



WHEN THE VOW BREAKS

**A Biblical Examination of Divorce From A
Covenant Breaking Spouse and
Remarriage**

When The Vow Breaks

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THE EXODUS PROJECT

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"Qualitative research (see, for example, research by Knickmeyer et al. (2016) with women from different Christian denominations; data collected by Levitt and Ware (2006) in the Memphis, Tennessee area of the US; and Nason-Clark (2009) in Atlantic Canada) supports the findings of a 2006 study by the UK Anglican Bishops' Council that 'incidence of domestic abuse within church...congregations is similar to the rate within the general population.' In other words, the prevalence of domestic violence in Western Christian families correlates with the prevalence of such violence in the general population.

What differs, however, is what has been called the added "vulnerability" of Christian women, who speak of both abuse and marriage in spiritual overtones (McMullin et al. 2012). Such women use religious language to describe why they remain in or return to relationships that involve domestic violence, citing the undesirability of divorce, the need to love and honour husbands, and the power of forgiveness and prayer to generate change in the abuser. It is the religious language that perpetuates and/or tolerates domestic violence (Nason-Clark 2009)."

**'When She Calls for Help'—Domestic Violence in Christian Families
by Leonie Westenberg**

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Rightly Dividing The Word

At the heart of the spiritually abusive application of the bible concerning divorce is a false and often self-seeking interpretation of God's marriage covenant, which results in a convoluted message regarding God's heart for abused spouses. Some have so twisted scripture to fit a religious or doctrinal bent that the lay person is hard pressed to know the truth.

The heart of God for the abused is not hidden, concealed, revealed to a privileged "scholarly" few or buried so deep that one would need more degrees than a thermometer to understand it. No, the root of the confusion regarding God's heart is not God's word but a man-ipulation of God's Word. God did not put His truth or the ability to rightly divide the truth beyond the reach of His children and the Holy Spirit: "*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*" (John 14:26)

When rightly divided, the Word of God is, "*quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...*" ([Hebrews 4:12](#)). In other words, the love of God cuts both ways and is universally applicable to all ([Galatians 6:7-9](#)), Under no circumstance does the word of God support the abuse of God's children, whether in or outside of a marriage. Under no circumstance does the bible exempt a spouse from the consequences of sin, rebellion and willfully destructive, treacherous behavior -- God's word has no respect of person ([Romans 2:11](#)). The entire bible is undermined by the notion that God would ordain marriage, which symbolizes the love that Christ has for the church, for the destruction of His child.

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Before We Begin

Before we begin, let's clarify a few things so that we can have common understanding regarding spousal abuse or intimate partner abuse. Abuse is not defined by the means or the method of abuse but rather the impact of the behavior. In other words, emotional, mental, spiritual and physical abuse are means to the abusers end -- coercive control. The impact of or effect of abuse hurts, harms or damages the victim for the benefit of the abuser's evil desire ([James 1:13-15](#)).

Spousal abuse is not a marital problem, spousal abuse is a behavioral problem that is not caused by or provoked by the impacted spouse. Church counseling has made the mistake of using, recommending and even demanding marriage counseling for the abusive relationship -- despite the dangerous consequences. Marriage counseling assumes that that the responsibility for marriage problems, in an abusive marriage, is or should be shared by both spouses and both spouses are equally responsible for the work to restore or heal the marriage. Nothing can be farther from the truth for an abusive marriage. Due to the potentially dangerous consequences, licensed mental health professionals will not provide marriage counseling for abusive marriages or when domestic abuse is present. An abuser is responsible for his/her behavior, not the marriage or the impacted spouse.

An abusive relationship is not a relationship that is having "normal" relationship problems or simply a toxic relationship. Often the toxic relationship is confused with an abusive relationship. Abusive relationships are toxic but the abuse is the result of an imbalance of power used to coerce and control the disadvantaged spouse. The abuser is the aggressor, and takes advantage of their imbalance of power to disempower their victim, creating a tortuous bondage that maliciously controls and destroys the victim.

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A toxic relationship of equals, is best described as two dysfunctional people who interact in an unhealthy way towards each other and they share in both the relationship toxicity and the power equally. The toxic relationship is decidedly different from an abuser/victim relationship. The toxic relationship between equals relies on unwillingness to acknowledge, address and resolve the dysfunctional dynamics that perpetuate the toxicity—that both parties are responsible for and participate in.

An abuse victim **DOES NOT** voluntarily, jointly or equally participate in their abuse, which is the primary distinction between a toxic relationship and an abusive relationship with a primary aggressor. An abuser is the perpetrator of attacks, assaults and destructive behavior -- mental, emotional or physical. A toxic relationship can exist between two equals -- equal power, equal choice, however an abusive relationship is not between two equals. Abuse victims don't have an equal voice; bondage doesn't come with equal rights, equal choice, equal participation, equal power or equal responsibility.

The church cannot support God's word and heart for the abused, and at the same time not support divorce in the case of a treacherous breach of the marriage covenant. When the church (religion) refuses to acknowledge domestic abuse as a treacherous breach of the marriage covenant, scripture is used to support and reinforce the false belief that God puts the institution of marriage, however unholy and unsafe, above the wellbeing His child. When theology or religion takes a position contrary to the word of God, confirmation bias ensues -- the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's beliefs or values. The resulting effect is biblical teaching and discipleship that destroys the sheep and emboldens the wolves.

"How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:4)

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What Does God Say About Spousal Abuse?

"God Hates Divorce" and "Except for the cause of adultery, divorce is not permitted," are the two of the most commonly used, and even weaponized, scriptures to coerce, guilt and manipulate abuse victims to needlessly stay in bondage for the benefit of their abuser.

The truth will set us free! Malachi 2:16 is a prime example of "Context Matters." When correctly translated, **Malachi 2:16** not only does it not say God Hates Divorce but in context, rightly divided, it is a rebuke of unfaithful and treacherous husbands who were discarding (divorcing) God's daughters like garbage to fulfill the lust of their flesh -- fornicate.

To put Malachi 2:16 into biblical context, one must start from Malachi 2:10. **Malachi 2:10-16 reads as follows (NIV):**

Verse 10: *Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?*

Verse 11: *Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god.*

Verse 12: *As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty.*

Verse 13: *Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands.*

Verse 14: *You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.*

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Verse 16: *The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the Lord Almighty.*

Verse 15: *Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.*

Examination of Malachi 2:10-16, reveals the truth. Abuse victims are spiritually manipulated to stay in abusive relationships with a scripture that, in truth, is a rebuke of rebellious and unfaithful husbands who were *"doing violence to the one they should protect."*

There are two important factors that Malachi 2:10-16 teaches us about God's heart towards abused spouses. First, God condemns behavior that does violence against the one that a spouse is supposed to protect. Second, the bible, rightly divided, does not say **"God hates divorce"** but what it repeatedly does say God hates is violence, abuse of any kind, rebellion and depravity, which should not be found in a biblical marriage:

"These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren" ([Proverbs 6:16-16](#); [Psalm 11:5](#))

There can be no mistaking God's marriage covenant with God's tolerance of abuse: *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless* (Ephesians 5:25-27). God's marriage covenant is the epitome of zero tolerance for abuse (Colossians 3:19, 1 Peter 3:7). If not, we would have to say that the love Christ has for the church is reflected in marital abuse or marital abuse and the love that Christ has for the church are synonymous. God forbid!

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Is An Abused Spouse Biblically Bound To Marital Bondage?

Nobody likes divorce. A spouse does not sign up to be abused or divorced. An abuse victim however, is not in a marriage, a covenant marriage, an abuse victim is in bondage -- against God's will and plan for their life, and contrary to His marriage covenant. A bondage relationship and a covenant marriage are not the same, and the bible addresses them separately. A common misconception is that all marriages are biblically equal, joined together by God and are covenant marriages. That's not true.

God joins two hearts submitted to each other through behavior that reverences our Savior: "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" ([Ephesians 5:21](#)). A God ordained marriage symbolizes the love that Christ has for the church ([Ephesians 5:25-28](#)). Abuse, treachery and abandonment breaches the marriage covenant and does violence to the one that is supposed to be protected ([Malachi 2:16](#)). God does not tempt us or harm us with evil relationships ([James 1:13-15](#), [Jeremiah 29:11](#), [John 10:10](#)).

Just as an earthly parent wouldn't condemn a child to an abusive, destructive relationship, God is no less of a parent to His children: "*If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*" ([Matthew 7:11](#)).

The abuser is a depraved, pathological destroyer ([Romans 1:28-32](#)), who, because of evil desire ([James 1:13-15](#)), commits spiritual adultery with a murderous spirit ([1 John 3:15](#)), and does violence against the one he should protect ([Malachi 2:16](#)). Behaviorally, the abusive spouse is worse than an unbeliever ([1 Timothy 5:8](#)), and is subject to the same consequences of willfully sinful behavior as everyone is ([Romans 1:28-32](#), [Romans 13:4](#), [1 Corinthians 5:11](#), [2 Timothy 3:1-5](#)) -- because God does not show favoritism ([Romans 2:11](#)).

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Contrary to popular religious teaching, adultery is not the only biblical cause for divorce. Departure from or abandonment of the marriage covenant — physically or behaviorally, is also cause. Abuse breaches and abandons the marriage covenant, causing the impacted spouse to be in bondage -- not marriage. God said His child is no longer bound to a spouse who departs or abandons the marriage -- behaviorally or physically:

"But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15).

No longer bound means what is says, the victim is biblically freed from the bondage of hell created by a treacherous breach of the marriage covenant, and God's plans for His child's life (Jeremiah 29:11). **Called to peace** means the brother or sister's life, soul and destiny are redeemed from bondage. Also, the redeemed from marital bondage are restored to a divine status of single by God - because God has set them free. God's child redeemed from marital bondage is free to remarry if they so choose. Divorce does not end an abusive marriage, departure from the covenant does. Divorce is God's Justice, a wrong doer reaps what they sow: *"For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer"* (Romans 13:4)

Bondage and abuse are not to be confused with a covenant marriage. The bible addresses the subject of divorce from two different perspectives, adultery and abandonment. Behavior that causes bondage is a departure from the marriage covenant; God hates the violent with a passion (Psalm 11:5). God cannot and does not bind His child to a life of hell to feed the evil desires of a depraved and pathologically abusive spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15)

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We see in 1 Peter 3:7 that God so despises marital abuse of any kind -- emotional, mental, spiritual or physical, that He will cut off the prayers of the abusive spouse. How can a person serve or worship God if because of their willfully wicked, unrepentant, rebellious, unfaithful, covenant violating heart their prayers are cut off? It's not possible. Why? Because we worship God in spirit and in truth: "*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth*" (John 4:24).

There is no truth or reverence for God in the wicked, divisive individual: "*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned*" (Titus 3:10-11). And that individual is a not a believer -- though their lips might be near, their heart is far from Jesus: "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Matthew 15:8).

God's view of abuse in a marriage is consistent with God's heart, biblically, concerning wickedness and violence against the innocent:

"The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion" (Psalm 11:5).

"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people" (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

"But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people" (1 Corinthians 5:11)

"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17)

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"Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (Romans 1:28-32)

"How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:2-4)

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Final Thoughts

No righteous or rightly divided application of scripture can condone or even tolerate domestic abuse. Religion can be either a resource or a roadblock for victims of abuse. As a resource, it encourages victims to resist mistreatment. As a roadblock, its misinterpretation and misapplication of scripture can contribute to the victim's self-blame, suffering and prolonged exposure to danger.

The Christian community must take a stand against abuse that simply says, "No person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage."

The Church can help break the cycle of abuse. Many abused women seek help from their church or the Christian community because they believe it to be a safe place. The church community must be a safe place for the oppressed and the abused: "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" ([Psalm 82:3-4](#)).

If the church at large does not examine its response to the abused, the church will continue to be unsafe for abuse victims and a safe place for the abuser, the oppressor and the wolf.

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Links to Additional Reading:

1. [12 Reasons Why Couples Counseling is Not Recommended When Domestic Violence is Present by the Oregon Domestic Violence Council \(Article\)](#)
2. [The Life Saving Divorce by Gretchen Baskerville \(Book\)](#)
3. [Couple Counseling Prohibited In Domestic Violence Relationships \(Article\)](#)
4. [Domestic Abuse and Psychological Impact Defined \(Article\)](#)
5. [Divorce and Remarriage In The Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities \(Book\)](#)
6. [Enough Is Enough: A Step-by-Step Plan to Leave an Abusive Relationship with God's Help \(Book\)](#)
7. [The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope \(Book\)](#)
8. [Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions \(Book\)](#)
9. [Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church \(Book\)](#)
10. [Find a domestic violence shelter in the US and Canada \(Online Registry\)](#)
11. [Global Domestic Violence Directory \(Online Registry\)](#)
12. [The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for men who use control and violence in the home \(Book\)](#)
13. [Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion \(Book\)](#)
14. [When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women \(Article\)](#)
15. [The Language of Battered Women: A Rhetorical Analysis of Personal Theologies \(Book\)](#)

If you need help now

The National Domestic Violence Hotline is 24/7, confidential and free: 1-800-799-7233 and through [chat](#).