

Wrestling With Abuse in a 'Christian' Marriage

God-talk and violence—physical, sexual, mental or spiritual—have mixed for centuries. Sadly, that same mixture shows up in even “Christian” homes.

Let’s agree that abuse of any kind is not what God wanted when He created marriage. But in our broken world, too many face the reality that their “Christian” spouse is abusive. What then?

It may seem easy to look on from the outside and say, “God hates divorce, so deal with it.” Or “Abuse is wrong. Just leave.” But for the person feeling stuck in such a hurtful marriage, it’s never really that simple. Shame and guilt are heavy—sometimes almost heavy enough to take you out. You ask yourself questions like, “Can’t prayer fix this?” “What’s wrong with me that I can’t make this work?” “Doesn’t Jesus expect me to forgive?”

Yes, God can—and does—resurrect dead things and turn impossible situations into glorious displays of His grace. Nothing is too hard for Him.

But that—in part—depends on human choices—yours and your spouse’s. God does not control your spouse’s free will, and you cannot control it, either.

God hates divorce not because of some legalistic hierarchy of sin and righteousness, but because it hurts His children. Scripture makes clear that in our broken world, there are times marriages are not saved. And God is neither surprised nor absent in your marriage dilemma.

So what do you do if your spouse is a Christian and abusive? Your emotions are certainly heavy and complicated. But putting

emotions aside for a moment, here are some important things to know:

1. Your spouse is accountable before God for his or her behavior. Regardless of their upbringing, physical or mental health, financial or other circumstances, or your own behavior, your spouse is completely responsible for what they do and don't do. "So then each of us shall give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12) Experiencing violence as a child, your lack of meeting their needs, or any other reason is no excuse for abusive behavior. This monkey is on their back; don't own it as yours.

2. You're not perfect. Join the club! So you made mistakes. So you didn't do things perfectly in relating to your spouse. None of us do! Yes, your behavior influences and affects your spouse, but that still doesn't excuse abuse. Ever. We are all human beings God is working to transform into His image. If perfect behavior was a prerequisite for a happy marriage, there wouldn't be any!

3. Being unhappy is not the same as being abused. There are some who have slapped the label of abuse on any behavior someone doesn't like. That minimizes the real and destructive trauma real abuse causes. Abuse has to do with willing another person harm and controlling through pain and fear. Only you can truly know what's happening in your relationship; even your best explanations to others may not fully express reality. If you know in your heart before God that you are being abused, you are. The issue is your safety, not your happiness.

4. You are a valuable, priceless child of God. People who have suffered ongoing abuse internalize a lot of shame and guilt. Feeling worthless and hopeless is part of the equation. But it's a lie! It doesn't matter what you've done or not done, God sees you as His priceless treasure. You may have a hard time believing that, but it's true. You're worth everything

because of who you are. True Christians act accordingly, not abusively.

5. Some marriages survive abuse. Yes, God can and does love the abuser too. His forgiving restoring grace is available to them as well. Some abusers open their heart to God's transformation, find the healing they need themselves, and truly change. The gospel is just as available to them as it is to anyone. Such restoration takes time, and sadly many abusers do not choose to walk that path. And you will know based on their behavior, not their words alone.

6. You can forgive whether or not you remain in the marriage. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. It's hard, it's personal, and it's a process. And most importantly, it only depends on you. You can forgive and still protect yourself. You can leave and still forgive. You can develop healthy boundaries and still forgive. You can forgive whether or not you continue the relationship. Forgiveness is giving up your right for revenge, and letting God handle the one who harmed you. That's hard to do, but it is possible.

7. You need help whether you stay or leave. Don't make the mistake of going it alone. Wrestling with the decision to leave or stay is not easy. The most important voice you need to hear is God's. You also need other godly people around you—Christian friends, a pastor or counselor or a small group. Others have walked this path before you. There is help available. It may feel embarrassing to reach out, but it's vitally important to do so.

If you make the decision to leave, pray—among other things—to sense whether God is releasing you from this marriage. I believe there are times God does that. In that case, you will come to know in your heart that you did what you could and that the marriage covenant is over.

Take God with you as you walk into your future. You will need

Him to minister healing to you whether you leave or stay. He will not let you down.

Question: Are you wrestling with abuse in a “Christian” marriage? Have you become quiet long enough to hear God’s voice? {eo}

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