

Has God Abandoned Me?

For Women Facing Domestic Violence

Introduction

Where is domestic violence found? Only in homes of the poor or the uneducated? Absolutely not! Victims of domestic violence are in the homes of the rich and the poor; the highly educated and high school dropout; the homes of doctors, pastors, lawyers. Domestic violence has no boundaries, and it does not care about social standing, age, ethnicity or religion. Domestic violence traps its victims in a very lonely and frightening prison. Every day, worldwide, many women are battered by the men in their lives. This includes Christian women.

A woman being abused often feels alone and that she is the only one in this horrible situation. An abused Christian woman can suffer greater pain and isolation. The experience may lead to a spiritual crisis. She asks, 'Has God abandoned me?' 'Does the church care?' 'What if my church family finds out the truth?' Due to the shame, the Christian woman may flee the church. She also may question what the Bible says concerning her desperate situation. 'Is this God's will for my life?' 'Is there hope?' Yes, there is hope in despair as God repeatedly has promised that He will never leave or forsake His children. God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5). Sometimes Christians imagine that faith prevents all troubles, including domestic violence. They forget that our world is a fallen world, full of sin and darkness (Romans 3:10-12). Because we are living in a fallen world, where evil exists, domestic violence also exists. It exists in 'good' Christian homes, even in pastor's homes. You may be asking yourself this question: 'Am I a victim of domestic violence?' How do you know? This booklet is designed to help you understand domestic violence.

Am I a Victim of Domestic Violence?

A common misperception of domestic violence is that it involves only physical abuse. On the contrary, there are many forms of domestic violence, with hitting being only one means of abuse. In reality, domestic violence deals with who controls the relationship—it is an issue of power. One person advances or is 'built up' at the expense, physically or emotionally, of another.

Domestic violence occurs in a variety of relationships: husband against wife; boyfriend against girlfriend; girlfriend against boyfriend; parent against child, etc. The pain of domestic violence affects both women and men, yet most often the victim is a woman. One in six Australian women have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner. In this booklet we will address the issue of domestic violence from a woman's point of view.

So, is abuse a problem in your life?

How would you answer the following questions?

- Do you fear your husband?
- Have you changed yourself, your children and your surroundings in an attempt to please your husband and reduce his anger?
- Are you feeling empty and alone?
- Are you filled with self-doubt?
- Do you think that the terrible things he says about you are really true?
- Do you have to ask your husband for permission to spend money or to go places?
- Can you tell your husband about your feelings without being afraid?
- Are you made to feel as though you cannot do anything right or that no matter what you do, it is not good enough for your husband?
- Are you blamed by your husband for all the money or marital problems?
- Does your husband become jealous when you talk to new people?
- Do you feel like you are married to two completely different people: one a kind and loving husband and the other a tyrant?
- Are you being pressured to have sex in ways that are uncomfortable?
- Have you ever been hit, slapped or choked by your husband?

If you have said to yourself, 'I think I'm in an abusive relationship,' you may be right! If you agree with any of the above questions you are likely in an abusive relationship.

Recognising the nature of the relationship does not mean that you cause your husband to be abusive. Your husband controls what he does and how he behaves. *Not you!* You do not cause your husband's abusive behaviour. It is his choice to behave in this manner. He is capable of controlling his anger.

So, now that you recognise the abusive environment you live in, does it mean that you must immediately abandon the relationship? No, but it does mean that you should develop a plan to protect yourself and your children. When determining how to handle your situation you must first consider the safety of yourself and your children.

Answering Questions about Domestic Violence

After answering the questions in the introduction, you may be thinking you are in an abusive relationship. You also may have many questions, such as 'Why is this happening to me?' 'How did the relationship get this way?' 'What do I do now?' 'Who can help?' 'Whom do I trust?' 'If I tell someone, what will they think about me?' 'Why did God let this happen to me?' 'Will my pastor, family and friends care?' Another thought may be, 'I deserve this.'

Fear, loneliness and shame are common. In other words, you are having normal reactions. Maybe you feel even God has abandoned you. Do not condemn yourself but say, 'Wow, I made it this far.' Look at what you have survived—loneliness,

confusion, pain and suffering. This booklet is designed to serve as a guide to help you through the upcoming tough days and into new days without abuse. Education is the key to protect you and to help you survive. As you become more knowledgeable, you will understand violent relationships and, in the process, will become stronger. Thus, you will be able to ask for help and will be better prepared to protect yourself and your children. As you learn, you will be able to answer the question, 'Can I stay in this relationship or must I leave?'

Learning about domestic violence is a start, but also seek God's help. Talk to your pastor, allow your church to be a support, and immerse yourself in God's Word. Without the support of others and the strength, wisdom and comfort of God's Word, it will be harder to make it through the difficult days ahead. Remember God has promised, '*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you*' (Hebrews 13:5). You are not facing this alone.

Now let's look at some questions and answers to help you learn more about violent relationships and how they work.

How is Domestic Violence Defined?

The term domestic violence has its roots in the Latin words *domus* (home) and *violare* (use of force) or 'use of force at home.' Domestic violence happens when someone you love and trust harms you physically or emotionally. The attacks or threats also may be against your children, pets or property. Emotional abuse occurs when you are humiliated, made to fear or threatened with harm. Domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour that is coercive, forceful and instills fear. There is no regard for feelings or well-being.

In Genesis 2:18, 21-22, God made Eve so Adam would not be alone. God established the family for our good. He did not intend a man to abuse his wife. The Bible says this in Ephesians 5:25, 28-29: '*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her ... In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.*'"How did Christ love the church? He died on the cross for her. Martin Luther in his Large Catechism says, 'Husband and wife above all things must live together in love and harmony, each loving the other with the whole heart and with totally committed faithfulness' (Explanation to the Sixth Commandment). God does not want women to suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands.

How Does Domestic Violence Appear?

Some think that domestic violence means that a woman is being hit by her husband, but it goes much deeper. Domestic violence is a control issue. It is about projecting control and asserting power in a relationship. In an abusive relationship, one person is built up at the expense—physically or emotionally—of the other person. There are various ways abuse is used to gain power and control in a relationship. The following are different types of abuse. You may be suffering from one type or any number of types.

Physical abuse: In physical abuse, control is achieved through various physical acts, such as slapping, hitting, punching, restraining, grabbing, shaking, pushing, shoving, choking or kicking. It may involve denying you access to food, drink, medicines or medical care, or forcing you to use drugs or alcohol.

Emotional abuse: In emotional abuse one controls through a pattern of criticism, manipulation, humiliation and embarrassment. It may involve name-calling, attacking one's sense of self-worth, causing self-doubt and ignoring you. Your husband may also attack and destroy your relationships with other people. Emotional abuse often is subtle and difficult to recognise.

Psychological abuse: In psychological abuse, control is gained through fear. The abuser may intimidate; threaten you or threaten to kill either you or him or the children; stalk; harass and isolate you, all in an attempt to make you afraid. He may insist on making all decisions for the family, doubt your judgment and blame you for everything. Sometimes the abuser will justify abuse by misusing the Bible and may forbid church attendance. In an attempt to frighten, he may damage or destroy property, harm family pets or threaten to kidnap you or the children.

Sexual abuse: Sexual abuse involves control by unwelcome sexual behaviour, forced, aggressive or intimidating sexual contact. His behaviour may involve bizarre sexual activity, pornography, rape or forcing you to have sex or watch him have sex with others. He also may falsely accuse you of infidelity.

Economic abuse: In economic abuse, family resources are used to control. Your husband may force you to be financially dependent on him, deny you access to money (including not providing money for groceries), seize your paycheck, make you account for all money spent and prohibit outside activities, including employment, education or socialization.

Legal abuse: In legal abuse, the legal system is used to gain control over you. Your husband may file false reports of child neglect or abuse, accuse you of drug use, seek custody of the children or refuse to pay or contest child support or alimony ordered by a court.

You should not feel guilty if you realise that any of the previously mentioned behaviors are present in your relationship and yet you did not see them earlier. Remember that having knowledge of the situation is power. A problem cannot be solved until it is recognised. So time is needed to recognise these behaviors and to come up with a healthy response. It is important to be gentle with yourself.

Am I Being Abused?

You might be thinking, I do not fit the picture of an abused woman. I'm not bewildered and poor. It is important to realise that there is no one picture of an abused woman. Each story is different. Doubts and denial are common. It is not easy to admit, 'This is happening to me.' You may not want to believe it. After all, admitting that you are abused feels shameful and degrading. So, how do you recognise the fact that you are abused? Review and examine the questions in the introduction more closely.

It is very important to be clear about what is abuse, and what is not. We are not talking about the normal, occasional tensions and conflicts that every person experiences in marriage. The occasional argument, disagreement or outburst of angry speech is not what we are talking about when we describe abuse. An abusive marriage is one that involves behaviors that are ongoing, severe and never seem to resolve themselves. Anyone constantly bombarded by psychological and emotional abuse ultimately will have deep, intense feelings of fear, confusion, shame and self-doubt. Let's review and examine the questions in the introduction more closely.

The initial five questions have to do with your perceptions and feelings:

Are you afraid of your husband? Husbands and wives do not fear one another in a healthy marriage. Mutual love and support are important in a marriage relationship. If fear is a constant in a marriage, there is a major problem.

Have you changed yourself, your children and your surroundings in an attempt to please your husband and reduce his anger? It is a bad sign when you must always 'walk on eggshells.'

A healthy relationship does not involve changing your life to avoid your husband's wrath. A healthy marriage is not filled with fear.

Are you constantly feeling empty and alone? Your emptiness is due to constantly neglecting your own feelings in an attempt to avoid the pain and hurt. It is important to be free to have a variety of feelings without being condemned for them. Often loneliness in abusive relationships results from being cut off from friends or family, and/or being isolated from others. Since you feel lonely, you will be less likely to leave your husband. Isolation provides your husband more control and power over you. Physical and emotional isolation promote feelings of loneliness.

Are you plagued by self-doubt? This question concerns emotional abuse resulting from constant humiliation, belittling and manipulation. Your abusive husband wants to keep you confused. In a healthy marriage, each cares about the partner's feelings and opinions.

Do you think that the terrible things he says about you are really true? Your husband's constant undermining of your self-worth is one way of controlling you. God does not condone this attitude for marriage. He wants us to love (1 John 3:23) and honour one another (Romans 12:10).

The next four questions address the issue of who has the power and who controls the relationship. Healthy marriages have a balance of control and power with each person giving and taking.

Do you have to ask your husband for permission to spend money or to go places? This suggests a relationship more like parent and child, rather than husband and wife. This is not a healthy marital relationship. Neither partner in a marriage will spend large amounts of money without discussing this with the other person. Neither partner in a marriage will just leave for days at a time without talking with the other spouse.

Similarly, in a healthy marriage, neither a husband or a wife will be expected to 'report' every expenditure of money or get 'permission' to go about daily tasks and chores, including time away from the other partner during the day. In the Bible, God established marriage (Genesis 2:23-25). However, God stated that the husband should love as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). Does Christ deal with his bride, the church, as a tyrant? No, God's approach is of a servant who died for his bride. When a marriage is healthy, each person is free to make decisions and each considers the other's needs.

Can you tell your husband about your feelings without being afraid? A healthy marriage is not filled with fear. Husbands and wives need to be free to express their feelings and opinions without fearing the consequences, as they will not agree on everything.

Are you made to feel like you cannot do anything right or that no matter what you do it is not good enough for your husband? Your husband is building himself up by tearing you down, in order to make himself feel better. This is not God's design for marriage. God intended marriage to be filled with love, respect and forgiveness, not animosity (Colossians 3:13).

The next three questions concern your husband's behaviour. Always remember that he is responsible for his abusive behaviour, not you. He controls how he handles his feelings.

Are you blamed for all the money or marital problems by your husband? Accepting responsibility is extremely difficult for an abusive husband. As a result he blames you for his irresponsible behaviour and feelings of insecurity. In his mind, you are accountable for all problems in your marriage.

Does your husband become jealous when you talk to new people? Your husband is unable to trust others. This leads to jealousy and possessiveness, which causes him to restrict your social life. This, in turn, gives him control over the marriage.

Do you feel like you are married to two completely different people, one a kind and loving husband and the other a tyrant? The 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' behaviour is a pattern in abusive marriages. Obviously, this creates a lot of stress, as you never know what to expect. Marriage normally does not have this pattern, but the pattern has been identified as part of Lenore Walker's *Cycle of Violence*.

The final questions relate to physical abuse:

Are you being pressured to have sex in ways that are uncomfortable? And **have you ever been hit, slapped or choked by your husband?** Sexual intercourse in marriage is God's gift. God intended it to be a blessing, not something forced or shameful. In healthy marriages, the couple respects one another. If sex is used as a way of gaining power and control, it loses the blessing God intended for the couple. Also, healthy marriages do not contain physical abuse.

Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians 5:28b-29, '*... husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies ... no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.*' Healthy marriages do not include physical violence. God's desire for marriage is that each one loves and cherishes the other. Having a clearer understanding of domestic violence may make you think, we have problems, but it hasn't been that bad. After all, he has never hit me or he only hit me once. Domestic violence is progressive. So beware!

Progressive Abuse

Just as an avalanche starts and grows bigger and bigger, domestic violence starts small and grows. There may not be hitting on the first date. Domestic violence usually starts subtly; there may be verbal assaults about the way you look or on your abilities. As it continues, the attacks become more frequent and intense. Then isolation starts. Violence escalates once the abuser knows that you are entrapped. Physical violence is a taboo, but after the first time he hits you, it is much easier for him to hit you again. Therefore, if there is no intervention, the abuse usually will become more frequent and severe.

Reflect on the beginning days of your relationship with your husband. Has the abuse progressed? Do you see a pattern? Be gentle with yourself. Write down any memories you have to help you understand how well or how poorly your marriage is working.

The Cycle of Violence

Abuse is not random, nor is it continual. Domestic violence has a definite pattern or cycle. Lenore Walker has studied domestic violence for years. In *The Battered Woman*, Walker defines three phases of the violence cycle: tension-building, acute battering and loving respite. The time and intensity of each phase varies among couples, as each couple has its own distinct cycle.

The cycle begins with the tension-building phase. This period has minor abuse episodes, which may include verbal attacks, throwing or slamming objects or shoving. In an attempt to keep your husband's anger from increasing, you may try to anticipate his wishes or stay out of his way. This phase may be maintained at a constant level for long periods of time. Ultimately, minor incidents intensify and become more frequent. As a result, greater tension builds and becomes unbearable.

The acute abuse phase, which may involve emotional, physical or sexual assault, starts with the uncontrolled release of tension built during the tension-building phase. Your husband has an overwhelming outburst of anger. This is often triggered by an external incident or his inner feelings, but not by your behavior. This phase, which can last from a few moments to an entire day, is characterised by destructiveness and lack of control. Once over, you may be shocked and not believe what just occurred. Both you and your husband may rationalise the seriousness of the event. For up to 48 hours after the abuse, you may suffer emotional collapse.

The third stage is the loving respite phase, which is characterised by unusual calm and loving behavior by your husband. He will try to win your forgiveness and support, as he knows he has 'crossed the line.' He may be remorseful over his actions and may bring you expensive gifts. He often will promise that his violent behavior will never happen again.

He may use family, your pastor or friends to convince you to stay with him, and he may say that he needs you to help him change. During this phase, you often will see the rewarding side of the marriage. You want to believe that he will change. After a while, however, his promises are broken and the cycle starts again.

Why is He Doing This to Me?

Often you ask yourself 'Why does he treat me this way?' This is a very good question, but lacks a clear answer since domestic violence is complex. Abusive men share some characteristics: they have a strong need for control and many grew up in abusive homes. Many abusive men have poor self-images and have difficulty accepting responsibility for their behaviour. They often are insensitive to the needs of others.

Usually their expectations of intimate relations are unrealistic and they become extremely jealous and possessive. In addition, abusive men often have a strong sense of entitlement. There is a tendency toward alcohol or other drug abuse.

Many abusive men have grown up in an abusive home. They learned that violence is 'normal' behaviour and therefore see violence as a solution to problems at home. Their public behaviour may be very different from their private behaviour. Usually abuse happens behind closed doors; however, some men are not afraid to be subtly or overtly abusive in public. Examples of this include verbal humiliation or physical grabbing in front of others.

Your abusive husband actually is emotionally dependent on you and most of his behaviour is an attempt at keeping you from leaving him. He gets a sense of control through his abusive behaviour.

Many experts have offered theories on what motivates an abuser; however, the only definite reason is sin. Your husband is a sinner and part of this fallen world. Instead of wondering why he behaves this way, it is more important to ask, 'What am I going to do?' You will not be able to change his behaviour. That is something he must do himself. Due to the cycle of violence, he will have an extremely difficult time changing his ways as long as you live together. To start the slow process of change, you need to think about separating from your husband for a period of time. An abuser needs professional help, so your husband needs counseling from a therapist specialising in domestic violence, who will hold him accountable for his behaviour.

Yes, he may beg you to stay and ask you to help him. Look at the cycle of violence. This is an attempt to manipulate you and to prevent you from leaving. The cycle of violence will continue if you stay to help him. This can place you and the children in a very dangerous situation. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that his abusive behaviour will change, even with professional help. Ultimately, the only solution to ensure your safety—as painful as it can be—may be permanent separation or divorce.

So Where Is God in All of This?

You may feel that God is punishing you for your sins through the abuse or you may be filled with anger towards God for letting this pain happen to you. You may feel that God has abandoned you or that God lacks understanding of your situation. God does understand what you are experiencing. He knows all about your pain and suffering. He loves you so much that he sent his Son to suffer and die for you (Romans 5:15, 1 John 4:9-10). Abuse is not God's punishment for your sins. Do not think that you deserve to be abused. Jesus already endured any punishment deserved for your sins. He paid in full, once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). Abuse is not the result of your behaviour. The abuser is responsible for his sinful behaviour, not you. This is not God's will for your life. In Jeremiah 29:11, God says, *'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.'* At this particular time, it may not appear that God is prospering you; however, God promises to be with you always (Matthew 28:20).

You may be angry—angry with God for allowing abuse to happen; angry with your husband for his actions; angry with those around you for not seeing your problem. Your feelings are normal. Anger is a human emotion common to us all. The Bible says, *'In your anger, do not sin ...'* (Ephesians 4:26a). What is important is how you handle your anger. It is wrong to take anger out on others, especially children. It is important to express your feelings of anger to someone you trust—a friend, your pastor, a family member or a counselor. Talking helps healing. Pray about your anger. Write your feelings down on paper. Do not take your frustrations out on your children. They know what is going on and have suffered enough. Your children need your love and support, not your anger.

If you feel God has abandoned you, do not give up or cut yourself off from God's Word in the Bible or from the church. Attend church regularly. Pray regularly and study the Bible. Find someone who is strong in the faith to support you. Satan wants you to doubt God and to fall from faith. Cling to the cross of Christ and be patient. God's promises are true; he will not forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). You can hope for a better life.

Develop a Plan for Your Future

Now that you realise the abusive nature of your marriage, you may feel confused and have no idea what to do. It may seem hopeless at this time, but you can have hope for a better life, a life free from abuse. However, only you can decide what will be the best way to improve your life. Many people will tell you what you should do. Yet, finally, you are the one who has to live with the consequences of any decisions.

The hardest and definitely the most painful decision you need to make is whether or not to separate from your husband. This will not be an easy decision. When making this important decision on separation, it is crucial to take into account how the abuse has affected you and your children. The goal of this section is to help you prepare to make healthy choices for your future. Remember, you are the one making the decisions, so you are free to change your mind at any point. As you contemplate separation from your husband, you will face many questions: 'Where will I live?' 'How will I provide for myself and the children?' 'What will my husband do?' All these questions need to be answered. Having to make a major change in your life can be positive, but at the same time very scary. Often you are torn—you want to escape the painful relationship. At the same time, you will miss him terribly and desire to stay with him. When making a major decision, you must think everything through carefully and develop a plan for your future.

Start by writing down the pros and cons of staying in this marriage. How will staying affect your life? What are the costs and the benefits of staying? As an example, for some women, one benefit of staying may be financial security. However, for women employed outside the home, financial security may not be an issue. Each woman has a different situation. How will staying with your husband affect you physically, emotionally and spiritually? How will staying affect the children? It is important to assess the severity of your physical abuse when determining how dangerous staying will be. If your husband has threatened your life, it is extremely dangerous to continue living with him. Violence only escalates over time.

How long are you thinking of staying? Depending on your situation, you may find it necessary to continue living with your husband temporarily, as you save the money needed to leave, or while you plan your departure. Think of other issues as well. Write things down to help you remember them later. As time passes, what appears to be an advantage today may be a disadvantage later. Whenever you are feeling confused or unsure of your decision, look back over your list.

Whether you decide to stay or leave the relationship at this time, pray for God's comfort, and ask God for strength and guidance. If you decide to stay, planning is very important. Use your time to build up the courage and skills you will need to change your life. Try to save money. Keeping a journal of events in your marriage will help increase awareness of the cycle of violence and this will help you understand what is going on in your marriage. If you stay, it is crucial to remember that you are passively agreeing to live on your abuser's terms.

Plan

If you have decided to stay with your husband, you need to do several things. First, you must create a safety plan to put into effect during an emergency. This plan should include a list of people you can go to for help. In a safe location, that you can access quickly, store items you should take with you (such as a change of clothes, important documents, etc.). Determine where you will go when you leave, such as a relative's home, a friend's house or a shelter. Be sure it is a safe place that your husband is unaware of.

Also, determine what type of transportation is available if you need to leave in a hurry.

Support System

It is important to build a support system for yourself. You must be connected with more than one person. Remember your husband works by isolating you, so the more people you can trust to tell about your situation, the more help you will have. People in your support system could be friends, relatives, neighbors, fellow church members, your pastor, your child's teacher and coworkers—anyone you can trust. Find out what resources are available in your area. The type of resources available will depend on where you live. Available resources are more plentiful if you live in a large city or suburban area, whereas they may be minimal if you live in a small town or rural area. Look under headings such as crisis intervention, counselors, mental health, shelters, support groups, women, etc. If you have access to the Internet, there are many sites with domestic violence information.

Communicate with Your Husband

In a calm period, you may want to tell your husband what you think and feel about his abusive behaviour. Remember that he may not want to listen. Just as you are not responsible for his behaviour, you also cannot make him change. As you stay waiting for him to change or to get the counseling needed, you may be putting yourself and your children in danger. If you are going to give him an ultimatum, do not make threats that cannot be kept. For example, if you say to him that you will leave unless he stops abusing you, and he then abuses you, you must follow through and leave.

Talking to Your Children

One thought you may have is that the children will be better off in a two-parent home. They need your protection and are dependent on you for safety. However, the children need a safe home more than they need a two-parent home. Talk to them and tell them that they do not cause the violence. Stress that it is not their fault. It is very common for children to believe they are responsible for the abuser's behaviour. You need to have a safety plan for your children. Teach them what they should do during an abusive episode. For example, they can hide in their room or go to a neighbour's house.

Separation

The best chance for your husband to get the help he needs and to save your marriage is to break the cycle of violence by physically separating from him. Choosing separation will require all of your emotional and physical energy, as you will have to pick up the pieces of your life.

Make a list with the pros and cons of leaving, just like you did when considering whether or not to stay. If you decide to leave, you need a plan that includes when you will leave, where you will go, how you will get there and what you will take with you. You need to think this through carefully ahead of time.

Leaving

Deciding when to leave gives you the opportunity to separate on your own terms and thus will not be a reaction to your husband's abusive behaviour. Often women find that it is easiest to leave during the cycle's tension-building phase. It is possible to implement your plan during this phase, to take the personal belongings you want and to leave while the batterer is not home. Other women decide to leave shortly after a battering episode, as they have the 'motivation' to leave. Leaving at this point usually is an emergency situation and often is done without preparation. It is hardest to leave during the loving respite phase, since the batterer is on his best behaviour and is attentive to your needs.

Extreme caution must be taken when making separation plans. If your husband suspects you are planning to leave, his fear of losing you may result in escalated violence. If you leave while he is not at home, leave a note stating why you are leaving. *Do not tell him where you are staying.* If he knows where you are, it could endanger your life, your children and those you are staying with. Be on guard, as violence often intensifies after you leave. He will most likely be very angry and will feel the need to regain control of you and the marriage. It is common for him to say that he has changed. Watch from a distance to see if he has indeed changed. You need to see a sustained change of behaviour over months to ensure that it is not a ploy to get you to return home. Separating from your husband can be the most dangerous time, as numerous women have been killed by their abusive husbands following a separation.

How to Get Away

After you have decided when to separate, you must decide how you will get away. Can you use your car? What will you do if he grabs the keys from your hand during a heated moment? Could you call someone to come and get you? Find out what supports are available in your community. Think through as many different scenarios as you can so you can plan a safe departure.

What to Take

Make a list of what you will take with you. What material possessions are you willing to live without? Remember, it is important to plan as if you will have to leave in a hurry and may never return. Preparation ahead of time will help you leave at a moment's notice if necessary. In a place where they can be quickly grabbed during an emergency, place valuables and certain documents. These include your birth certificate, your children's birth certificates, medical information and other personal information. Keep a list of any other important information or assets you have, for example, bank account numbers, credit cards, insurance policies, car titles, annuities. Think of items you will need to provide for yourself and your children. All these items need to be kept together in a safe place or in a container you can quickly take if you have to leave in a hurry. Having a spare set of house keys and a hidden set of car keys may save your life during an emergency.

Where to Go

Once you have decided when and how to leave you must determine where you will go. Contact the resources available in your area (remember the resource list you developed earlier). Look at your options. Keep in mind that your choices may be limited by where you live. There may not be a shelter close to you. Remember that your husband may suspect you will leave and stay with a certain family member or friend. Think about where he would expect to find you—you should consider going to an unexpected location. You are the only one who can decide the best place for you and the children. Investigate your alternatives and make plans ahead of time.

You may not have thought of asking him to move out of the house. Be very careful if he agrees to leave. If he does leave, for your own safety, change the locks on the door. Go to court and get a restraining order to keep him from moving back home or threatening you and the children. Note that some shelters for abused women only allow a woman to stay for a limited period.

It may be easiest for you to stay temporarily with friends and then find your own place to live. If you have a good rapport with your pastor, he may be able to find a family through church with whom you could stay. If you leave and later decide to return home to get your belongings, for your own safety, take someone with you. If you decide to stay with family or friends, you need to think about what you will do if your husband finds you living there. Always think about your safety when planning living arrangements.

Continued Safety

Even after the separation, safety will continue to be a concern. Your husband's abusive behaviour may escalate, becoming more violent, or he may decide to kidnap the children in an attempt to reconcile with you or to punish you. Think about how you will maintain safe contact with your husband. At first you may only want to communicate with him by telephone. Many telephones reveal the telephone number and name of the person calling, so use caller ID blocking to keep your location a secret. Only you can determine how to handle your particular situation.

Determine how to provide safe contact between the children and their father. If your children are school age or in day care, tell their teachers, other school staff or caregivers of any instructions, especially what persons have your permission to pick them up. The safety plan you come up with may require legal consultation in order to provide both physical and financial security for both you and the children (through a protection order or legal separation).

Divorce

Domestic violence has been terribly destructive to your family—to you, to your husband, to your children. God is not pleased with this type of life. Sometimes divorce is inevitable. Your husband may refuse to be reconciled and choose divorce. Likewise, you may come to the decision that divorce is necessary for your own physical and financial protection. If all efforts to address the issue of abuse in your marriage have proven futile, divorce may be the only way to protect yourself and your children from continuing violence and abuse.

If you have children together there will always be a connection between the two of you, even if the marriage ends in divorce. Your husband may attempt to use the children to regain control of the relationship, even if from a distance. Take comfort in the fact that you are still God's child, no matter what your marital status. Being divorced does not make you less of a person. It will be important to take the time needed to heal emotionally if your marriage ends in divorce. Be careful not to rush into another relationship to feel worthwhile or loved. Often this leads to repeated victimisation. Remember God will always love you and that God is the source of love. In 1 John 4:10, He says, *'This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'*

Ultimately, you are the one who has to choose how you will handle your abusive marriage. Pray for God's continued guidance and his comfort. The decision may be overwhelming. Think each decision through one at a time. Plan ahead. Do not be surprised if you have feelings of loss, sadness, depression, frustration or anger. You are experiencing normal feelings under the circumstances. An abusive marriage is painful to live in. It is also painful to live through a separation or divorce. God promises to be with you. Remember God's words, *'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'* (Hebrews 13:5).

Words of Help

As an abused woman, you not only face the decision whether or not to separate from your husband, but a variety of other practical issues. These may include finding a job, finding a place to live, how to deal with very mixed and troubling emotions, choosing a counselor, finding resources or handling your children.

Sometimes pastors or other well-meaning friends may give you unwise advice. For example, they may just say, 'Don't worry, God will take care of you,' or 'Go home, pray harder, and be a better wife.' 'Submit to your husband, no matter what.' In an abusive relationship, this type of advice is counterproductive. Regardless of who will support you, there is help available to break the cycle of violence in your life.

Another support person can be a counselor. A good counselor, secular or Christian, who understands domestic violence can be very helpful.

A counselor can help you look at your particular situation and provide guidance. Be aware that the counselor should not tell you what to do. He or she should help you carefully evaluate your situation, gain insight about your situation, but then allow and encourage you to make the decisions about what you will do.

Deciding which counselor to use may depend on where you live or your financial situation. It is important to consider your practical needs when you choose a counselor. If money is tight, the counselor you choose may depend on whether or not you have insurance coverage. Without insurance, your only choice may be to see a low-cost counselor at a mental health clinic or social service agency. Likewise, if you live in a rural area, you may have to travel a long way to receive counseling, which may be impossible if you lack adequate transportation or childcare. In this situation, the only help available may be a domestic violence telephone hotline or your pastor.

It is important to consider your faith when selecting a counselor. It is okay to ask questions about the counselor's religious beliefs or about any other concerns you may have about the counselor.

Sometimes, depending on your situation, only secular counseling is available. *Do not despair.* Some secular counselors are as respectful of your spiritual convictions as Christian counselors. God can use non-Christians to provide for your needs.

To alleviate any fears or concerns, feel free to ask the counselor questions. No matter what the counselor's religious beliefs, he or she must have experience working with domestic violence or be knowledgeable about the cycle of violence. Continue looking for a counselor if he/she does not understand the cycle of violence. Your pastor may be able to recommend a good counselor, and during your counseling, particularly if you choose to use a secular counselor, stay in close contact with your pastor so he can extend to you the ministry of the Gospel.

After choosing a counselor, ask about fees, rules about canceling appointments or any other questions or concerns you have.

In the previous section, we discussed where to start looking for other resources. Domestic violence hotlines often have useful suggestions or can lead you to other resources.

Find out whether you are eligible for various social services; check with your local welfare office. Your physician is one resource you may have overlooked. If you have been abused physically or sexually, go to your doctor and be checked for injuries. Documentation of injuries is important. This information may be very important if you decide to pursue legal action at a later time.

How has abuse affected your feelings? Are you feeling guilty, lonely, angry or bitter? Do you desire revenge? All of these are normal feelings. How you react to your feelings is important. Be aware that feelings are not always reliable. For example, have you ever felt guilty when you did not do anything wrong? In this situation, the guilty feeling did not reflect the real situation.

The most common and disturbing feeling in abused women is guilt. Maybe your husband has repeatedly told you how worthless you are, how everything is your fault and how you deserve to be punished for your failures. He has tried to make you feel guilty and probably has succeeded. Guilt also can arise from the failure at love or the loss of the "perfect" marriage. You may be bombarded with nagging thoughts like, 'If only I had' or 'Did I do enough?' These thoughts can lead to feeling guilty. It is important not to second-guess your decisions, as this increases guilt. Given the circumstances of your marriage, know that you have done your best. Do not be deceived into thinking that if you had tried harder to make him love you, or if you were prettier, etc., that the marriage would have been better.

Nothing you could have done would have changed his attitude or behaviour. He alone is responsible for his violent temper and his abusive personality. Your guilt will diminish over time. Time also brings healing. Ask your pastor for individual confession and absolution if guilt burdens you or if there are actions you regret. Being told privately by a pastor of God's forgiveness, for Christ's sake, is a powerful way God works to bring us comfort during these times.

It is extremely common for you as an abused woman to feel lonely; after all, the abuser works to create isolation in your life. Your husband may have prohibited you from seeing friends or perhaps even from attending church. Isolation can make you feel incompetent and alone, and this often inhibits your emotional and spiritual growth. Despite your feelings, you are worthwhile and you have many good qualities.

To fight isolation and loneliness, reach out to other people and start new friendships. Perhaps you have been overly focused on your husband and on trying to save your marriage. You may feel empty and very uncomfortable when you are alone. Instead of panicking about being alone, use this time to pray, to read the Bible and to focus on your own needs.

Another source of loneliness arises from how other people interact with you. Sometimes it seems that some people avoid you, and this may indeed be true. There are people who will avoid you once they find out that you have been abused. Do not take offense. This avoidance reaction is similar to how some people react after a death. Usually these people are acting out of their own discomfort, not a lack of concern. People may be afraid of what to say to you or lack ideas as to what they should do for you. Their coping mechanism is to avoid the whole situation. It is important to know that not everyone you have contact with will be understanding and supportive. Instead, look to those individuals who are helpful and understanding of your situation. Try to find people who can relate to your abusive situation and who can give you encouragement and support.

Even extended families can add to the loneliness. If you lack your family's support, you may feel especially lonely. When a family does not understand domestic violence, they may pressure you into staying with your husband no matter the cost. Your loneliness may increase if you decide to cut yourself off from the extended family for a time.

Being abused also may prevent you from seeing God's hand in your life, and this leads to feeling lonely or abandoned. Even though you may feel that God has abandoned you, it does not mean that he has. Remember, feelings can be deceptive. God promises, '*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you*' (Hebrews 13:5). Look at the rainbow in the sky following a storm and know that God keeps his promises. Trust God's promises in his Word, not your feelings. God will not change (Psalm 102:27, Hebrews 13:8), but over time your feelings will change.

Bitterness is another feeling that can consume you. Bitter feelings may arise because there seem to be no solutions easily available, or because your church does not seem to help you, or because you see that others have a better life than you have. Sometimes bitterness arises if your husband divorces you and remarries. You see him treating his new wife like a 'queen.' Do not be fooled by his outward behaviour; he has not changed. Remember how he abused you in the privacy of your home. Pray for strength and ask God to help you handle your feelings of bitterness. God desires that we lose all bitterness (Ephesians 4:31). Unchecked bitterness can lead to rage or anger and the need for revenge. God does not want you to act upon your bitter feelings. He does not want you to seek revenge as a means of punishing your husband. That is what the devil wants, and he will try to use your bitterness to drive you to despair. The devil desires that you curse God and fall from faith.

It is God who is to take revenge or punish your abuser. God tells us in Deuteronomy 32:35a, *'It is mine to avenge; I will repay. ...'* and in Romans 12:19a, *'Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath. ...'* God will deal with your abusive husband. You need to protect yourself and hold your abuser responsible for his actions, but do not seek revenge. We live in a fallen world and this often prevents our ability to see God's justice.

Often it appears as if there is no justice at all, since your abuser continues to prosper. The Bible gives examples of how the wicked seem to prosper. In Psalm 73:12 it says, *'This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth.'* Yet, if you continue reading, it says in verse 27, *'Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.'* So do not despair and do not yield to feelings of bitterness and the desire for revenge. Ask God for his help in dealing with your feelings. Talk with your pastor or counsellor.

Bitter feelings or the desire for revenge may leave you concerned about forgiveness. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' God understands better than we do how liberating forgiveness toward others is in our life. Being willing to forgive your abusive husband may take a long time. Or perhaps you feel that you cannot be forgiven for your mistakes. Ask for God's forgiveness and learn from your mistakes. Even though it maybe difficult, accept the fact that God has forgiven you, even if you do not feel forgiven. Once again feelings can deceive. Forgiveness is not a feeling—it is a reality. If you are to forgive your abusive husband, it will require a conscious decision on your part. Eventually, you may desire to forgive him. *Your forgiveness does not depend on his repentance.* Your recovery from abuse does not depend on anything he may do or say or feel. Your healing does not depend on anyone else. You can recover and heal. You will with God's abundant grace and strength.

When a Christian forgives another person, even an enemy, it is in response to the forgiveness that God has given them through Christ's death on the cross (Ephesians 4:32). Keep in mind that when you forgive, you may receive more benefits and greater peace of mind than your abuser receives. Forgiveness often will give you peace and allow you to look to your future. Feelings are not constant and will change over time. God can help you sort through your feelings as you study the Bible, pray and ask for the counsel of your pastor or a fellow Christian. *'Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me'* (Psalm 50:15).

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