

IS IT ABUSE?

A Biblical Guide
to Identifying
Domestic Abuse
and Helping Victims

DARBY A. STRICKLAND

Foreword by **EDWARD T. WELCH**



In a day too often filled with rhetoric and finger-pointing, Darby gives us a book filled with gracious, biblical, and practical counsel for how to effectively care for women in our churches who are suffering abuse. She offers biblical hope for the abused as well as practical help for the counselor as she shares insights, cautions, stories, and specific questions that can help us to love and lead these “bruised reeds” to a place of new hope.

—**Brad Bigney**, Lead Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church,
Kentucky

Darby’s work in understanding abuse, its power structure, and its wounds provides critical help to victims and to those walking alongside them. *Is It Abuse?* equips pastors and all of us to identify abuse in its various insidious forms and then be equipped with the knowledge and skills to help victims to find freedom, hope, and healing. This resource and the wisdom it provides are integral to pastoral ministry—and indeed to the work of everyone who is ready to speak for the oppressed and cry out for justice. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

—**Rachael Denhollander**, Speaker; Author; Victim Advocate

Darby Strickland has written an exceptionally helpful, winsome, and authoritative resource that should be required reading for all helpers in the church. Rather than giving a simplistic line-in-the-sand answer to the question “Is it abuse?” she builds carefully on Scripture and her years of counseling experience to explore the heart of abuse and its many horrific manifestations in ways that equip readers to discern when oppression is occurring and how to move forward with wise, compassionate care of victims. As an elder and counselor, I found Darby’s approach to this complex and heartrending issue immensely clarifying and seasoned with wisdom that I can use immediately in my pastoral care of others. I pray this important book will enjoy a very wide readership within the church.

—**Michael R. Emlet**, Dean of Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; Author, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet*

I love this book! I don't know of another written from a biblical perspective that provides such an accurate and comprehensive description of the dynamics of domestic abuse. For two decades, my top recommendation to pastors and counselors seeking to understand these dynamics has been a secular book, simply because it touched on the many subtleties of abuse that most Christian resources lack. However, I believe this book provides what has been missing in our circles—an in-depth resource that will truly help to equip God's people to better understand and respond to a problem that is ever present in our churches. I am particularly grateful for Darby's thorough description of the impacts of spiritual abuse and the effects of domestic violence on children. Far too few resources touch on these important topics, but they have not escaped our Savior's notice, and I believe he will use this book to help to awaken the church to the plight of his children who are being oppressed in their homes. *Is It Abuse?* is an absolute gem, and I plan to recommend it often!

—**Joy Forrest**, Founder and Executive Director, Called to Peace Ministries

Is It Abuse? is a stunning work. It is brave without being incendiary. It is carefully and thoroughly biblical. It is relentlessly practical. Yet Strickland also steadfastly avoids the traps of oversimplifying either the problem or the solution. Written from a wealth of experience, this book is for oppressed spouses, the spouses who are harming them, and those trying to intervene redemptively in abusive marriages on behalf of Christ. If you ever read a book about abuse in couples, let it be this one.

—**Alasdair Groves**, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

Darby has served the church well by answering what seems like it would be a straightforward question: "Is it abuse?" But if you've experienced abuse or walked alongside someone who is experiencing abuse, you know a fog of confusion surrounds this question. Don't wait for a crisis near you to read this book. If you read this book before you need

it, you will be grateful . . . and so will the person who is reaching out to you for guidance.

—**Brad Hambrick**, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina; General Editor, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*

The presence of oppressive marriages in the church is grievous. We must take notice. The road of caring for souls in oppressive marriages is long and painful. We cannot be timid or impatient. With the grace, mercy, and compassion of Christ, we need to intervene. There are words of redemption to speak and works of redemption to do. There are serious obstacles to overcome. We need wisdom. We need biblical, practical resources. I praise God that Darby Strickland has written such a resource. *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* belongs on the shelf of every pastor and church leader.

—**John Henderson**, Author, *Catching Foxes: A Gospel-Guided Journey to Marriage*

For the pastor, leader, or counselor, few issues can seem more perplexing and confusing than abuse. That is why I am grateful for Darby Strickland's most helpful book. Darby strikes the difficult balance of being clear and compassionate as well as comprehensive, covering an impressive amount of content related to abuse. I have not come across another resource that is as thoroughly biblical and imminently practical. If you find yourself in a helping role of any kind, this book should be required reading. You will read it and weep for those who are and have been oppressed, but you will also rejoice in the comfort and encouragement of gospel hope.

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

Darby's materials are always ranked #1 on my list of resources for understanding and addressing abuse! Through church-wide conferences, specific leadership training, and her print and internet materials,

Darby's faithfully biblical insight and expertise have provided solid guidance for our church as we have stepped deep into this crucial ministry to brokenness and need. I welcome *Is It Abuse?* gratefully and enthusiastically.

—**Joan McConnell**, Director of Women's Ministry, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

This book is now my go-to resource on domestic abuse. I have looked for a book on domestic abuse that is the total package: biblical, practical, accessible, and theological. I have finally found it. It is gospel-rich, well written, and chock-full of practical wisdom. Darby Strickland is a gift to the church.

—**Jason Meyer**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

Is It Abuse? is a wonderful addition to the growing library of biblical resources regarding domestic abuse. Through clear language, real-life examples, and biblically informed responses, Darby Strickland has given the church the clearest and most complete work on understanding the dynamics and impact of abuse to date. This work is the first book pastors and biblical counselors should read on their journey to understanding domestic abuse.

—**Chris Moles**, Author, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home*

This is a significant book that raises and answers an extremely important question for counselors and church leaders: "Is it abuse?" Too often we have gotten the answer wrong by failing to recognize oppression and to protect victims. The author is also careful to help us to avoid another wrong answer: to falsely label ordinary marital sin struggles as abusive. She employs her wealth of knowledge and experience as she helps us to accurately identify different categories of habitual oppressive behavior (abuse). She then wisely shows us how to offer compassionate biblical help to victims. I especially appreciate how she faithfully applies

Scripture throughout, how she carefully addresses delicate issues, how she fearlessly confronts sin, and how she encourages the involvement of the local church.

—**Jim Newheiser**, Director, Christian Counseling Program,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte; Executive
Director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling & Discipleship

This is an exemplary biblical counseling manual. It offers biblically based, theologically minded insights into abuse; practical wisdom on counseling abuse victims gained from years of experience; and ready-to-use tools that can be implemented in the counseling process. The soul-wrenching work of counseling women who face abuse is challenging. Our sister has plunged deep into the dark and tumultuous waters of domestic abuse and borne the burdens of other sisters to give us tremendous insight and practical wisdom to understand and address this horror. The church will be greatly blessed and equipped by *Is It Abuse?*

—**Curtis W. Solomon**, Executive Director, The Biblical
Counseling Coalition

Darby has gifted God's people with a well-researched and biblical manual on marital abuse. She deftly equips counselors, pastors, and caring leaders to navigate through the difficult and often confusing narrative surrounding what's wrong and what to do. Step by step she demonstrates what to listen for and how to make sense of conflicting information. Her chapter on the entitled thinking of the oppressor will help you to understand why abuse is not a marriage problem but a problem inside the heart and mind of the oppressor that must be addressed before any true marital healing can take place.

—**Leslie Vernick**, Coach; Speaker; Author, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage* and *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*

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DARBY A. STRICKLAND


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Portions of this book have been taken from the author’s writings in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* and online (compiled at www.darbystrickland.com). They have been revised and adapted for this format.

The stories in this book are true. However, names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To the precious women
who were brave enough
to share their stories of oppression with me.

And for John,
who encouraged me
to keep telling the church their stories.

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Foreword

“Protect the vulnerable.” That is the mission of this book. Given Scripture’s ongoing cry that we act on behalf of those who are underserved, unremembered, and oppressed, we who live under Scripture welcome this mission and are eager to grow in our ability to accomplish it. What we haven’t always expected is that this vulnerable group includes women who live next door to us or sit in front of us in church. Their public personas show few signs that anything is wrong, yet their souls and even their bodies are under assault.

Darby Strickland will help you in this mission. Let me tell you just a little about her. I met her in seminary, when she was a student and I was her instructor. Now I have the privilege of getting to learn from her as her colleague. At the beginning of her studies, she didn’t intend to specialize in abuse. But she has ended up drawing out the abused and seeing them drawn to her as they recognize her careful use of Scripture, her godly compassion, and her humble and respectful love.

There is a lesson for us in this. Darby did not begin as a professional expert—and abused women don’t first go to a professional expert. She began by simply growing relationships, listening well, and following up when a friend would hint about hardships in her home. This book is for those of us who want to do the same.

As Darby began to carry burdens with more and more women and men, she wanted to honor them by equipping us to serve them well. She has done this through seminars, articles and booklets, church consultations and denominational committees. As you read this book, you will quickly find that she is a trustworthy guide.

Foreword

Darby knows the stories of the many women you will meet in this book. She has walked with them—often for years. She loves them; she respects them; she honors them. Notice the many resources and tools that Darby gives you so that you too can love, respect, and honor those who are in relationships that substitute control and power for love. Every inventory question and practical resource is evidence of her experience and her desire to equip her readers. She knows that we can draw conclusions too quickly and can inadvertently hurt rather than protect.

The book's title, *Is it Abuse?*, might suggest a foolproof system or test that can quickly detect vulnerable women and dangerous people. If that were what this book claimed to offer, it would *not* be the book to read. Quick, easy answers are not part of the hard work of discernment—and they are typically not the way of love. Instead, from its very first story, the book will remind you that the process of discernment is slow. An abused woman rarely blurts out the details of her painful homelife. Her shame, and her belief that she is at fault, lead her to keep her situation hidden. Only friends and pastors who walk carefully in wise love with the women they know will be in a position to answer the question that this book asks. Humility that listens; love and discernment that act wisely—these form our path ahead.

This book comes at an important time. The world is increasingly concerned about the vulnerable and oppressed, and the church is seeing anew that our God has this group so deeply on his heart. What a gift for us to be able to see more clearly those whom God sees—and then, together, to have the enviable task of working out the specifics of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Edward T. Welch

Acknowledgments

I am writing this book as one who has learned much from the women whom God has called me to care for. My heart is deeply burdened for victims of domestic abuse, and I could not have written this book without being invited into the lives of sufferers. I thank each of you for entrusting your stories to me. While I sought to love you, God kindly taught me much about oppression, about himself, and about how to help. But you bore the brunt of my mistakes and were patient with me as I learned, and together we leaned into the Lord for wisdom. Each of you is more precious to me than you will ever know, and watching your faith and witnessing your courage continues to bless me—and now to bless the lives of many others.

My husband, John, has devotedly listened to me and encouraged me as I sought to develop this material and embark upon this book. His encouragements and prayers are what enabled its completion. He is a faithful servant who has made countless sacrifices that have allowed me to carry the burden of abuse ministry to which my Savior has called me. John's smile, faith, and heart have pulled me out of the darkness that doing such work requires a person to visit again and again. My heart is filled with gratitude to my children as well. Each of you rose to the occasion— you have inspired me by the sacrifices you have made and what you have given to this book. Love you all.

Three women, in particular, have inspired my writing. Diane Langberg, Joy Forrest, and Leslie Vernick, you were the pioneers who first called the church to see and tend to its suffering sheep. Your labors for the church body have been invaluable to them and to me. Your work

Acknowledgments

and your use of Scripture have shaped my heart and my thinking. Your fingerprints can be found throughout these pages.

A special thank-you to my early readers: Alasdair Groves, Ed Welch, Mike Emler, Brad Hambrick, John Henderson, Ann Maree Goudzwaard, and Joy Forrest. You each devoted time and careful thought that has helped me to hone and fine-tune this manuscript. And thank you as well to my CCEF colleagues who cheered me on and whose body of work taught me to seek out the places where life and Scripture meet.

I would be very remiss if I did not also mention my editors. First, Amanda Martin, your work on this manuscript has had an immeasurable impact on it. And I am also thankful to Kim Monroe and Lauren Whitman, who dove into my first writings on oppression and helped me as a young author to give them shape. Without you three, I feel that this task would have been too much for me. God was sweet to provide each of you to me and this material.

This book is the fruit of many prayers. I want to express my most profound appreciation to all my family and friends who prayed for me and for this book. You all helped me to look to the Lord and to entrust my weakness and worries to him. Your prayers have been precious, and today we rejoice together that they have been answered. But above all, my heart swells with gratitude for the work of Christ, whose own suffering provides the ultimate rescue. For one day, he will bring an end to all the sin and evil that victims endure.

A Note to Readers: How to Use This Book

I have written this book for anyone who desires to come alongside a victim, or victims, of domestic abuse. Maybe you are a church leader, friend, or counselor, and you find yourself dealing with the many layers of complexity that unfold as you encounter an abusive marriage. You are sorting through many questions amid the chaos. How should you proceed? Perhaps what you have heard from a wife has left you asking, “Is this abuse?” Or you may be observing her from afar and wondering, “What is happening with her?” You feel the weight of those questions and know that you need to answer them correctly if you are going to provide sound counsel.

Abuse is easy to miss, but it is even easier to minimize. As a young counselor, I did not possess the wisdom I needed in order to minister to the oppressed. I had much to learn about oppression, its particular wounds, and the way it entangles its victims. Now, after years of working with oppressed women, I understand what rules the hearts of oppressors and how they seek to control their victims—as well as to control others’ perception of reality. We must understand the dynamics of abuse in order to minister to its victims effectively. Domestic abuse can be disorienting—it can initially be hard to get a handle on what is happening in a marriage. I hope to pass on to you what I have learned so that you will have clarity about this issue. I hope to equip you to think biblically about oppression and to teach you how to be a trusted guide for those who are enslaved and ensnared. I have sought to be

both biblical and practical in every chapter of this book. I want you to grow in your understanding of what is at the root of oppression and what the Bible says about it while also giving you the means to create pathways to safety and restoration for victims.

This book acknowledges the evils of domestic abuse and prioritizes protection for those who are affected by it. My goal is not just for you to understand what makes a marriage abusive but to help you to understand the particular hearts and situations that you will encounter. No two cases of abuse are the same, but all oppression is destructive and dishonors both victims and God. So this book strives to help you to offer thoughtful care to the particular victims whom God has placed in your path. Its goal is to prepare you to do three things.

- As a helper, you will learn to *pick up on cues* that something is wrong. You will learn more about the dynamics of abuse, the heart of the abuser, and the damage that is done to the abused.
- You will learn how to *draw out stories* so that you can get clarity on the situations you encounter and their severity. (This may result in your ruling out the presence of abuse.)
- You will become equipped to *provide wise and Christ-centered counsel* as you navigate the complex and often dangerous dynamics of abuse.

Format

The first five chapters of this book provide an essential framework for what follows. You may be tempted to skip them and dive into part 2 or 3. Don't. You must understand what is at the root of oppression and wade through the many nuances of how to help victims before you can best use the tools that uncover different types of abuse and bring healing.

This book has features of a workbook. There are reflection questions throughout each chapter to help you to process what you are learning. But merely understanding oppression is not enough. You need to understand the contours of each person's story and heart. Thus,

this book includes many resources that are designed for you to copy and reuse. These tools will help you to make evaluations and set key ministry priorities for each person you are walking with.

Men may be victims of domestic abuse, and this book's material can be applied to male victims. However, the majority of my own experience is with counseling women who are in oppressive marriages, and the language I use will reflect this. I will refer to the wives as victims and will share stories in which husbands are the perpetrators of abuse. This is consistent with what we *typically* encounter in our churches, because domestic abuse is gendered. Men are more likely to be the perpetrators of domestic abuse and women the victims.¹

Cautions

Wisdom requires us to be careful and to know the heart and story of each person who comes before us. And wisdom also demands that we be keenly aware of potential danger and ready to act quickly. Before you have your first few conversations with someone whom you even *suspect* is oppressed, be aware of the following:

- Her communications may be monitored—so do not phone her, text her, email her, or leave her messages without the assumption that her spouse will see them.
- Any confrontation with an oppressor brings the potential for danger to escalate. Any engagement has to be thought out, and safety precautions must be made—so go slowly and get the

1. Women can be abusive and violent to their male partners, but this is estimated to happen in less than five percent of cases of domestic abuse. See Joanne Belknap and Heather Melton, *Are Heterosexual Men Also Victims of Intimate Partner Violence?* (Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2005), https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/AR_MaleVictims.pdf. Sadly, when men are victims, they have to overcome the many hurdles that are associated with the stigma of being a male victim, so it can be harder for men to come forward. If you are working with a male victim, use the same principles that are taught in this book, go slowly, and seek to tenderly understand his story.

necessary support in place first. This book will help you with doing so.

- Some situations are so dangerous and intense that it is imperative for you to get professional counselors, domestic abuse experts, or law enforcement involved right away. The resources in this book will still be valuable to you, as victims who are in crisis often struggle to see the severity of their situation while, and after, the intensity peaks. But if you are at all concerned about the level of danger a victim is in, consult a professional who can help you to determine the first steps to take right away. Victims cannot afford for us to make mistakes.

Encouragement for the Journey

As you become a guide and comforter for the oppressed, one of the most powerful things you can do for victims is to remind them that the Lord sees them, knows their trouble, and is active in their rescue. Listen to the ways he promises to be a help to them:

The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble. (Ps. 9:9)

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

The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed. (Ps. 103:6)

The Word is full of beautiful and helpful truths that we will explore together. My prayer is that this book captures God's heart for the oppressed so that you may share it with his oppressed daughters.

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING OPPRESSION

*... To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Luke 1:79

1

Is It Abuse?

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Luke 12:2)

Addison was a regular at women's Bible studies and social gatherings. God gifted her with hospitality, and she possessed a deep hunger for Jesus and his Word. Yet after her first child was born, her involvement in women's ministry activities dwindled—then came to a complete halt.

One Sunday morning, I managed to catch Addison for a few minutes and asked her how she was adjusting to motherhood. When I said that I had missed seeing her, she made a joke about how long it would be before she returned to Bible study. Although I could have put this down to the side effects of the normal feelings of a new mother, something struck me about what she said. I asked her if she was saying that because she was overwhelmed or if someone had hurt her. Her eyes filled with tears. "Things are just hard at home, and I have to make my marriage my priority."

That statement could have meant anything. But Addison's tear-filled eyes betrayed the intensity of her emotion. Her husband came up to her, and they quickly left the building.

Seeing Addison's heartache, I naturally wanted to check in with her again; but in the weeks that followed, her family always left as soon as the church service was over, leaving me no opportunity to connect with her. I asked if we could meet up to chat, but Addison said that things were tight financially and that she couldn't make it out. Many months passed during which we exchanged only simple greetings.

About a year later, Addison came up to me and asked if she could ask me a personal question. Was my husband ever jealous of our children? A few years earlier, I might have said no—and made a joke about my husband liking the cleaner version of the house that we’d had pre-kids. But my previous interactions with oppressed women led me to respond much more carefully. I have learned that abused women tend to ask somewhat veiled questions as they try to figure out if what they are experiencing is normal and if you are a safe person to talk to. My ears perked up at her question. “Why are you asking?” I said. “Do you think your husband is jealous? What does he do to make you think that?”

And the stories began to flow. Addison shared with me how her husband would get angry with her if she tended to her crying child when they were having a conversation. He would be silent for days if she showed her child affection. He would often say, “Ever since the baby was born, you have a heart of stone for me! You only married me because you wanted children.” He became so upset with how much time it took her to tend to a small child that he did not allow her to come to our Bible study or see her family. If she had extra energy or time, it was his. She owed him, and he made it clear what he wanted her to do.

Addison’s theory was that he was jealous of her delight in their child—but she could not understand why. She questioned whether she loved her husband enough. Why would loving their child make him so angry? Was this normal? What was she doing wrong? But I was left wondering, “Is it abuse?”

God’s Design for Marriage

The opening pages of Scripture tell us that God knew it was not good for man to be alone, so he created Eve to have spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy with Adam. This tells us that companionship was integral to God’s design for marriage from the start. He created marriage to be a means for a husband and wife to help each other become the people God designed them to be. And what’s more, our covenants with our spouses are intended to be a glorious reflection of Christ’s covenant with his bride—the church (see Eph. 5).

In order to understand how God calls spouses to relate to each other, we look at how Christ loves the church. His love for his church is self-sacrificial, faithful, purifying, honest, and sanctifying. He treats her with honor and has served her at a high personal cost. In fact, his love for her is *characterized* by humility and service.

Paul says that we are to have that same kind of humble, sacrificial mindset.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. (Phil. 2:3–7)

Tim Keller reminds spouses that “we are not to live for ourselves but for the other. And that is the hardest yet single most important function of being a husband or a wife.”¹ God calls us to love our spouses for their good and God’s glory. After all, that is the way that Jesus loved us—his bride.

This is difficult to do. Even with the sanctifying help of the Holy Spirit, we act selfishly. Yet we are sanctified in our marriages as we seek to highlight Jesus’s sacrificial love for our spouses. Much could be said here about how to help and fortify good marriages—and even lousy ones. But there is already a sea of valuable resources that are available to Christians. What I want to focus on here is how abuse in particular corrupts the covenant of marriage. Certainly we all need to be continually reminded that marriage is not a place where we look to fulfill our own desires (whether emotional, physical, or spiritual) but a relationship in which we are called to love and serve our spouses so that they and we both help each other to better love and image God. But oppressors, we will learn, specialize in breaking the marriage covenant along these self-serving dimensions, which does a tremendous amount of damage to their marriages and their victims.

1. Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 50.

REFLECT

1. Motivated and fueled by his sacrificial love for us, Jesus died to his own interests and looked to our needs and interests (see Rom. 15:1–3). Consider how this has deepened your intimacy with him.
2. How have you seen your relationships deepen when you have acted sacrificially and for the benefit of the sanctification of others?
3. Our sin always distorts God’s good design. How have you seen your selfishness harm people whom you love?

What Is Domestic Abuse?

Knowing God’s intention for marriage allows us to see just how much it has been corrupted when oppression is present. Oppression is the opposite of God’s design for marriage. Abuse occurs in a marriage when one spouse pursues their own self-interests by seeking to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors. This controlling pattern of behavior is commonly called *domestic abuse* or *domestic violence*. I like to use the term *oppression*, since it provides a framework for this behavior that is addressed in Scripture and captures the domination that it involves. No matter what form oppression takes, its intended outcome is the same: to punish and wound a victim so that an oppressor gets their world the way they want it. An oppressor’s behavior says, “Serve me or suffer the consequences!” We will look at the biblical roots for this type of brutal idolatry in chapter 3, but for now we are already getting a sense that oppression stands in stark contrast to Jesus’s self-sacrificing love.

Abuse exists on a spectrum. While the underlying attitude of all oppressors is the same, no two cases of oppression are the same. Some oppressors delight in bringing harm, while some remain unaware of their life-choking entitlements.² All oppression is a grave sin—some abusive tactics may be more or less severe than others, but they are all

2. We will talk more about this in chapter 3.

destructive and dishonoring to victims and to God. *There is no place for oppression in a marriage.*

Assessing for Abuse

Assessing for abuse involves many layers of complexity. Our goal is to identify whether entire marriages are abusive, based on whether coercive control is the ruling force within them. This is not as simple as breaking them down to individual behaviors and labeling each one by saying “This is abuse” or “This isn’t abuse”—the process is much more complicated than that! Let’s contrast two ways of thinking about abuse.

Labeling Behaviors as Abusive or Non-Abusive

Sometimes focusing on behaviors can be an effective way to assess extreme or brutal instances of abuse. If someone is choking or beating his spouse, does it really matter how many times he does it or why? Certain behaviors, such as rape or strangulation, cross a line that allows us to easily identify them as evil and abusive. They get our attention right away. We know that we need to do something about them.

However, people differ on whether some specific actions should be classified as abusive or not. For example, is it abusive to drive recklessly with your spouse in the car? Some of us may chalk reckless driving up to an attitude of impatience or immaturity—others to a controlling tirade. To discern whether behavior like this is abuse, we would have to know more about both the incident and the context of the relationship in which it took place. Was it done in order to frighten and control? Did scaring the passenger accomplish something, such as getting out of a trip to the in-laws? Does this behavior fit into a larger pattern of intimidation or cruelty? We cannot detach behaviors from the heart that perpetrates them. Realizing this usually leads us to make judgments using the second method.

Assessing for Coercive Control

Most often, when we encounter abuse, it is subtle. Any one instance or occurrence of most behaviors can be explained away or dismissed. To answer the question “Is it abuse?” we need to determine whether such

an event is part of a much broader system of oppression. The chapters ahead will teach you to be alert for patterns of coercion so that you can assess for oppression with the whole context of a relationship in mind.

Say, for example, that a woman reports that her husband has been ignoring her. To determine whether the husband is being inattentive or abusive, you need to consider many things.

- Was this a punishment? If so, for what?
- How often does this occur?
- For how long?
- Does it accomplish something for the husband?
- What is its effect on the wife?
- How does it change the wife's future behavior?
- Can the wife express how this is hurting her without receiving further punishment?
- Who repairs the relationship after this happens, and why?
- Does the husband display true repentance and a recognition that this this behavior is wrong?

Do you see how we must go deeper—must look at the heart of the husband and the impact of his behavior on the wife? In the chapters that follow, you will learn not just how to discern instances of abuse but how to identify marriages in which coercive control is the ruling force. In chapter 3, we will learn about the heart that seeks domination and control. In chapter 4, we will see the effects that enslaving and dominating behaviors have on the life and heart of the oppressed. In the second half of the book, we will get into the specifics of the various types of abuse and consider the different behaviors and punishments that abusers of each type employ in order to get their way.

As we assess marriages for abuse, we must be accurate and careful. Labeling something as abuse when it is not will do damage of a different kind—not only to the people involved but also to the women we encounter after them who truly are being abused. If I were to mistakenly label a lousy marriage between a couple in a church as an abusive

one, the next time I had to help an oppressed woman come forward in that church, it would take more time for others to believe her—time that she might not have. Further, potential helpers might treat her more suspiciously when she desperately needs their support.

Much is at stake, so I urge you to take great care before labeling something as abuse. It is wise to go slow and compile stories and examples of power and control. I designed this book not just to help you to grow in discernment but also to provide you with questions that will extract the critical information you need in order to make careful and accurate assessments. You will serve both a victim and her church well when you can communicate a clear, full, and accurate picture of her marriage.

The Oppressed Are in Our Churches

Consider whom God has placed in your life. Who is sitting next to you in your small group or nervously quiet beside you at a women's Bible study? God has placed particular people in your path because he wants you to be his hands and feet. He wants you to represent the heart he has for their tender, wounded souls. God calls us to see specific sufferers. Whom is he drawing you to?

We may be overwhelmed by or detached from statistics that show the pervasive nature of this problem. Or perhaps you are reading this book because you are concerned for a particular person. If your interest in this topic is more general, however, I suggest asking God to help you to see whom he is directing you toward as you keep reading. We are called to help *particular* people—and that is a grounding reality.

Shock of Statistics

There are many—too many—domestic abuse victims sitting in our pews. The statistics are alarming. Research from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's Division of Violence Prevention shows that one in four women experience severe physical violence from an intimate partner.³ While men can be victims of abuse as well, the

3. See Michele C. Black et al., *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence*

majority of victims—85 percent—are women.⁴ And sadly, that statistic does not change within the walls of the church—even the evangelical church. Religious leaders who were surveyed in one study believed that one in five of the couples in their congregations were violent, and 9.3 percent of the surveyed pastors had counseled *five or more* abused women during the previous year alone.⁵

Since the statistics are the same inside our churches as outside them, we can figure that in a church that has a hundred and sixty women, forty women will have experienced some sort of physical abuse in their lives and twenty women will *currently* be experiencing physical abuse. If we consider emotional abuse, the number of victims climbs. This means that most likely each of us has perpetrators and victims in our midst.⁶

While these statistics are hard to believe, they are essential for us to acknowledge. When I first considered the statistics, they shocked me. Then I thought about the cases in my own church that I am aware of, and sadly the numbers rang very true. Even if we cut these statistics in half to accommodate our disbelief, the numbers would remain staggering—even disturbing—and our call to help would remain unchanged.

Scripture's Call

God asks his people repeatedly in Scripture to work for justice and righteousness. Psalm 82 is one such instance. Notice how God urgently challenges his people by asking them how long they will continue to rule in favor of the wicked: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” (v. 2). This is quite an indictment. In order to

Survey: 2010 Summary Report (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

4. See Callie Marie Rennison, *Intimate Partner Violence, 1993–2001* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2003), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipv01.pdf>.

5. See “From Religious Leaders,” The Rave Project, accessed July 11, 2020, <https://www.theraveproject.org/resources/from-religious-leaders/>.

6. See Ron Clark, *Setting the Captives Free: A Christian Theology for Domestic Violence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), xx, quoted in Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 59–60.

work for justice and judge justly and impartially, we first must notice the transgressors. Abuse is often hidden from our sight, so part of acting justly means learning to fine-tune our perception of who is doing wicked things.

But God is not merely concerned with accurate judgement for those who do wrong. His interest in justice goes beyond judging perpetrators. He asks us to intervene on behalf of the afflicted as well.

Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (vv. 3–4)

God imparts to us clear and direct commands: give justice, maintain rights, rescue, and deliver. These are not small things he is asking us to do. He is imploring us, as his people, to help rescue the weak and oppressed. The chapters ahead will help you to answer that call.

Do you desire, as the Lord does, to see the church become a refuge for the abused—a place where they can confidently seek help and get wise and protective counsel? Victims should not be left without help and hope because we fail to see the unseen or do not know what to do. God calls us not only to confront oppression but also to provide protection and care for the vulnerable. We see Jesus doing these things. He identifies with the powerless, takes up their cause, and stands against those who do harm to the vulnerable. As the body of Christ, we simply cannot allow abuse to go unaddressed in our midst. We must be deliverers and protectors.

Scriptural Wisdom and Soul Shaping

This book is needed not merely because of the prevalence of abuse but because of its complexity. Abuse is overwhelming—not just for the victim but also for the helper. There is so much to consider regarding how to assess it and how to provide care and safety, and we tend to fear getting involved in another person's marriage, encountering evil, feeling helpless, or being out of our depth. I can almost guarantee that all this

will happen when you enter the life of the oppressed, and I want you to be able to love well and to enter with confidence while carrying the precious truths of Scripture to guide you (see Heb. 4:16)—so this book draws wisdom directly from Scripture and seeks to make it actionable.

Abuse ministry is also soul shaping. My specific prayer has been that the coming chapters will not just give you information about abuse and what to do but will go even further by shaping your heart to better reflect Jesus as you minister to the oppressed.

REFLECT

1. Think about the size of your church. For every hundred people in your church, there are likely to be five women who are experiencing physical abuse and twenty who are emotionally abused. How many cases may there be in your church?
2. How many stories of abuse in your own church are you aware of or do you suspect?
3. How do you feel the Lord tugging at your heart as you think about his heart for the vulnerable and his call to justice?

An Overview of Those Who Are Involved

In this book, we will examine the different roles that God, helpers, oppressors, and the oppressed play in situations of abuse. I want to introduce these key players to you as we get started.

God

The Bible has much to say about God's heart for victims of oppression. Early on, he introduces himself to his enslaved people as their deliverer and protector (see Ex. 3:7–10). Their oppression moves him to orchestrate their rescue from harsh slavery in Egypt. God continues to denounce oppression all throughout Scripture, such as when he says, "Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand" (Mic. 2:1). God stands against all forms of oppression

(see Ps. 12:5; 34:21; Prov. 6:12–16; Isa. 10:1–3; Jer. 50:33–34)—and we will see that he is particularly concerned when oppression occurs within the covenant of marriage.

As God incarnate, Jesus identifies with the powerless and takes up their cause, as well as standing against those who harm the vulnerable. Describing his calling, Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

God has also gifted us the Holy Spirit to be our helper. He is a source of wisdom and power, and he will guide us to truth. We can pray for him to convict oppressors and can be confident that he will comfort the oppressed. We rely on him for much as we seek to help victims.

God is a protector of the vulnerable. He delivers us not only from our own brokenness and sin but also from injustice—from the sins of others. He knows our suffering, and he is moved to act.

REFLECT

Jesus’s words in Luke 4:18 come at the beginning of his public ministry. Consider the individuals who were on his heart. This should be a deep encouragement—not just for you, as you enter this ministry, but also for the oppressed.

The Helpers

God calls us to see the broken and the vulnerable among us. Even more than that, he calls us to tend to them and protect them, just as he sent his Son to do.

If you are drawn to this book, it is most likely because someone whom you love is suffering. Your heart is burdened for hers. You might be a friend or a family member whose concern for her is deeply personal. Perhaps you are a pastor or a counselor or you work in women’s ministry, and you want to know how you and your church can support the oppressed in their suffering. God uses many different people who are in various roles to care for his vulnerable sheep. No matter your role,

you want to help—but you feel the weightiness of getting it right. You might even feel overwhelmed when you think about where to start or feel uncertain regarding how to think about an abusive marriage biblically. You are entering a critical role, and the stakes are high. I want to help you to navigate the deep and turbulent waters ahead.

If you serve in a more formal capacity, you will be able to provide direct care or formal counseling. Chances are that a victim will rely on your understanding of abuse and will trust your counsel, so it is vital for you to gain expertise.

Victims also greatly benefit from the involvement of their churches, informed friends, and family members who know how to support them. I cannot say enough about the vital role that wise friends play as they help the oppressed to understand and organize their stories. When sufferers share their stories with you, you support the emergence of their personhood. This is a glorious role to play in their lives.

Friends can also serve as conduits that lead victims to others who can provide more formal help or that, when needed, urge them to connect with trained people who can work toward establishing their safety. As friends love well, they reinforce the work of pastors and counselors. The time that a counselee spends in my office is significantly reduced when her church community wisely cares for her.

Each helper role is critical, and many different types of helpers can make use of the material in this book—and can even share it with one another to help develop a unified community of care for a victim.

Different types of helpers might even come together to form a care team. A care team works toward one main goal: protecting a victim. There are people with specialized abuse training who can be enlisted for this team, such as shelter workers, victim advocates, counselors, and batterer intervention specialists (see appendix F for more information on this). While the team's main goal will be to focus on a victim's care, as we said above, it should also help the perpetrator to turn from his sin and cease doing harm, as a dimension of fulfilling that goal. It would be natural for a church to be involved in the building of this team, since a church should easily be able to align itself with the team's goals as part of its commitment to care for the vulnerable and stand against

sin. Churches also have resources that can help with victims' practical needs as well as rich biblical truths that they need.

One fundamental truth we as helpers need to know is that *we cannot solve oppression, and we cannot make it stop*. But we can be used by a powerful God—a God who loves his people and is always on the side of the oppressed.

As we enter the lives of the oppressed, we must faithfully pray—must seek the Lord's wisdom and ask him to reveal what we need to know and see in order to help. Things are rarely the way that they outwardly appear. But we need not fear, because the Lord promises to be our guide and our help. Amid this challenging ministry, I encourage you to slow down and see the things that God brings to your attention.

REFLECT

Begin asking for God to grow your wisdom and your dependence on him. Pray that he would prepare your heart to be changed so that you can love the oppressed the way that Jesus loves them.

The Oppressor

It is essential to understand up front that oppressors are deceptive and are usually masters at disguising what they are doing. Often their own spouses fail to recognize that what is being done to them is abusive. And not only do abusers deceive others, but they also deceive *themselves*—which makes it difficult to know how to weigh their words (see Prov. 21:2; Jer. 17:9–10). This is disorienting for everyone. When we are trying to detect abuse, we cannot rely upon outward appearances or what *think* we know about someone.

We also need to be aware of how prideful an oppressor's heart is. Psalm 10 zeros in on the heart of one who seeks to do wicked things. His pride causes him to speak as one who does not believe that the Lord will hold him accountable.

He says in his heart, "I shall not be moved;
throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity."

Understanding Oppression

His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. (vv. 6–7)

The description of how this man spews vile words, lies, threats, and destruction shows us how prideful and unruly oppressors are.

What complicates matters is that our culture has bought into varying myths about why men abuse. We cannot rely on what we *think* we know about abuse. Here are some common excuses that you may have heard for why a man might abuse:

- He was abused as a child.
- It's just the liquor talking.
- He can't control his anger.
- He can't communicate and express emotions.
- He was hurt by his last girlfriend and now fears intimacy.
- He's so in love that he's afraid he will lose her.

Each of these excuses casts the abuser as being helpless. They imply that his abusive behaviors are reactive—that he is out of control. Nothing can be further from the truth. Oppressors are not out of control; they *seek* control. Oppressors are driven by their selfishness and their desire to dominate their spouses. What they do always accomplishes something for them. Their bad behaviors benefit them. If a wife is abused when she asks for help around the house, she learns to stop asking for help. Oppressors do not oppress because they are wounded or weak; they wound so that they can make their world the way that they want it. As we will see in chapter 3, understanding an abuser's entitled mentality is essential if we are to provide wise care and counsel.

REFLECT

Are you aware of your own presuppositions about abuse? Now is a good time to write them down.

1. Why do you think that men abuse their wives?

2. Have you had any experiences with abusive men? What do you believe motivated their behavior?

The Oppressed

When you are abused by your spouse, you know that something is terribly wrong but may be unsure what it is—just as Addison was. You've done everything you can, and read every book on marriage you can find, in an attempt to understand how you can fix your relationship. But things keep getting worse. Nothing helps.

You live in constant tension, fearful of your spouse's anger and wondering what you are doing wrong. You have tried so many ways to maintain the peace that you are exhausted; yet you don't stop attempting to please your spouse. Nothing works.

No one around you sees what is happening. *You* aren't even sure what is happening. You cannot put into words what it is like to live in your home. Nothing seems to capture it.

You sit with many unanswered questions: Why can't I fix this? Is it really that bad? Am I just oversensitive? Am I overreacting? Is it my fault? What did I do to deserve this? Why hasn't God helped me? Nothing stops the self-condemnation.

Your perception of reality becomes disoriented. Your constant uncertainty feeds your growing confusion and fear. Your heart and body ache, and you long for clarity and guidance. Where can you turn for help? Who would even believe you? Others look at you and see a depressed, anxious person. No one sees what is really happening.

When you go to others for marital advice or prayer support, their advice does not solve the problem—and what's more, it leaves you feeling broken and exposed. Chances are that those you have reached out to for help have not understood the extent of your suffering and have wounded you further with judgment or misguided advice. You do not know who to trust. You fear that people will bring you more harm than help. No one feels safe to you.

If you could disappear, you would. You feel trapped and hopeless—not to mention guilty for feeling this way about your marriage. After all you have read, you believe that godly women have good marriages

and that they respect and delight in their husbands. Nothing could be less true of you.

REFLECT

1. David describes an experience that is similar to what oppressed spouses feel when he recounts the deliverance he received from his enemies:

For the waves of death encompassed me,
the torrents of destruction assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me;
the snares of death confronted me. (2 Sam 22:5–6)

Meditate on this imagery of being relentlessly trapped under waves and torrents of water—ensnared and strangled. Consider what it would be like to live like this day after day.

2. If this were your reality, how would you seek to identify a trustworthy helper?

Patient and Prayerful Pursuit

During the conversations that I had with Addison, which we saw at the start of this chapter, my experience with other abused women led me to pick up on the subtle cues that she was displaying. Addison was increasingly isolated and anxious and was working overtime to be a good wife. By simply slowing down and asking her a well-placed question—“Why are you asking that?”—I gave Addison the space and support to tell me more about what was occurring in her home. I would have missed what was happening in her life if I had not asked for more information before I answered her initial question.

Many victims, like Addison, know that something is not right. They need people who will carefully listen to them and draw out their stories. Slowly, Addison began sharing more stories with me, as I continued to check in with her from time to time. Some weeks she

felt guilty for speaking ill of her husband; other times she believed she was being oversensitive and unfair. But as we continued to talk, I was able to gently reflect back to her the seriousness and pervasiveness of her husband's cruelty and control. At last she did not feel crazy and was able to articulate that there was a problem and that she desired help.

I could tell that praying for her to gain clarity and wisdom was a profound encouragement to her, and so we prayed together for this for many months. She would share stories with me; I would affirm the gravity of what she was enduring. Then, together, we would ask the Lord to guide her. It took about eighteen months, but eventually she was able to speak to her pastor (with me present) and ask for help with her marriage. Thankfully, the Lord had placed her in a church that understood abuse and responded well. She began to receive excellent care immediately.⁷

As we pursue victims to try to help them, we must remember to be patient and careful. We should lean in and ask for more information when we sense that abuse may be present and should slow down and take the time to learn more about a woman and about her story. We may be tempted to speak into her world—but first we need to learn what her world is like.

Remember that, like Addison, victims are not always able to provide us with accurate assessments of their problems. We can help them by carefully pursuing important details about their situations and gathering enough stories to make an accurate judgment about them. And remember that it takes time for victims to trust us as well as to recognize that they are being abused. I find that it takes a number of months, if not longer than a year, before most victims whom I work with are ready to take substantial steps to address their oppression. So as each of us get started working with the oppressed, we must be prepared to move slowly and prayerfully.

7. This is not always the case. Often churches have to be educated regarding how to care for abusive marriages. See appendix B, as well as the recommended resources section, for additional church-training resources.

REFLECT

1. Meditate on Ephesians 4:1–2: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” How might this call for us to be humble, gentle, and patient be particularly important when we are ministering to the oppressed?
2. Considering what you know about yourself, how might you be tempted to do the following things when you are working with a victim?
 - Make assumptions based on what you know
 - Be insensitive about her story
 - Be impatient with the long process of victim care
3. Confess these things to the Lord and ask him to help to reshape your heart for the journey ahead.

What God Says about Oppression

Victims need to hear about the heart God has for them and how he stands against the things that are happening to them. The oppressed need true and lasting comfort. It is paramount that you share with victims what God says about oppression. I wrote this next section¹ so that you can share it directly with victims. I want you to read it now and then tuck it away to use later. It speaks directly to the oppressed and addresses the concerns of their hearts.

I have found that the hearts of victims are often further burdened by bad teaching. If we want them to connect to God and to bring their questions to him, it is essential for us to help them to know what his Word actually says about them and their plight. When the time is right, you might choose to read this section to a victim or recount these truths for her—but you should do so while seeking to understand what she currently believes and should pray together with her that these truths will take root.

The Abuse Is Not Your Fault

Abusive behaviors are inexcusable. They are not the result of your words, actions, or inactions. Nothing that you have done could make you deserve or be responsible for abusive treatment—nothing ever. Jesus says,

What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. *All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.* (Mark 7:20–23)

1. A version of the material in this section also appears in a mini-book that can be given to victims: Darby A. Strickland, *Domestic Abuse: Help for the Sufferer* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 14–19.

Your oppressor will blame you for his anger and rage. But Jesus says that these abusive actions come from within him. Husbands will say, “My wife provoked me.” But God says that the opposite is true. Abusive acts flow from an oppressor’s heart, choices, and deliberate actions. Oppressors want their wives to feel responsible for their sins so that they can use fear and guilt to control them. But God says it is not your fault—not ever. *We cannot make or cause someone else to sin.* We all fail and disappoint our spouses at times, but there are plenty of healthy ways that they can express their hurt. There is no justification for abuse—ever!

No One Deserves to Be Treated Unjustly

Oppressors hurl accusations at their victims. Hearing these relentless attacks can make you believe that you deserve heinous treatment. You may think about your failures and conclude, “I haven’t been a faithful Christian, so this is God’s way of rebuking me”; “When I was younger I fell into sin, and I’m paying for it now”; or “If I were a better spouse, God would not need to punish me in this way.” These thoughts might leave you believing that you deserve the abuse that is happening to you. However, there is nothing that you could have done to justify oppression. Everything about oppression is unjust.

When we are suffering, our hearts cry out to understand why something bad is happening to us. Sometimes we turn inward and search ourselves, asking, “What did I do to deserve this?” We may think that God is punishing us. But this thinking is false, because it fails to account for God’s grace. Our merit, past or present, does not determine God’s love and care for us. His love is for the unlovely and the broken. When we belong to Jesus, the grace we receive is based solely on what Jesus has done. Jesus’s work is complete, and so we are forgiven—completely. In fact, God says, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17; cf. Jer. 31:34). If God does not remember your sins and failings, why would he punish you for them? Jesus himself took on the punishment for *all* our sins on the cross. He lovingly and willingly substituted himself so that our sins are forgiven and we can

be reconciled to God. God's desire is not to punish us but to woo us to himself. He longs to lavish his loving grace on us—flaws and all (see Gal. 2:20).

God Hates Violence

God is not silent on the issue of violence. Passages such as Psalm 11 describe his hatred of violent people. People are made in God's image, and being brutal to them desecrates that image (see Gen. 9:6)—and so God does not hide his disdain for violence. Being married does not mean that a wife needs to stay with a violent husband. It is not a sin to get away from danger. Nothing in Scripture says that anyone needs to remain in a dangerous situation.

Oppression Violates God's Design for Marriage

God designed marriage to be a place of mutual trust, sacrifice, care, and honesty. It is supposed to be a reflection of the way that Jesus loves his church—a relationship that is characterized by sacrifice (see Gen. 2:23–24; Eph. 5:25, 28–30). Oppressive people make it a place of domination. They have an inflated sense of self-worth and feel that they are owed preferential treatment and unwavering allegiance. They use manipulation and unrelenting pressure to get their needs met. When others fail them, they retaliate. Oppressors are willing to wound others in order to preserve their positions of power. This is not what God intends for *any* marriage.

Victims often think, “So what? I’m married, so this is what I have to put up with” or “God hates divorce, so this is my reality!” But we are not called to submit to and accept rampant destructive behavior. In fact, the opposite is true. We are supposed to help our spouses to know, serve, love, and be more like Jesus (see Col. 3:12–16; 1 Thess. 5:14). That means limiting their ability to sin against us. Sometimes a separation is the only way for this to happen. When abuse is present, wives should resist domination and, if it is safe for them to do so, expose their husbands’ sin (see Eph. 5:11–14). This is an act of grace for their husbands.

God Sees Your Suffering

Oppression is isolating. It can feel like no one, not even God, sees or cares about what is happening to you. The psalmist cries out, “You are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” (Ps. 43:2). The teacher in Ecclesiastes puts it this way: “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them” (Eccl. 4:1).

It is natural for you to wonder if God sees or cares about your suffering. Yet Jesus not only sees but also understands your distress, because he too experienced suffering and oppression. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. . . . He was oppressed, and he was afflicted” (Isa. 53:3, 7).

God Desires to Rescue You

When God talks about oppression, he also talks about rescuing his people: “I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey” (Ezek. 34:22). God links oppression and rescue together. When he looks on oppression, he desires to deliver his people from it. He says, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people . . . and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them” (Ex. 3:7–8). Jesus says he was sent “to proclaim liberty to the captives . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). God encourages you to cry out to him for deliverance, as the psalmist did: “Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men; preserve me from violent men” (Ps. 140:1).²

2. To read about other instances of God showing his care for the oppressed, see Genesis 16; 1 Samuel 25; Psalm 146:7–9; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 50:33–34; and Zechariah 7:10.

REFLECT

1. Scripture is clear when it talks about each of us being responsible for our own sin. In short, we cannot make another person sin. Why do we struggle to believe this?
2. Why might we be tempted to believe that abuse is a punishment? How should remembering the way God has dealt with our sins by sending his Son to redeem us change how we think?
3. How does it give you hope to be reminded that God sees the oppressed? That he desires their rescue?