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This Was Never the Plan

Walking with God Through the Heartache of Divorce

Divorce brings a storm of emotions—grief, anger, confusion and shame. Yet while the ache lingers, life goes on.

Vaneetha Risner has walked through this pain. In this hopeful and honest book, she draws from Scripture and her own story to offer compassionate wisdom on...

- Finding emotional clarity and letting go of shame
- Trusting God in the uncertainties ahead
- Healing relationally, resisting bitterness and finding community
- Nurturing hope for the future

She also shares about navigating single parenting, church, dating and the work of rebuilding.

Whether you are in the early stages of divorce or beginning to restore your life, this book points to Christ's faithful presence every step of the way. Helpful "check-ins" throughout invite you to pause, reflect and take hold of God again and again.

Includes appendices to guide friends and church leaders in supporting you.

About the Author



Vaneetha Risner is passionate about helping others find hope and joy in the midst of suffering. Her story includes contracting polio as a child, losing an infant son unexpectedly, developing post-polio syndrome and going through an unwanted divorce, all of which have forced her to deal with issues of loss. She and her husband, Joel, live in Raleigh, North Carolina, and have four daughters between them.

Endorsements

"I wish I had this book when I was first facing divorce. Vaneetha offers essential wisdom for anyone facing divorce, and her words are helpful for those of us on the other side of it as well. God is kind, and his words are trustworthy. Vaneetha reminds us in a voice we can hear of the value of trusting Jesus despite circumstances that seem to knock us off our foundation. I pray this book is shared far and wide."

Wendy Alsup

Author of I Forgive You

"If you are reeling from a divorce you never wanted, *This Was Never the Plan* is a lifeline. In these pages, you will see yourself in Vaneetha's story as she opens her heart and shares the raw, unfiltered emotions of her own unwanted divorce. But Vaneetha doesn't leave you in the pain. With honesty and compassion, she gently guides you along a pathway of healing—helping you move through the heartbreak you feel today toward renewed hope for tomorrow. Her journey is living proof that your heart can heal, your future can be restored, and that, as she beautifully reminds us, "divorce doesn't get the last word."

Steve Grissom

Founder, DivorceCare

Suggested Interview Questions

1. You begin the book by naming that divorce doesn't come with a funeral, but it still brings death. Why was it important for you to start there—and how do you see people underestimate the grief of divorce?
2. Many people wrestle with shame after divorce—especially in church settings. What did shame sound like in your mind, and how did you begin to untangle your identity from it?
3. Let's talk about community. What did friendship and church look like in your lowest seasons, and what would you say to someone who feels like no one stayed?
4. You write about lament as a turning point in your healing. What does biblical lament look like, and how did it help you meet God in your emotions rather than push them down?
5. Forgiveness is a loaded topic after betrayal. You talk about forgiveness as releasing the right to hurt someone back. What helped you move toward that, especially when it didn't feel fair?
6. You write honestly about single parenting while living with a progressive disease. What would you say to a parent who feels like they're parenting on empty?
7. You include a chapter on dating after divorce, but you don't take a definitive theological stance on remarriage. Why did you approach it that way, and what questions do you encourage readers to ask?
8. The title of your book, *This Was Never the Plan*, speaks to that feeling of being blindsided. What helped you move from disappointment with your story to trust in God's plan?
9. You wrote this book not just for divorced readers but for the people who love them. What are a few key things you wish friends or churches had done—or avoided doing—during your hardest seasons?
10. You end the book with a powerful reminder that spring is coming. What gives you hope today, and what do you want readers to walk away with when they finish the last page?

Extended Questions on Specific Topics

GENERAL: GRIEF, LAMENT & HEALING

1. You begin the book by naming that divorce doesn't come with a funeral, but it is similar to death. Why was it important for you to start there—and how do you see people underestimate the grief of divorce?
2. You write about lament as a turning point in your healing. What does biblical lament look like, and how did it help you meet God in your emotions rather than push them down?
3. Many Christians feel pressure to wrap suffering in a bow. But your book lingers in the tension. Why was it important to you not to rush readers through their pain?
4. Your book explores the lies we believe after divorce. What were some of the most harmful lies you faced, and how did Scripture help you confront them?
5. The title of your book, *This Was Never the Plan*, speaks to that feeling of being blindsided. What helped you move from disappointment with your story to trust in God's plan?
6. You describe healing as slow, which is the way wounds heal. This healing is not quick or linear. How would you encourage someone who feels like they'll never get through the ashes?
7. You end the book with a powerful reminder that spring is coming. What gives you hope today, and what do you want readers to walk away with when they finish the last page?
8. For someone who feels like God is silent after their divorce, what would you say to them today?

SHAME, COMMUNITY & the CHURCH

1. Many people wrestle with shame after divorce—especially in church settings. What did shame sound like in your mind, and how did you begin to untangle your identity from it?
2. What did friendship and church look like in your lowest seasons, and what would you say to someone who feels like no one stayed?
3. You write about the shame of walking into church alone or checking the “divorced” box on forms. How did shame show up in your life after divorce, and what helped you start to dismantle it?
4. You're honest about how church sometimes hurt more than it helped. What were some of the hardest moments—and what do you wish churches better understood about walking with people through divorce?
5. You talk about the friends who stayed when others drifted away. What did they do—or not do—that made the biggest difference for you?

FORGIVENESS

1. Forgiveness is a loaded topic after betrayal. You talk about forgiveness as releasing the right to hurt someone back. What helped you move toward that, especially when it didn't feel fair?
2. You've said that forgiveness felt like death at first. Can you share about how you wrestled with that—and what shifted your heart over time?
3. Many people feel like forgiving means excusing what happened or pretending it didn't hurt. What did you learn about forgiveness that helped you move forward without minimizing the pain?
4. You write that forgiveness was something you had to walk through over and over again—not just once. What did that process look like, practically and spiritually?
5. How did your view of God shape—or get reshaped by—your decision to forgive?
6. Some people listening might feel like they just can't forgive yet. What would you say to someone who wants to forgive but doesn't feel ready?

SINGLE PARENTING

1. You write honestly about single parenting while living with a progressive disease. What would you say to a parent who feels like they're parenting on empty?
2. You've described parenting after divorce as trying to hold your children together while falling apart yourself. What were some of the hardest moments for you as a single parent, and how did you navigate them?
3. You mention the pressure to keep up appearances and the guilt over what your children were going through. How did you learn to parent without being driven by shame—or the need to be perfect?
4. What role did prayer play in your parenting during that season—especially when you didn't see immediate fruit or felt unsure if anything was working?
5. Co-parenting can be one of the most painful, complicated parts of divorce. What advice would you give to people who are struggling with what to say and what not to say to their kids?
6. Looking back, what would you say to a single parent who feels like they're failing—who's exhausted, unsure, and doesn't know if they're doing enough?

DATING/REMARRIAGE

1. You include a chapter on dating after divorce, but you don't take a definitive theological stance on remarriage. Why did you approach it that way, and what questions do you encourage readers to ask?
2. What were some of the most unexpected emotions or challenges you faced when you started dating again—especially as a Christian woman with a complex story?
3. Online dating brought both hilarity and heartbreak. What did you learn about yourself and God through that experience?
4. Why is healing so important before someone considers dating again? What do you mean by that, and how can someone tell if they are ready?

FOR FRIENDS

1. You wrote this book not just for divorced readers but for the people who love them. What are a few key things you wish friends or churches had done—or avoided doing—during your hardest seasons?
2. You created an acronym—SHOW UP—to help people know how to care well for a friend going through divorce. What inspired that, and why do you think people often feel unsure of what to say or do?
3. What are some of the most helpful things friends did for you?
4. You emphasize offering presence over advice. Why is simply showing up so powerful for someone in the middle of heartbreak?
5. Many friends fear saying the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all. How can we push past that fear and love people more courageously? What advice would you give in that area?
6. You include forms in the appendix to help people communicate needs to friends and churches. What made you want to include those, and how can tools like that reduce shame for people asking for help?
7. In terms of those communication tools — which are actual fill-in-the-blank forms for friends and churches to use — what specific needs would listeners want to be aware of for divorced people that they might not otherwise have thought about?