how God walks with us in trauma, shapes us through suffering, and uses our healing to bring life to others.

The Story of Joseph: From Wounded to Witness

- (*Genesis 37–50*)
- Joseph was the beloved son of Jacob, deeply favored and gifted with dreams from God. As a teenager, he dreamed that one day he would rise to a position of honor—but instead of celebrating, his brothers were consumed by jealousy. They betrayed him—throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery. Wounded by the people who should have protected him, Joseph was taken to Egypt, far from home and everything familiar.
- In Egypt, Joseph served faithfully in the house of Potiphar. But just as things seemed stable, he was falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit. Once again, he was stripped of dignity and thrown into prison. He spent years in darkness—forgotten, invisible, and alone.

The Story of Joseph: From Wounded to Witness

- But **God was with Joseph**. Even in prison, Joseph remained faithful. He began using his gifts to interpret dreams and help others. His character deepened. His humility grew. And in time, Joseph was called to interpret Pharaoh's troubling dreams. Through that act, God raised him up—Joseph went from prisoner to ruler, second in command of all Egypt.
- When famine struck the land, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt seeking food—unaware that the brother they had betrayed was now in power. He could have taken revenge. But instead, Joseph wept. He chose forgiveness over vengeance, healing over hatred.
- He revealed himself to his brothers and said words that have echoed through generations:
- **“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good—to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.”** (Genesis 50:20)

Summary

- **Joseph's story is a journey through deep trauma wounds—betrayed by his family, stripped of his identity, and left without safety or control.** Yet even in suffering, God remained with him.
- Over time, Joseph rebuilt trust, discovered a new sense of purpose, and experienced redemption not only for himself, but for others.
- In the end, he chose forgiveness over revenge, showing us that our deepest wounds, when surrendered to God, can become the very place where healing and hope are born.

Outline

- We will be applying the core concepts and themes we have learned and applying them to Joseph's story.

PART 1: Creation & Shalom — *Joseph's Identity Before the Trauma*

- Scripture Reference: **Genesis 37:1–4**
- *“Now Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.”*
— *Genesis 37:3–4*

Biblical Lens: Shalom and Identity

- At the beginning of Joseph's story, we find him **deeply known, deeply loved, and set apart**.
- Jacob (Israel) treasures him, clothing him with a **special robe** that symbolizes favor and belonging. (Compare to Robe of animal skins-Gen.3:21)
- Joseph has dreams—visions from God—that affirm a sense of calling and purpose. There is a sense of **order, wholeness, and relational connection**.
- This beginning reflects the **Creation narrative in Genesis 1–2**, where:
 - Identity is rooted in God's image.
 - Relationships are whole and safe.
 - Life has purpose, peace, and trust.
 - Joseph's world, for a time, mirrors this state of **shalom**.

Clinical Lens: Pre-Trauma Identity and Safety

- This stage represents what we might call the “**pre-trauma self.**” It’s a developmental phase—emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually—where a person experiences:
 - **Safety** in relationships
 - **Clarity** of identity
 - **Confidence** in self-worth
 - A **regulated nervous system** (fight/flight not yet triggered)
- Joseph knows who he is, where he belongs, and what his future might look like.
- **Therapeutic Insight:**
In trauma therapy, we often help clients **reconnect with the part of themselves that existed before trauma**—not to dwell in the past, but to **remember that they were once whole**. That original self is not lost—it’s *buried*, waiting to be drawn out and healed.

Reformed Theological Perspective

- Joseph's early life reveals the **created order and covenantal identity** given by God.
- Before the fall, humanity was created **in God's image (imago Dei)**, with a purpose to glorify God and enjoy communion with Him and others.
- This beginning underscores humanity's original design for **relationship, purpose, and trust in God's sovereignty**, setting the stage for understanding how sin and trauma disrupt that design, yet cannot ultimately change God's redemptive plan.

Summary

- Joseph's story opens in a place of favor and relational wholeness. As his father's beloved son, clothed with a special robe, Joseph enjoys a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. This mirrors the **Creation narrative**, where God made humanity in His image, with dignity, purpose, and connection.
- From a clinical perspective, this stage represents **secure attachment**, identity formation, and a sense of emotional and relational safety.
- From a Reformed theological view, Joseph's identity is not merely in his role or family, but ultimately in God's sovereign choice and covenant purposes. It reminds us that our truest identity is received, not achieved.
- **Reflective Question:**
When in your life have you felt most grounded in your God-given identity and secure in your relationships?

PART 2: The Fall — The Betrayal, the Pit, and the Loss of Safety

- Scripture Reference: **Genesis 37:5–28**
- *“They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him... So, when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe... and they took him and threw him into a pit.”*
— *Genesis 37:18, 23–24*

Biblical Lens: Sin Enters the Story

- This is the moment Joseph's life is violently disrupted. His own brothers, motivated by **jealousy and hatred**, strip him of his robe (his identity and dignity) and throw him into a pit. He cries out, but they do not listen (Genesis 42:21).
- This parallels **Genesis 3**, where the Fall introduces fear, shame, betrayal, and broken relationships.
- Joseph's trauma begins not from random suffering but through **relational sin**—those who should have protected him became the source of his harm.

Clinical Lens: Trauma, Safety, and Survival Responses

- Joseph experiences a profound **loss of safety** and **relational betrayal**—two of the most impactful factors in trauma.
- **Common trauma responses likely present in this part of Joseph's story:**
 - **Fight** – He pleads with his brothers (Genesis 42:21).
 - **Flight** – He is physically restrained and sold; flight is not an option.
 - **Freeze** – Powerless in the pit, likely overwhelmed and immobilized.
 - **Fawn** – Later seen in his behavior of quiet service in Potiphar's house and prison (possibly appeasing or adapting to maintain survival).
- These reactions aren't sinful—they are **instinctual survival responses**. But over time, if unhealed, they can distort a person's view of self, others, and God.

Reformed Theological Perspective

- The Fall in Genesis 3 is not only cosmic—it is **personal**. Joseph's story reflects how the **effects of the Fall are lived out in human relationships**, especially in families.
- From a Reformed lens:
 - This betrayal is an expression of **total depravity**— that sin has touched every part of his brothers' hearts.
 - Yet even here, **God's providence** is quietly at work. The pit and the betrayal are not random.
 - They are the beginning of a sovereign redemptive arc (see Acts 7:9–10, where Stephen says “God was with him” even in this part of the story).
 - Sovereign = in control. Redemption = Restoration. Arc = storyline
 - God is in control, restoring our story.
- Trauma, from this view, is both a result of human sin and a space where God's **grace and sustaining presence** can enter.

Summary

- Joseph's fall into the pit marks the beginning of his trauma—betrayal by family, loss of safety, and a rupture in trust. His story reflects how trauma can enter our lives through sin and broken relationships.
- Yet through Reformed theology, we understand that even here, **God's providence is active**, working through human evil to accomplish His good purposes in time.
- **Reflective Question:**
Where have you seen God's quiet providence at work in your own painful experiences, even when it wasn't immediately clear?

PART 3: The Curse — *Injustice, Imprisonment, and Long-Suffering*

- *Genesis 39–40*
- **Biblical Theme:** Joseph faces ongoing trauma—false accusations, imprisonment, and abandonment.
- **Theological Lens:** The **curse** of a broken world—where injustice reigns, and trauma persists beyond the initial event.
- **Clinical Insight:** This reflects the **chronic impact of trauma**—shame, isolation, distrust, nervous system dysregulation. Identity confusion deepens.
- *Application:* “Many of us live here—feeling forgotten, alone, and misunderstood. But this is also where healing begins in hidden ways.”

PART 3: The Curse — Injustice, Imprisonment, and Long-Suffering

- Scripture Reference: **Genesis 39–40**
- *“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.”*
— *Genesis 39:20–21*

Biblical Lens: Suffering Deepens

- After already enduring betrayal and slavery, Joseph is **falsely accused** by Potiphar's wife and unjustly imprisoned.
- Despite his integrity and faithful service, things go from bad to worse. In prison, he is forgotten and alone for years—even after helping others.
- This extended suffering reflects the **ongoing curse** of sin in the world (Genesis 3:14–19)—painful toil, broken systems, relational distrust, and deferred justice.
- Even when we do what is right, we may still suffer under the weight of sin's reach.

Clinical Lens: Complex Trauma & Prolonged Distress

- This chapter of Joseph's life illustrates the experience of **complex trauma**—not just a single event, but **prolonged, layered pain** that erodes one's sense of hope and worth.
- Trauma-related symptoms Joseph may have experienced (and that modern survivors often do):
 - Emotional numbing or detachment
 - Hypervigilance or distrust
 - Loss of motivation or hope (learned helplessness)
 - Internalized shame ("Why is this happening to me?", "I must be the problem")
 - Disconnection from identity and calling
- Joseph's ability to serve and interpret dreams (Genesis 40) shows that he's still functioning outwardly—but likely bearing internal weight that is invisible to those around him.

Reformed Theological Perspective

- Reformed theology acknowledges the **real and persistent effects of the Fall**—not just morally, but systemically and relationally.
- Joseph’s imprisonment is an example of *common grace* (God sustaining him) and *mysterious providence* (God is working behind the scenes, even when we can't see it or make sense of it.)
- Importantly, God’s **presence in suffering** is emphasized here:
- “But the Lord was with Joseph...” (Gen. 39:21)
This doesn’t mean relief is immediate—but it affirms that **God is near to the brokenhearted** (Psalm 34:18), and that **our trials are not wasted**.
- From this view, Joseph’s affliction is not accidental or meaningless—it is part of **God’s hidden, unfolding plan**, preparing him for future fruitfulness (Rom. 8:28).

Summary

- Joseph's unjust suffering shows how trauma is often **compounded** by circumstances beyond our control.
- The ongoing impact of sin and brokenness doesn't always lift quickly, even when we remain faithful.
- Yet God's presence in the prison reminds us that **He sustains us even in the silence**—shaping us through waiting, refining, and hidden growth.
- In the Reformed perspective, this is the **slow work of sanctification**, through trials that God uses for His glory and our good.
- **Reflective Question:**
How might God be using a current season of waiting or hardship to shape your character, even if you can't yet see the outcome?

PART 4: Redemption — Joseph's Rise, Forgiveness, and Healing

- Scripture Reference: **Genesis 41; 45; 50:15–21**
- *“But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive...”*
— *Genesis 50:20*

Biblical Lens: God's Redeeming Purpose

- Joseph's story turns when he interprets Pharaoh's dreams and is promoted to second-in-command in Egypt.
- His earlier suffering is not erased but given purpose as he saves nations from famine.
- Joseph chooses forgiveness—he restores relationship with his brothers instead of seeking revenge.
- This reflects the biblical theme of **redemption**—God bringing good out of evil, restoring broken relationships, and healing wounds.

Clinical Lens: Healing, Forgiveness, and Post-Traumatic Growth

- Joseph's journey models **post-traumatic growth**—the positive psychological change experienced because of adversity. Key elements include:
 - Reclaiming identity and purpose
 - Finding meaning in suffering
 - Choosing forgiveness over bitterness
 - Rebuilding trust in relationships
- Forgiveness here is not minimizing trauma but **liberating oneself from the ongoing burden of pain.**
- Joseph's restoration of family bonds exemplifies the healing of relational wounds and recovery of safety.

Reformed Theological Perspective

- Joseph's redemption reveals God's **sovereign providence** working through human sin and suffering to accomplish His covenantal promises.
- His forgiveness echoes the gospel call to forgive as we have been forgiven by Christ.
- Joseph's story anticipates the **ultimate Redeemer—Jesus Christ**, who transforms suffering into salvation and offers healing for our deepest wounds.
- The redemption in Joseph's life is a type and foreshadowing of Christ's work on the cross.

Summary

- Joseph's rise from prisoner to prince embodies how God redeems suffering and uses wounded people to accomplish His purposes.
- His choice to forgive and restore relationship illustrates the path from brokenness to wholeness and models the healing potential in trauma recovery.
- The Reformed view highlights God's sovereign, redemptive plan unfolding even through human brokenness.
- **Reflective Question:**
- *How might your own story of suffering become a testimony that brings hope and healing to someone else?*

PART 5: Becoming a Witness — Using Our Wounds to Minister to Others

- Scripture Reference: **2 Corinthians 1:3–4**
- *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*

Biblical Lens: God Uses Our Wounds

- Joseph's life teaches us that God doesn't waste our pain.
- The comfort and wisdom we gain through suffering become tools to **minister to others in their brokenness.**
- Joseph's leadership during famine not only saved nations but also restored his family.
- This reflects the Christian call to share in one another's burdens and offer hope drawn from our own healing journey.

Clinical Lens: Post-Traumatic Growth and Vicarious Healing

- Therapeutically, survivors who process trauma well often develop **empathy, resilience, and a desire to help others**—a phenomenon known as **post-traumatic growth**.
- Helping others can:
 - Strengthen one's own recovery
 - Foster meaning and purpose
 - Build community and connection
- Joseph's story illustrates how wounds can become **wells of healing and hope** for others.

Reformed Theological Perspective

- From the Reformed viewpoint, God's comfort to us is **not merely for our own sake** but for the **building up of the body of Christ**.
- Our experiences of grace in suffering equip us to **serve others with humility and compassion**.
- This reflects the doctrine of **common grace** and the **call to discipleship**—living out God's kingdom by extending His mercy and comfort.

Summary

- Joseph's journey from wounded son to wise leader reveals that God uses our past pain for His greater purposes.
- Our healing becomes a ministry, allowing us to comfort others with the very grace that sustained us.
- This calls us to trust God's sovereignty and to become vessels of His comfort and hope in a hurting world.

Conclusion

- As we've seen through Joseph's story, trauma is real, painful, and disorienting. Betrayal, loss, injustice, and long seasons of waiting can break us. But the God of the Bible does not waste our wounds. He is **the God of all comfort**, walking with us in every pit, prison, and valley.
- Joseph's journey reminds us that:
 - **Our identity is rooted in God's covenantal love**, not just our circumstances.
 - **Sin and brokenness disrupt God's shalom**, but they do not have the final word.
 - **God's providence is at work even in the darkest moments**, shaping us for His good purposes.
 - **Redemption is possible**—healing, restoration, and forgiveness can bring new life.
 - And ultimately, **our wounds become a source of ministry**, as we comfort and serve others through the grace that has comforted us.

Conclusion

- In the Reformed understanding, our lives are held in the sovereign hands of a God who **redeems all things for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28)**. No pain is wasted, no tear unnoticed, no journey outside His care.
- **So, what does this mean for us today?**
 - We can surrender our trauma to the God who heals and restores.
 - We can find hope in the promises of Scripture that God is near to the brokenhearted.
 - We can trust that even in suffering, God is forming us into His image.
 - And we can step forward, wounded but not defeated, to become witnesses of God's grace in a hurting world.

Challenge and Encouragement

- Take heart: your story matters. Your pain, your healing, and your growth are part of God's greater story—a story that moves from **woundedness to witness**.
- Like Joseph, you may be walking through a dark pit right now, but God's plan is unfolding, and your faithfulness is not in vain. Hold onto hope. Lean into God's comfort. And prepare to be a light to others who need to know that healing is possible.

Additional Questions

- If you have additional questions or would like copies of the handouts or Powerpoint.
- Please email me at dylanshearer20@gmail.com
- call or text me your email.