Does the Bible Say Women Should Suffer Abuse and Violence?

Tragically, at least one in four women experiences abuse from her partner at some point in her adult life. And tragically, that rate is no different in Christian homes. In fact, research shows that Christian women stay longer and suffer more severe abuse than their non-Christian counterparts.\(^1\) Biblical interpretation on the topic of divorce and separation can cause confusion and allow violence and abuse to continue.

This article is written both to the women who experience domestic violence and to those who know of the situation and can offer help: pastors, family and friends. Our goal is to show that the Bible does not say that a woman must stay in an abusive marriage. She can and should flee—and her church community can help her do so.

**Scripture Misapplied**

Christian women caught up in the cycle of abuse\(^2\) may think, “I can’t leave this abusive situation because the Bible says divorce is wrong.” Likewise, abusive hus-

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2. We use the words *abuse* and *violence* to refer to both physical and non-physical acts and behaviors that are in opposition to the rights of another.
bands may claim, “The Bible commands that my wife should be submissive to me.”

Abusive men often take a biblical text and distort it to support their belief that they have a right to abuse. We even know of clergy who have said to victims of abuse, “Jesus’ wounds were redemptive—they saved the world. Your wounds can be redemptive and save your relationship.” Similarly, we know of pastors who have given this counsel to abused women: “If you just submit to your husband, even if he is abusive, God will honor your obedience and the abuse will either stop or God will give you the grace to endure the abuse.”

Some have even misapplied 1 Peter 1:6 to the context of abuse. “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” This verse has been grossly misused to tell women they should simply accept abuse and use the suffering as an opportunity to grow in their faith.

It is true that people suffer in all kinds of ways. It is also true that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection paint a picture of suffering that leads to glory. This undergirds a central theme found throughout the New Testament that suffering can be redemptive. In fact, Paul says that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12), and he told the first churches that they must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Certainly suffering has the potential to be purifying and strip us of ingrained attitudes and habits that lead us away from God. It also has the potential to drive us to deeper trust and dependence upon God. But the problem with using the above arguments as reasons for staying in an abusive relationship is that God never calls us to tolerate violence if it can be avoided. We are not called to passively accept every form of unjust pain that comes our way.

Scripture shows us a complex and multifaceted view of human suffering, and so we must not be simplistic in our counsel to ourselves and to others who face unjust suffering. Scripture does not encourage people to endure avoidable suffering. On the contrary, it encourages people to avoid unnecessary suffering. Let us not fall into the trap of thinking that if you decide to take steps to end the abuse, you are being a bad Christian. Remember that Jesus stood up for the dignity of many women when others looked down on them. He gave them both a sense of dignity and a practical way out (as he did for the woman about to be stoned in John 8). He did not tell them to become more accepting of their circumstances.

**You Were Not Created to Suffer**

Jesus’ reason for not asking sufferers to accept their circumstances goes back to
the beginning, to God’s original plan for humanity. God’s intent was for *shalom*, a term that means fullness of peace, universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight. Shalom is the vision of a society without violence or fear: “I will give you peace (*shalom*) in the land, and none shall make you afraid” (Lev 26:6). It entails harmonious relationships with both God and others, a profound and comprehensive sense of well-being, overflowing with peace, justice, and common good (Isa 32:14–20).

So you see, you were not created to suffer. But why do you? Why do we all? Suffering and pain are a result of sin entering the world. While God mysteriously works within the confines of an evil and suffering world, transforming these things for his own purposes, he himself is good and does not delight in the suffering of the world. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 33:11) and does not tempt anyone to evil (James 1:13). Instead, it is from him that we receive every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

For example, even after Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, he did not abandon them. Though disobedience brought awareness of nakedness and shame, God did not shame the couple further. Instead, he made garments of skin and clothed them (Gen 3:21). Suffering, shame, and pain entered a good world through the deceit of the devil and the sin of man, but God showed mercy. And at the other end of history, when the end of the age arrives and the kingdom of God is consummated, suffering and death will be destroyed forever (Rev 21:3–5).

The full arc of Scripture, from beginning to end, tells us this: we were not created to suffer. God is grieved by our suffering and longs for the day when we will be fully delivered from it.

**Biblical Examples of Avoiding Suffering**

What we have seen, then, is that human suffering and pain do not originate in the character of God and have no place in God’s original design for creation. God’s people are to trust him in the face of unavoidable suffering, but can avoid and work around unjust suffering when they are able.

Let’s look at some examples throughout the Bible of God’s people who chose to flee and avoid suffering.

**Noah.** Noah and his family escaped the destruction of the flood and avoided imminent death by obeying God and accepting the deliverance he provided.

> So the Lord said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created…” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen 6:7–8)

God’s favor provided a way of escape and safety.
Patriarchs saved from famine. All three of the biblical patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—could have died by starvation in their lifetimes because of famine in the land. Each one, however, found a way out that was providentially—rather than miraculously—given to them by God. In other words, God used natural and ordinary circumstances to ensure their safety.

Israel in Egypt. In Genesis, God explains to Abraham that his descendants would suffer slavery and abuse in Egypt, but that he would deliver them.

Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.” (Gen 15:13–14)

Israel did indeed suffer in Egypt, and God was faithful to his word that he would not leave Israel in the hands of their abusers (Ex 3:7–10).

God’s rescue of Israel from their oppressors is a theme that continues throughout the rest of the Bible. Not only that, but his rescuing nature was something that he wanted his people to imitate. For example, God wanted their oppression in Egypt to lead them to have compassion on foreigners in their midst.

You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. (Ex 22:21–22)

The vulnerable are to be protected.

Israel in the time of the judges. During the era of the judges in Israel, God repeatedly intervened through ordinary people and delivered Israel from those who oppressed her, even after she had fallen into great sin.

Israel would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them… Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. (Judg 2:17–18)

The Lord cares for the oppressed.

David fleeing from Saul. After David had been anointed king by Samuel and began to rise in the eyes of the people as the leader of the nation of Israel, Saul became jealous and sought to kill him. In response to this threat, David fled.

Saul sent men to David’s house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David’s wife, warned him, “If you
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