

Toxic Relationships is a must-read, not only for those who feel the need for relational wisdom, but for anyone engaged in ministry and discipleship. This book reminds us that our hope is not in what people offer, but in what God offers us through the person of his Son, Jesus. I am very grateful for such a biblically rich, helpful resource on such an important topic.

—**Hunter Beless**, Host, *Journeywomen* podcast

Unlike Job, most of us never experience frontal attacks from Satan. Instead, we are worn down by the saturation of our culture and our own hearts with Satan's lies. Lies about God. Lies about ourselves. Lies about how God's world really works. When believed, his lies shrivel our souls, tempt us into toxic relationships, and trap us in life-dominating sins. Ellen Dykas, in *Toxic Relationships*, lovingly and biblically confronts the lies we are so prone to believe with refreshing and liberating truth from the heart of God himself. Read, reflect, and act. You won't be disappointed.

—**Jim Berg**, Professor of Biblical Counseling, Bob Jones University Seminary; Author, *Changed into His Image* and *Quieting a Noisy Soul*; Counsel Member, Biblical Counseling Coalition; Executive Director, Freedom That Lasts

Ever since Adam and Eve shared the forbidden fruit, human relationships have been plagued by sin. Sometimes, sin sets us against one another; other times, it pulls us into unhealthy entanglements. These codependent relationships may seem harmless at the beginning, but their ultimate effect is toxic. If you find yourself—or someone you love—trapped in a toxic relationship, Ellen Dykas's book will be a lifeline. With a counselor's wisdom and a friend's sympathy, Dykas brings readers to passages of Scripture that will expose the flaws in our relationships, explain the deep needs of every human heart, and point again and again to the gracious comfort that can be found in Christ alone.

—**Megan Hill**, Author, *A Place to Belong: Learning to Love the Local Church*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition

Ellen Dykas has given the church a wonderful gift in this latest devotional, walking and working us through toxic relationships. The book begins by reminding us that God is our refuge, and it ends with a hopeful reminder that Jesus is our truest comfort and friend. For those who have been hurt, trapped, and betrayed by toxic relationships, Ellen gives way neither to despair nor dismissal but, like a gentle friend, guides us along a path of healing and restoration. This book will be a balm to the hurting heart.

—**Jonathan D. Holmes**, Founder and Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling; Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

Ellen speaks hopeful biblical truths to people who desire to be deeply known and loved yet find themselves hurt and empty in their relationships. Each devotional is filled with tender wisdom, helping you to reorder your relational desires so that you find refuge in the most faithful lover of your soul.

—**Darby A. Strickland**, Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; Author, *Is It Abuse?*

T O X I C
RELATIONSHIPS

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T O X I C
RELATIONSHIPS

TAKING
REFUGE
IN CHRIST

ELLEN MARY DYKAS


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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Names and details have been changed for references to specific people throughout this devotional.

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How to Nourish Your Soul

A LITTLE BIT every day can do great good for your soul.

I read the Bible to my kids during breakfast. I don't read a lot. Maybe just a few verses. But I work hard to do it every weekday.

My wife and I pray for one of our children, every night, before we go to bed. We usually take just a few minutes. We don't pray lengthy, expansive prayers. But we try to do this most every night.

Although they don't take long, these practices are edifying, hopeful, and effective.

This devotional is just the same. Each entry is short. Just a few tasty morsels of Scripture to nourish your starving soul. Read it on the subway or the bus on the way to work. Read it with a friend or a spouse every night at dinner. Make it a part of each day for thirty-one days, and it will do you great good.

Why is that?

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your daily life. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* in the application section because Ellen speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Relationships are scary and fraught with difficulties. Our insecurities can make us emotionally unstable, overly dependent, and fearful. We get entangled and bogged down in toxic relationships. So, we turn to God's Word. The Scriptures help us to disentangle ourselves from the cobweb of messy relationships and point us to Christ as our everlasting security. People make for insufficient foundations. Build your life around another person, and you will inevitably be hurt and disappointed. We can never get from people the satisfaction that our souls desire. God gives us his Word to reorient our worship away from the people whom we so desperately want, to himself instead. We embrace God's Word because it points us to Christ as our one, true, and sufficient foundation.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, then come back to it a year from now to remind yourself that our security must ultimately be in Christ.

If, after reading and rereading Ellen's devotional, you want more gospel-rich resources about relationships, she has listed several at the end of the book. Buy them and make good use of them.

Are you ready? Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

INTRODUCTION

Moving toward Your True Refuge

WHAT ARE YOU thinking and feeling as you begin this book? Perhaps it seems like you're hanging on for dear life while thrown about by your relational circumstances. Like Jesus's disciples on the boat in the tumultuous sea in Mark 4:35–41, you are scared, hurting, and fixated on relational waves that are out of control. Maybe someone who came to be like life for you has withdrawn or ended his or her connection to you. Or a family member (your spouse, parent, child) refuses to love and depend on you the way you crave, the way you feel you *need* to make life bearable. Or have you effectively merged your emotional world with a friend and fixate obsessively on that friend?

Have you ever thought something like the following?

- Why hasn't he texted me today?! Is he spending time with someone else? Why wasn't I invited? Am I being replaced?
- I love her so much—I *need* her! If this relationship ends, I don't want to live anymore; life has no meaning without it.
- You make my day, and you have the power to break my day. My heart, stability, sense of being valuable and lovable rise and fall with how much attention you give me. You are me, and I am you. *Don't leave me!*
- I know I'm a bit over the top in how involved I am in my kids' lives, but they need me—I'm their mother! If my marriage is suffering, so what? It never was that great anyway. God gave me these children, and they are my reason for being alive. If they don't need me, I won't exist anymore.
- I just can't understand why my marriage isn't as satisfying as I thought it would be. I mean, isn't it supposed to be the one relationship in my life that meets all my needs? Isn't my spouse supposed to complete me?

Our desire for satisfying and loving relationships is a good one because it is from God (see James 1:17). He is the Creator of relationships, whether in the context of friends, family, ministry, work colleagues, neighbors, and, of course, spiritual siblings in the body of Christ. However, *God never intended for us to turn other people into our primary refuge or home*. God wants us to depend on him, to live under his authority and care, and to grow in satisfaction with his love for us. When we are secure in Christ, our love for the people in our lives can be healthy, holy, and honoring to God. But when love for Christ and obedience to him become secondary to our relationships or aren't a part of them at all, friendships, romantic relationships, mentoring duos, spiritual leader/follower connections, and family relationships can all slide into idolatry.

According to the Bible, whenever something or *someone* sidelines God from our thoughts, desires, and focus, our lives have gotten off track. The toxic nature of these kinds of relationships can be difficult to diagnose because they can feel so, well, *intoxicating!* The emotional buzz or euphoria that often accompanies intense conversations, physical affection, or a person's adoration of us can be addictive. However, a dynamic of "I need your need of me, and you need my need of your neediness" is messy at best and destructive at worst. Instead of helping us to grow and flourish, sinful dynamics in our relationships imprison us. I've had my share of relationships in which my love for and dependency upon God was displaced by my love for a person's need of me or my role in that person's life. I know what it's like to be anxious, fearful, jealous, and insecure when relational terrain suddenly changes and you're left feeling ousted, left behind, and brokenhearted. God has me on a trajectory of growing freedom from interpersonal patterns that were mired down for years in toxic, unholy dependency.

No matter where you are, God is compassionately aware of the circumstances you're in and knows, really knows, what you are feeling. If you are in relational turmoil, are you willing to have the eyes of your heart and mind reoriented toward him? To gaze

upon who he is and then begin to diagnose why there is toxicity in one or more of your relationships? To consider who Jesus is and then move toward humbly understanding that when he is in his rightful place in our lives, people will be in theirs?

Come, join me on this journey. Let's be encouraged with a fresh consideration of our loving, safe Refuge and Lord. Let's honestly face our hearts' tendency to crave and seek from others what only Christ can be for us. More than anything, let's be encouraged to grow as worshippers of God who are healthy in all our relationships.

Engage This Journey with Faith-Fueled Realism

As you begin this book, you may struggle to believe God can change your codependent patterns, and perhaps you don't *feel* desirous of change. Are you, however, willing to ask God to work "in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13)? Your first step in pursuing spiritual growth is to believe God's Word and to surrender control of your life to him.

Your next step is to have realistic expectations. Most of us want quick, pain-free solutions to our problems, and problematic relationships are no exception! But your desires, interpersonal patterns, and relationships won't change overnight. Instead, repentance brings about directional change—a slow, steady upward trajectory of growth, transformation, and healthiness. What might growth look like?

- Honestly examining your relational world as you go through this devotional.
- Putting space between yourself and a person you realize you are too dependent upon.¹
- Initiating time with a new friend or an acquaintance—a growth in willingness to engage with other people relationally.

- Engaging with a community of believers through a Christ-centered, biblically faithful local church. God’s people are your “household of faith” (see Gal. 6:10), and local churches provide a unique opportunity to cultivate a variety of types and depths of healthy relationships.
- Reading God’s Word as a way to know him, love him, and cultivate your relationship with him.
- Longing for God more and more, loving him, and seeking him out as your primary relationship.

The first section of devotional readings offers you an opportunity to engage in a weeklong fast from having your thoughts preoccupied by any one person or relational situation. If you really—I mean, *really*—want to grow toward relational wholeness, you need to freshly focus on the only one who truly meets your needs: God himself!

The second and third sections will help you to understand the factors that contribute to toxic relationships and to identify steps you can take to become healthier. In the fourth section, you will have several days to gaze upon Jesus—the one who is with you throughout this thirty-one-day journey and all the days of growth, obedience, and transformation that lie beyond it.

Our True Refuge Frees Us from Toxic Relational Dynamics

People problems have been around as long as people have existed outside the garden of Eden! You’re not alone in this struggle. Many are familiar with the fear, anger, anxiety, discontent, jealousy, and pain that come together when others don’t seem to like, love, or respond to them in the way they desire—in the way they’re convinced they *need*. Women and men alike have experienced what it’s like to feel trapped, even imprisoned, in a relationship that is obsessive and consuming.

That’s why, of all the prayers and songs David uttered from his

heart as a shepherd, king, military commander, sinner, and chosen one of God, the cry that resonates with me the most is “Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name! The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me” (Ps. 142:7). God has indeed brought me out of relational prisons and allowed me to have healthy, Christ-honoring relationships in my life. Even though I am surrounded by the righteous, I’ll never outgrow the need for God to be my Refuge, first love, and source of security.

As we begin this journey, let’s ask God to change our desires as we look to Christ.

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.”

As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.

The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Ps. 16:1–6)

GOD IS OUR MOST TRUSTWORTHY REFUGE

Lord, I struggle to believe that you really can be a safe place for me in the midst of what I'm facing. I am tormented right now as I battle to believe I can truly be free of the mess in my relational world, and specifically my relationship with _____. I am hurting, angry, lonely, and anxious and ask you to open my heart to see wonderful things in your Word. Help me to believe your words, Lord, and please cause them to soak into my heart, mind, and life. I need you and want to grow in trusting you to lead me, day by day, step by step, to become healthy and holy in my relationships, even as I struggle to know what that looks like. Thank you that I can offer these cries for help through Jesus, the one I belong to and who calls me friend. Amen.

DAY 1

Our Refuge Now and Forever

I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Ps. 18:1–2)

AFTER BEING CHASED by enemies and betrayed by people he loved,¹ David begins here: *I love you, Lord*. That isn't always my go-to prayer when relational disappointments leave me feeling frustrated, left out, and hurt! My inner passive-aggressive, pain-avoidant girl nags me to let her *out*. I can stress and turn inward, which usually results in self-pity. Surely I deserve relief, *right, Lord?! Surely you want me to be loved as I want to be loved, right, Lord?!*

Ouch. How did my relational motivations get so tangled up in *me*? I want to love Jesus and people with a sincere heart. When I'm disappointed, it's easy to forget the most foundational and beautiful truth of my identity—I'm loved and known by God. God's love for me in Christ enables me to love people rather than demand they love me.

When we forget who we are and who God is, it's easy to rush after earthly relationships that seem to promise escape from all pain and disappointment. Sometimes certain people stir a desire in us to have them meet all our needs, soothe our hearts, or save us in some way. Relationships are a good gift, but even the most loving, well-meaning people can't ultimately deliver us from inner pain or provide unfailing love. Not *really*.

David, like us, needed to learn that only the Lord is a constant safe place, a refuge in this life of storms and unexpected relational weather we can't control. Look at his descriptions of the Lord: *my strength, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my shield, my stronghold*.

David's use of the word *my* brings a personal and specific touch to his heartfelt cries. The Lord isn't only *the* most trustworthy refuge; he is *your* and *my* faithful shelter.

Do you turn to the Lord for help regarding your relational struggles, or do you look elsewhere? God is our safe harbor in our relational storms. He changes our hearts to love him more than we love what people can give to us. He is tender toward us when we're weary, unsure if we can really overcome long-held unhealthy relational patterns. Even when we forsake him and insist on seeking security in the companionship and attention of people, the Lord doesn't tire of pursuing us. Unlike weak and sinful humans, his bandwidth for loving us is unfailing and inexhaustible!

I love you, Lord. Turn toward him and begin here today. Through Christ, God delivers us from unhelpful (and unholy) patterns in our relationships and strengthens us to trust him.

Reflect: Later in Psalm 18, David's heart gushes with thankfulness. "He rescued me from my strong enemy . . . for they were too mighty for me" (v. 17). "He brought me out into a broad [spacious, wide] place . . . because he delighted in me" (v. 19). God rescued David because he delighted in him, just as he delights to help you in the relational storms of your life. Christ is with you as you begin this journey!

Act: Pray for God to help you to look to him as your true Refuge, perhaps with words like these: "Lord Jesus, help me to love you and to say no to my false saviors. Strengthen me to say yes to you. Help me to trust in you to deliver me from my relational prisons and to bring me into a safe place of resting and trusting in you. Amen."

DAY 2

Our Heart Healer

*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves
the crushed in spirit. (Ps. 34:18)*

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Ps. 147:3)

HAVE YOU EVER heard of a wound-care specialist? I have a friend who is a nurse and spends her days traveling to people's homes to assess and treat their wounds. She cleans, bandages, and uses antibiotics to promote healing in bodies that have been bruised, punctured, and cut.

But what about wounded hearts? How can they be assessed, bandaged, and healed? Toxic relationships can wound and break our hearts. We can be crushed by those who manipulate us to meet their needs. When we become obsessively attached to someone, believing that person is all we ever need, a betrayal can devastate our dream of unflinching love.

Scripture uses the word *broken* to describe what happens when our soul, the center of our will and spiritual life, has been "shattered, smashed, burst into pieces."¹ The "wounds" that Psalm 147:3 describes refer to injury, hurt, or pain in someone's soul. God is compassionately aware of how you carry scars from sin committed against you. Fools, sinners, and messy people have made choices that have impacted your life. Betrayal, abandonment, and deceit are not small offenses in God's eyes; he sees you and knows if you have been on the receiving end of painful, perhaps even traumatic, experiences.

God, our Redeemer and Healer, is the only one who can heal your heart. In fact, when Jesus began his public ministry, he quoted Isaiah 61 to describe his ministry, which includes the healing of

broken hearts; this is one of his stated purposes for why his Father sent him into this world (see Luke 4:18–20). Wound-care specialists can treat our physical bodies, yet only God can heal the unseen parts of us. Inside us, where God alone dwells (see Col. 1:27), the Spirit of Christ comforts and heals our pain and grief.

Sometimes our hearts can be wounded by our own sin and idolatry (see Ps. 16:4). Foolish choices, sinful behaviors, and messy relationships bring consequences that expose our dependence upon God not only for forgiveness but for comfort and healing. Our gracious Savior not only delivers us from our sin but also heals and restores us from the consequences of our sin and the sin of others! Yes, we may bear the consequences of foolish sinful choices. Yes, soul-wounding sin done *against us* may produce scars we carry throughout this earthly life. However, Christ's ministry to bandage and heal broken hearts is real!

A healed heart grows by looking to God more—and to people less—for comfort and affirmation. A healed heart can celebrate the sweetness of connection with a friend, spouse, or mentor as a good gift. A heart heals gradually as we allow God's Word and love to wash our wounds, one truth at a time.

Reflect: Does your heart feel broken and bruised? Can you express to God your need for healing in the innermost places of your being?

Act: What consequences of sin—either your own or someone else's—have produced the most painful grief in your life? Many of us bear the scars from obsessive relationships, sexual sin, and selfish actions. Our God of peace can sanctify us completely so that our whole spirit, soul, and body will be kept sound and blameless when Jesus, our heart healer, returns (see 1 Thess. 5:23)! Turn to him now, asking for the mercy and help you need.

DAY 3

The One Who Saves Us from Ourselves

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13–14)

THERE ARE DAYS when I am compelled to cry out to God with desperation, “Lord, please protect people from me today!” When I am feeling impatient, frustrated, or self-righteous, the people who come in contact with me are in danger if I don’t receive God’s gracious intervention to change my heart’s desires and demands.

I didn’t always pray this way. When I was in the throes of fierce relational mess and confusion, the biggest problem I thought I had wasn’t located *in* my heart; no, the problem was other people. They weren’t delivering on what I assumed they should give to me, and they needed to step up with consistent attention and affirmation. They needed to keep me as a priority—better yet, as their *top* priority! After all, I’d given so much to my relationships, sacrificing so much time and energy for them.

Have you been there? Your spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, or friend just won’t give you what you desperately want, and you’re consistently frustrated, disappointed, and hurt. Michael was like that. His wife, Jackie, *was* loving and devoted to him, yet she loved God more than she loved her husband. She talked about the peace and love she experienced in her relationship with Jesus. Michael secretly—and guiltily—felt angry about this. Sure, we need to be serious about God and all that, but she was his wife! Wasn’t she supposed to keep him as her number one, the focus of

her day, and always consider how to make him feel loved, important, and respected? His biggest problem, or so he thought, was his wife's inability to satisfy his emotional desires. He was blind to the insecurity that contributed to the demands he placed on Jackie to make himself feel secure.

Michael, like me, had allowed his pain and sinful heart's demands to imprison him, and he needed to be delivered. He needed to realize that he had a refuge in the Beloved Son who alone could free him from sin, satisfy his heart, and enable him to love his wife selflessly. The darkness of his heart's secret anger could be transformed with the light of God's kingdom through Jesus, freeing him to let Jackie off the hook from his self-imposed mini-messiah role for her.

God saves us from ourselves—from our sin, selfishness, disordered desires, and skewed priorities. His rescue comes through the person of Jesus, the Beloved Son. Jesus was disappointed, mistreated, unloved, and abandoned, yet he never sinned against those who hurt him. What a comfort that he rescues us *into* himself—as an unfailing friend, spouse, and companion with whom we'll live forever.

Reflect: Have you ever thought that your biggest problem was a person's response or lack of response to you? How have you allowed your focus to shift from asking God to change *your* heart to demanding that he change *someone else* to do or be what you want him or her to be?

Reflect: Have you ever cried out to God to save you from your selfishness and sin and to deliver you into the kingdom of Jesus? If not, pray and ask God to help you to believe that his loving rescue is what you need most.