

Bible Study: What Does the Bible Say about Intimate Partner Violence?

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who trust in him.

— Psalm 34:8

The Bible consistently identifies abuse as a misuse of power and condemns abuse of all kinds as unjust. Sometimes, abusers use the Bible's teaching on topics such as marriage, submission, love and forgiveness to persuade victims of intimate partner violence to tolerate abuse and to remain in a relationship that is abusive.

You may have been told that the Bible's teaching on the lifelong commitment of marriage is a reason to overlook abuse, but the Bible is clear that God never condones abuse. If a relationship ends over violence, it is the person who abused that caused the relationship to break down, not the person seeking safety.

Let's look more closely at what the Bible teaches about violence.

Violence entered the world as a result of sin.

In Genesis 3, we read that human rebellion against God resulted in conflict between people. Almost immediately after this, we read the narrative of Cain murdering his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8). Violence, motivated by anger, revenge and general moral degeneration, is found throughout the pages of Scripture. This includes violence against women, such as Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:29–40) and Levi's concubine (Judges 19), as well as the rapes of Diana (Genesis 34), the woman of Bethlehem (Judges 19-20) and Tamar (2 Samuel 13).

The Bible uses a few different words for violence.

The Hebrew word *hamas* means violence or wrongdoing and is used about 60 times in the Bible, usually referring to physical violence but also to general wickedness, sin, injustice and verbal violence. The words *gazal* and *asaq* mean to rob and oppress and are used to refer to violence that may be physical, verbal or immoral. Other words have the meaning of attack, destroy and annihilate. The Hebrew verb *anah* means to rape and violate sexually and can also mean to oppress or weaken. Other words are also used to indicate oppression. As in our own time, a variety of words are used and context determines meaning. The behaviors we associate today with domestic abuse, such as physical violence, rape, intimidation, threats, isolation and emotional abuse, fit within the Bible's description of violence.

The presence of violent narratives in the Bible is not a prescription for violence or an approval of violence but rather is consistent with the Bible's realistic portrayal of human civilization.

In Genesis 6:11, we read that the earth became corrupt in God's sight and full of violence. The chapters depicting violence in the Old Testament are a "warts and all" historical account of the extent of evil and the fallen nature of humanity, including historical cultural attitudes to various forms of violence. This record of history should not lead us to think violence is condoned by God. These passages are not there to normalize violence.

Violence is condemned as sinful in the Bible.

The extent of human violence in the days of Noah was so destructive that God despaired of creation. The Ten Commandments condemn violence and the Old Testament laws of Deuteronomy prescribe punishments for violence against others, including sexual violence against women (Deuteronomy 22:25-29). Psalms and Proverbs counsel people to shun evil (Proverbs 3:7), malicious behavior, concealed hatred and lying lips, slander and the stirring up of conflict (Proverbs 10). The book of Judges recounts the rape of the woman of Bethlehem and condemns it as a lewd and outrageous act. The rapists are described as wicked men and the rape and murder of the woman bring about a violent uprising against the tribe of those who committed the crime.

In Old Testament law, rape was considered equivalent to murder, with punishment up to death (Deuteronomy 22:25-30). Other narratives of family violence, such as that done to Tamar, show the impact of such trauma on the victim and God's condemnation of it.

There are patterns of behavior that often accompany and contribute to domestic abuse. We see these condemned in the Bible, and guilt is as assigned to the abuser:

- Using power to oppress others is condemned in Ecclesiastes 4:1
- Hitting another is condemned in Exodus 21:26-27
- Causing trouble in the household and bringing ruin to a family is condemned in Proverbs 11:29
- Stirring up conflict is condemned in Proverbs 10
- The man who hates his wife is described as doing violence to the very person he should protect in Malachi 2:16
- Verbal abuse, hurtful words, damaging gossip, insults and hateful slander are condemned in Matthew 5:22, Proverbs 18:21 and James 3:9)
- Twisting words is condemned in Psalm 56:5
- Calling wrong “right” and right “wrong” — a common domestic abuse behavior that we refer to today as gaslighting — is condemned in Malachi 2:17
- Threatening others is condemned in Psalm 73-8
- Cursing, lying and threatening are called out as evil in Psalm 10:7
- Secret and shameful ways are condemned by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:2

Instead of abuse and violence, the Bible promotes peace (*shalom*) between people.

Shalom is a kind of peace that means that each person experiences well-being, positive relationships, security and safety from harm. God wants peace to permeate all of creation. It is what we see when we read the first pages of the Bible and encounter the Garden of Eden — where there is perfect harmony and peace between Adam and Eve, with God and with creation. It is where we see a gracious mutual submission between Adam and Eve.

Jesus came into the world in order that, through his work on the cross, we might access peace with God and a renewed peace with one another and creation. He came that we might stop battling against one another (Isaiah 2:4). The ultimate fulfillment of Jesus’s work is described in Revelation 21, where we read of the end of all that is shameful and deceitful and of the healing of the nations and the restoration of the kind of peace between people and God that was enjoyed before sin entered the world.

God loves justice and establishes equity (Psalm 99:4).

Amos 5:24 says: *But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

As intimate partner violence is an unjust misuse of a person's power, it stands to reason that God wants justice for the one who is subject to intimate partner violence. Church leaders and all Christians should stand up and defend those who are subject to it. In Ezekiel 34, we read of the judgment of God on leaders who do not take care of the weak and tend to the injured.

Proverbs 22:24-25 counsels us not to be friends with angry or hot-tempered men.

Jesus recognized violence as a denial of justice. He taught about God's compassion for victims of violence. The story of the Good Samaritan emphasizes Jesus's teaching that victims of violence ought to be shown care and helped to heal. The position held by some people that a victim should tolerate abuse for the sake of their marriage, to honor their spouse or for the sake of not drawing attention to their spouse is a subversion of the Bible's expansive condemnation of all the behaviors associated with what we today call intimate partner violence.

Adapted from [Renew](#): *An Australian Guide for Christian Women Survivors of Domestic Abuse* 2023. Written by the Rev. Tracy Lauersen. Used with permission.