



the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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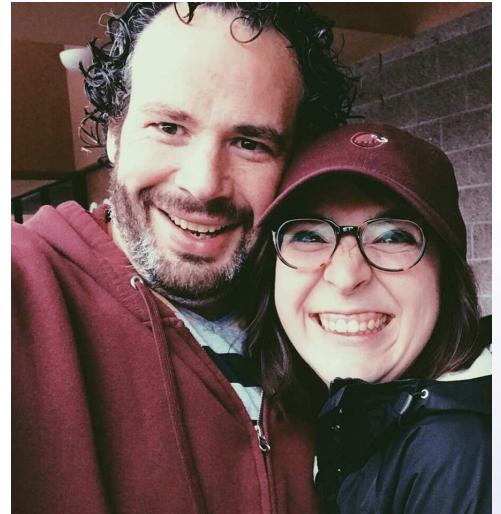
Unexpected Grace by Janelle Chandler

I couldn't believe the conversation was happening: "If we do this, we're headed towards marriage." I was sitting across the table from someone I had grown to admire, respect, and, if my stomach would stop flip-flopping, love. I wanted to jump in with everything in me.

We had been praying about this, asking for advice from those we trusted, and it seemed like God had opened this door. Evan and I started dating a week before Christmas, and I couldn't have been happier. We were already having serious conversations about how we would approach marriage. We were committed to counseling and doing everything possible to set up our marriage as rooted in Christ's grace and redemption. Probably a week after dating, we received advice that we should go through Portland Fellowship together. I knew what PF was from hearing guest speakers in youth group and college classes, and I was on board. That was part of Evan's story, and if Portland Fellowship was a place that helped people who struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction, that seemed like the place we should go. I was aware of Evan's past and willing to take whatever steps necessary for him to sort through his past, and I was committed to being by his side while he did that. I had already seen so much growth in him in the years that I had known him.

While close friends and family were on board with us and supportive of us going through the program at PF, it was not easy at all to try and explain why I would willingly date and want to marry someone who had struggled with same-sex attraction. Six months after dating, we were engaged. We were still meeting with trusted friends, pastors and counselors, praying for God's leading and holding our relationship with open hands, saying, "If God's not in this, I don't want this." I was proud of us for being so willing to walk away from the relationship if that is what God wanted, but it felt so shaky to say it could end in a moment if that's what we heard from the Lord. There were close friends who were angry that we would choose this road together. When we walked through the doors of Portland Fellowship that first fall, it would be an understatement to say my heart was a little bruised.

I was told I'd be in the wives' group, which seemed a little odd to me since I wasn't married yet. Still, I found myself in a small group with one other lady and two leaders. God must have known I would need lots of space to process everything. What I found in that room was grace. I found ladies who had gone through similar things and didn't look at me like I was crazy for loving Evan. It was such an encouraging place to be every Tuesday night. Going through the workbook



Janelle is a women's small group leader with Taking Back Ground.

for Taking Back Ground was so good for my heart, not just for Evan. Even though I had never dealt with SSA myself, I could relate to many of the topics in Year One and it was so good to be figuring it out before getting married.

I had grown up in a Christian home and gone to church all my life, but there are just some things that were never talked about there. When it came to identity and being absolutely sure that God loved me, I was shaky. There were so many areas of my life at that time where I felt like I was starting over. I was in a new job, I had never been in a serious relationship before and friends I had had for years were gone. I cried so much in that season of life and I hated crying. I felt weak, out of control and lost. I was marrying the man I loved, and still I had so much grief. I felt like I was getting it completely wrong. The ladies in the wives' group were the kindest and most understanding souls I had been around in a long time. There was freedom there to cry, be angry, have doubts and ask if this was a normal part of getting married. Nothing I said was shamed or shut down. There were wise words and caring hearts in that room of the four of us, and by the end of the first year, it felt like sacred space. *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."*—2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Evan and I were married the following fall right before Year Two of TBG, and it was such a joy to walk through those doors at Portland Fellowship as a married couple. Year Two felt like continuing to build our marriage up in grace and honesty. It felt so healthy to be there, committed to walking in what God had for us and the healing for both our hearts. It wasn't scary or unknown. The people in our group were also making progress in their healing and you could see it on their faces. There was an inextinguishable joy for some of those men and women who were pressing on in their journey. It was a privilege and an honor to sit with them and hear their process. Wives' group was the four of us same ladies again, and there was such comfort in picking up right where we had left off. Pouring our hearts out amongst friends and

sisters in Christ was so life-giving and encouraging to me.

About a month or two into the second year, I started struggling with depression and fear. Even though we were married, there were still people who were upset that Evan and I were together. Fear became the loudest voice I heard—fear that maybe we had been wrong, fear that God would say some things are unforgivable, fear that I would always feel this way, lost and so far from the grace I'd received. Evan knew I was struggling, and we talked about it. I talked about it in group. My fear would go away for a while, but then it would prick my heart when I was by myself just driving, or getting ready for work, and I would be in tears all over again. I couldn't reconcile in my head how sad I was and how happy I was with being married.



Janelle at the Surrender Service.

When we had our spring retreat with everyone at PF, that's when things changed for me. Still shaky, still having a bruised heart, I went into the surrender service with my brokenness. Earlier that day, Evan and I had talked about how much I still heard other people's voices of condemnation louder than God's voice of forgiveness and grace. I knew I wanted to be done living in fear once and for all. I surrendered the fear that had me paralyzed and wept tears of freedom and joy as my husband, leaders and friends prayed over me for Christ's perfect love to take over. *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."*—1 John 4:18

I have clung to the lyrics of the song we sang right after the surrender service that night ("Take Courage" by Kristene DiMarco), and I will always remember it as the night I stopped listening to the voice of fear and began to hear my Father's song over me instead:

*Hold onto your hope / As your triumph unfolds
He's never failing / He's never failing
Sing praise my soul / Find strength in joy
Let His Words lead you on / Do not forget
His great faithfulness / He'll finish all He's begun
Take courage my heart / Stay steadfast my soul
He's in the waiting / He's in the waiting*

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section One—Understanding Homosexuality

Taking Back Ground: Section One

- A Call to Leave: The Journey Begins
- The Roots of Homosexuality: Part 1
- The Roots of Homosexuality: Part 2
- Our Relational Nature
- Defensiveness and Detachment
- The Scriptures and Homosexuality
- Transformation: From the Inside Out

Many of our supporters have expressed curiosity as to what we actually process in our two-year Taking Back Ground discipleship program. As the creator of the TBG curriculum, our founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our program. We begin with the first section of TBG: Understanding Homosexuality.

Portland Fellowship was established to provide a safe environment for women and men struggling with same-sex attractions who found those desires in conflict with their faith in God. It was never our intent to try and persuade persons to become straight. Instead, we've had an open-handed approach of

allowing individuals to be led by their biblical convictions: "If you need us, we're here for you."

The Taking Back Ground series was developed to provide a vehicle for God to bring change in the lives of like-minded Christ followers who want to be free of unwanted sexual desires and behaviors. And with some thought, we laid out a two-year curriculum that seeks to address topics related to sexual and relational issues. It's not perfect, but over the years, TBG has allowed many men and women the opportunity to walk in a newness of life not defined by sexual identity or desire. We affirm that God has created each of us for a purpose, and TBG's goal is to have each individual become that true authentic person which God intended them to be.

Section I of TBG covers the subject of "Understanding Homosexuality". We begin with a parallel comparison to God's work through Moses to free the children of Israel from slavery. At the heart of the story is God's desire for His people. This is vital to understanding the journey we are embarking on. God loves us so much that He is unwilling to share our affection, and wants to bring us to a place of peace, belonging and fulfillment. For all believers, no matter the struggle, it is God who works in us through the Holy Spirit to bring about change.

Over the years, there have been many theories as to the cause of same-sex attraction: Is it biology or psychology? Nurture or nature? We take a look at the most common assertions to get a better understanding of the origins of this desire. To date, no single cause has been found to support a biological reason that fits everyone with same-sex attraction. There is, however, strong evidence of emotional and psychology contributing factors. Identifying these "roots" is helpful, but it's not our aim to find a cause-and-effect that leads to "fixing" the problem. Understanding should only lead us to seek God's help to think and act differently.

At the heart of the matter, for all believers, is understanding and obeying God's Word. Knowing what the Bible says about homosexuality is important. Yet, seeing the bigger picture of what He intended for sexuality as a whole brings into perspective the need for us to walk in purity before God. He made us male and female, and speaks of sexuality within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. We are called to surrender our desires to fall in line with God's intent.

Same-sex struggles are more a relational problem than a physical one. We identify a relational "same-sex deficit" that seeks "repair" through emotional and physical means. Unhealthy relating can lead us to idolizing others and become enslaved to their approval. Wounds that have occurred through relationships with family and friends may need healing. Rather than detach from the hurt, we position ourselves to allow God to work restoration and healing.

This opening section of TBG lays a foundation for the good things God will do in the lives of our participants. For many, just having the chance to open up about thoughts, feeling and actions in an environment of grace helps lift the shame they may have lived under. And we've experienced over the years God's willingness to be right there with us.

january - february calendar & services

january 10 & february 7 the hope group

For friends and family of gay or trans-identifying loved ones. Join us for a time of prayer, support, encouragement and a great meal. One of our TBG alumni will be sharing in January. 6:30 p.m.

To RSVP for this month's Hope Group, please go to:
portlandfellowship.com/rsvp.php

january 11
annual planning meeting
PF Board and Staff gather to pray, plan and prepare for the new year.

tuesdays in january
taking back ground
PF's intensive discipleship program for men and women struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction. Group for wives and fiancées also available.
7-9:30 p.m.

follow us on facebook
Stay connected for updates, prayer requests and inspirational resources. Like and follow our page at: www.facebook.com/portlandfellowship/

additional updates
www.portlandfellowship.com
Please take advantage of your online profile. If you don't have a username, please email or call.

speakers, counseling and support for youth
can be set up through the office.

Partnering through Prayer

Prayer plays a significant part in how God changes lives in this ministry. Each month, there are numerous people that we lift up to the Lord, including our leaders, TBG participants, and family and friends with loved ones who have embraced a gay or trans identity.

If you have a heart for prayer and would like to support Portland Fellowship in this way, we have two prayer groups for you to consider:



Praying for Taking Back Ground:

This group prays over our Taking Back Ground participants and their requests each week. To sign up for the weekly confidential requests, simply create an account or sign in at **portlandfellowship.com**, then click on "Join a Program" and select "TBG Prayer Support".



Praying for Hope Group:

This group prays over our friends and family members, and their gay or trans-identified loved ones. We also have people calling or emailing asking us to pray for their loved ones, and we add their prayers to this list. These confidential requests are sent out once a month. To sign up for the monthly Hope Group Prayer re-

quests, sign in at **portlandfellowship.com**, click on "Join a Program" and select "Hope Group Prayer Support".

You can also call or email us here in the office to be added to one of the prayer teams. Thank you for considering interceding for our participants--your prayers have an eternal impact for the Kingdom!



PORTLAND
fellowship

The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of Portland Fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.

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