

Living with an Angry Husband



by Edward T. Welch

It shouldn't be. A woman gives herself to a man. Now that same man once entrusted with her life, threatens to *take* it. This is betrayal at its worst. And it shouldn't be.

Yes, there are also angry wives and battered husbands. Scripture speaks to them as well. But Scripture gives women unique attention because of the power differential between men and women. Women are typically weaker, in terms of brute strength, and women can still be thought of as property in cultures throughout the world. So don't just think in terms of reverse discrimination and the neglect of abused husbands. Marital violence is not distributed equally among the genders. Keep your focus on women.

Let's begin with a few assumptions.

- The problem is more frequent than we think. For every one woman who is willing to talk about it, there are dozens more who are too scared to say anything.
- Domestic anger and violence deserve our immediate attention, even when there is only a mere hint of a problem.
- Like every sin, you will find oppressive

anger in churches everywhere. Money and status can keep it hidden longer, but you will find it equally distributed through ethnic and income groups.

- Although the state can certainly help when women are victimized by their husband's anger, the church must respond and take action. God hates injustice.
- This might be one of the few times when those who help are called to righteous indignation.
- Men, and even women, err in *underestimating* how difficult it can be to live with an angry spouse.

Where is Domestic Anger and Violence?

Before considering how to help an abused woman you have to be aware of the problem. Domestic anger and violence don't happen in public, so you won't see them. And, since it feels shameful to be battered by someone who supposedly knows you best, battered women are usually the last to talk about it. In other words, you know someone right now who is being oppressed with sinful anger, and you don't know it. This leaves friends, pastors and counselors waiting, with doors open and an eagerness to help, but waiting.

Our preference is to take initiative when

**Edward T. Welch is counselor and faculty member at CCEF and professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.*

possible. This problem of violence and abuse in marriages, however, defies initiatives. If we knocked on doors and asked every woman we know if she has experienced violence in her home we still wouldn't expose the problem. But there are things a church can do.

For example, we can teach that silence is not an option in the Christian life. This abused woman lives before the God who hears and cares. If she doesn't even know where to start when she talks to God, the psalms can give her words. The Holy God is her Father who beseeches His children to call out to Him when there is trouble. If she looks for words to say in the Psalms she will find that God especially invites those who have enemies and oppressors to come to Him.

The natural corollary of speaking out to God is that those who are hurt will speak out to other people. One reason they can do this is that they have practiced speaking—they have broken the silence prescribed by their husbands. Also, there is a direct link between our relationship with God and others. If we love God, we will love other people. If we can speak out to God, we will be able to speak out to others. For women, this will mean that they will recognize that God often comes to us by way of His human ambassadors, and they will be more disposed to talk to another woman.

But what can you do when a friend confides that her husband's anger is out of control? And what can you do when the person being victimized doesn't want anyone else to know? There is something diabolic about silence in the face of injustice, so swearing to keep the secret compounds the problem. But it's easy to understand why a frightened woman would not want others to know. Coupled with her own shame is the sense that the slightest provocation will just make her husband all the angrier.

If the situation is life-threatening, then the circle of those who know must be enlarged immediately. If physical harm is not imminent a victimized wife will still need others to come alongside because her situation demands prayerfulness and corporate wisdom. Either way, it is time to understand the frightened woman and her situation.

The World of Victimized Women

How does the Bible describe those who hurt His people? How does He describe oppression? What will happen to those who oppress others? Look at this description found in Jeremiah, the weeping prophet.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend My people: “Because you have scattered My flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. (Jer. 23: 1-2)

With this passage alone, oppressed women can be certain that God cares about injustice. Whether the perpetrators are political leaders, leaders of Israel, leaders in the church, husbands or parents, those in more powerful positions are exhorted to deal gently with those under their care. People with power are called to use their power to serve. When they don't, the consequences can be devastating—people are destroyed and scattered—and God Himself will set His face against them.

This particular passage then goes into a beautiful soliloquy where the Messiah says, “I will now take the place of those shepherds, those who have abused their authority. I will now be the authority. And I will be the better good shepherd.”

Ezekiel 34 echoes both the seriousness of the crime and God's care for His hurting people.

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not the shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound upon the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally! So they were scattered because there was no good shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for

all the wild animals.

O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for My flock." (Ezek. 34:2-6 9-10.)

No doubt, it can feel impossible for violated women to break the silence, but when they know that God Himself will not be silent then speaking to others becomes a way to imitate God. It is *not* a betrayal of the perpetrator. Instead, one goal is to bring the perpetrator's sin to light so he has the opportunity to turn *to* God and, as a result, turn away from God's wrath.

What is it like to be brutalized and oppressed? What it is like to be scattered? What is it like to be victimized by the person who is closest to you? Let's look at a few true scenarios.

Scene 1:

A wife, making simple conversation, starts telling a story to her husband. "It was cold out and..."

"It wasn't cold out. It was cool out. Tell the story right or don't tell it at all," her husband responds. She cannot predict what will set him off. She becomes quiet and doesn't respond at all. She is like a condemned plaintiff standing before an accusing judge. Everything she says will be analyzed and used against her. So she answers with "Yes" and "No" and not much more. Then, of course, she will be harshly criticized for her silence.

Scene 2:

A woman talks with friends about decorating her home. "We painted the room red ..."

Her husband goes on angry tirade: "That's a lie. Why do you always lie? The room is burgundy. And you know that room is not even completely painted yet. Why are you such a liar? You are just an airhead. Even that doesn't describe you. It's like your head is a black hole. Your head is a vacuum. Every spark of intelligence gets sucked into it and disappears."

What can she say to such a thing? Nothing. To make matters worse, the husband makes some of these comments publicly. When she begins to cry, he responds, "See, that's your problem. You can't take a joke."

Scene 3:

A wife tries to talk to her husband about an argument that occurred earlier in the morning during which he blasted her for no apparent reason.

She gathers her courage. "Honey, it hurt me when you were so angry this morning."

"What are you talking about? Are you trying to start something? You are too sensitive. You can't even take a joke. You blow everything out of proportion. You're always complaining. You take everything wrong. Okay. Okay. Okay. I am sorry for even trying to talk you at all. Forget it. I just won't say anything." Then he declares a cold war for the next few days.

Now repeat that kind of abrasive, erratic, and unpredictable comment over and over. Can you imagine? A woman will shut down. She begins to think that *she* is the problem not her husband. Ingest this diet for a year or so and you think that not only are you the problem, you are also crazy.

The experience of insanity is actually a faithful mirror of the husband's irrational and insane sin. His irrational tirade doesn't make sense. It is a delusion that resists logical analysis. And the woman can't anticipate when she will be blindsided by the next angry outburst.

She observes that the grass is green. He says it is blue, simply because she has said it is green. To stop the argument, she capitulates and says, "Yes, it is blue." She can even start to believe that it really is blue.

The husband now gets angry because he believes his wife is arrogant or because she is stupid. "The grass," he now says, "is orange."

Add other irrational behaviors to the list: Name calling that would be laughably childish if it weren't so hurtful. Profanity. Orders. Threats. Physical contact in anger. Restraining. Pushing. There might be occasional respites, during which time the angry man might even show kindness and buy gifts as a way to show token contrition, but don't think the murderous anger is dead. The volcano is dormant, not extinct. It doesn't go away with time; it just picks up more speed and intensity. Anger is too addictive. It gives the angry person what he wants: authority, control, influence, and the feeling that he is exalted.

Scene 4:

One man was so blind to his anger that he sought help—for his wife’s anger. He gave this analysis of their marital situation.

“Here’s the problem. The worst day of my life was the day I married with this woman.” (This must have been an atrocious day because he has been married forty years! And he has told her the same thing every day for those forty years.)

“Can you help me deal with this woman? She is the most wretchedly angry woman I have ever met.”

His wife didn’t flinch. She had obviously heard it many times before. But maybe she didn’t flinch because she was almost dead inside. Maybe she was motionless because she had been between this rock and a hard place so many times before. If she said anything, he called her defensive. If she was silent, she was passive-aggressive. After a long pause, during which time the husband waited for the counselor to commiserate with his tragic plight, his wife *almost* looked up.

“I’m sorry for all the pain I have caused him. I’ve tried to take my life a number of times and I have even failed at that.”

You get the sense, accurately so, that this paralyzed woman has never raised her voice in her entire life.

Add isolation to the list of the wife’s experiences. This woman is isolated in her closest relationship—her marriage—and she can’t even speak about the greatest burden in her heart because to speak about it would make it worse. Couple this with isolation in other relationships. What woman is going to want to speak about a husband who hates her? Ultimately she feels guilty and thinks perhaps she is provoking her husband’s angry tirades. It’s analogous to a child who is hated by a parent. Could you even imagine this? Parents are supposed to love their children. Husbands covenant to love their wives. Like neglected children, spouses begin to think that they are the problem. It is easier than the alternative, which is that they are powerless to be loved by someone who acts like an enemy.

Chronic guilt is the norm, and the guilt persists regardless of how many things the abused woman tries to confess.

Difficult Questions for the Church

You are now brought in. The angry man doesn’t yet know that other people have been told about the marriage. Do you speak with the spouse who is the violator? What if the spouse is not a member of your church and you have no pastoral jurisdiction? What if the abused woman is willing to let you talk to her spouse, but she has told you some things she doesn’t want you to repeat to anyone else? These are just the beginning of the pastoral questions.

Personal Safety

Physical safety is your first concern. If the abuse in the home is truly violent and dangerous you can call the police, pursue a Protection from Abuse order from the county courthouse, or both. A protection from abuse order requires that the perpetrator keep a safe distance from the abused, and it typically lasts for one year. It can only be initiated by the person receiving the violence, but another person certainly should go with the abused woman to request it. As you can imagine, this is perhaps the most difficult decision the woman will ever make, and she needs the partnership of wise friends and pastors.

Don’t think that a woman who considers a protection from abuse order is taking her marriage lightly. The husband’s violent anger most likely has a long history, and only sheer desperation drives her to break the code of silence. The vast majority of women in this position are not looking for an easy way out. Rather, they still want to stay in the marriage. They usually think that with just a little more time, their husbands will settle down.

As evidence of abused women’s ambivalence, many women don’t go through with the protection orders. Those who do go through with it rescind them, within the first few weeks for a variety of reasons. Husbands seems contrite. Husbands hold the power in the relationship and use it to persuade their wives to drop the order. Wives are lonely and afraid that they will jeopardize the future of their marriage if they persist on this path. Children ask for their father. And family budgets strain to the breaking point when there are two residences instead of one. Deaconal help can answer some of these concerns, but the emotional pull that abused women experience toward angry men is strong

and resistant to advice. As soon as the immediate storm passes, women are ready and sometimes eager to have their spouses return. But the cycle of anger and abuse will continue.

Theological Matters

Along with the challenging decisions about safety, domestic anger raises other theological questions that might be new to some churches. Is a woman allowed to separate in situations of domestic violence? Most would say yes here. Is divorce permissible? (Few women in this situation choose that option.) That question is more difficult.

Domestic violence can be found at the intersection of two Scriptural teachings. First, marriage is a covenant. Marriage is a promise of faithfulness to one another. Second, and equally important, God hates violence and the destructive nature of this sin. These two issues seem to butt up against each other. One does not take prominence over the other. The challenge in pastoral ministry is to determine

injustice.

Church Discipline

Another challenging matter is church discipline for the angry husband. If he is not a member of the church, there are still questions about how, when, and if to confront the violent man, but formal church discipline is obviously not a consideration. If he is a member of the church, church discipline is a means of God's grace. No one is eager to start this process with anyone, and we can find even more reasons to avoid discipline with angry men because we don't want to incite their anger. But since this is God's means of pastoral care, we take these steps in love and with the hope of the perpetrator's repentance and reconciliation.

Here is where *church leaders* need counsel and someone to come alongside them. In a litigious culture, angry men are liable to take steps of discipline as a declaration of war and counterattack. With this in mind, church leadership should pursue this course prayerfully

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which theological issue or Scripture is relevant at each particular moment. At times, it is best to emphasize the promises of marriage. At other times we will emphasize the destructiveness of sin. The challenge is to call out for spiritual wisdom to know when to emphasize which type of passage.

The verse, "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel" (Mal. 2:16), is sometimes used to end all discussion. God hates divorce; therefore don't even consider it or anything else, including the separation that leads up to it. Instead follow the example of Christ who was obedient to the Father through His suffering. But the passage can be translated, "For the man who hates and divorces," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "covers his garment with violence" (ESV). Also, regardless of the correct translation, the Lord expresses hatred for men who are violent and sinfully discard their wives in preference for pagan women. The Lord hates

with the advice of others, making sure to document each step.

Pastoral Care

If church leaders need help through this process, how much more the woman who is in it. A woman who has been violated needs the gift of a pastor, either *the* Pastor or *a* pastor. More accurately, she needs pastors and deacons, and many of them. She needs people who are willing to walk with her, who are concerned with her spiritual well-being over the long term. Consultants who dispense a few answers and say, "call me" will never do. Instead, those who come along side need perseverance, love, and wisdom.

Suppose you are one of these pastors and the abused woman has told you her story. You have helped her articulate her experience. In this case, the woman is afraid, but she is not concerned about physical harm. She wants to stay in the home and live with the angry man.

Your task is to reframe the seemingly hopeless relationship in light of the cross of Christ and the giving of the Spirit.

The cross of Christ is brimming with application for her. God comes close; He knows suffering; He takes suffering on Himself. When the crucified Christ was raised from the dead and seated in the heavens He gave us His Spirit, who is God-with-us. Although this reality may seem far off from a scared and victimized woman, this is, indeed, her greatest hope.

But it certainly takes some re-orienting. She wants immediate peace in her relationship with her husband—she gets the Lord. She wants security in her marriage—she gets the Lord. She hopes for words that will magically transform a marriage that has had problems from the beginning—she gets the Lord. Like Israel, she might hope for a God who gives her a few earthly victories over enemies - she gets the cosmic King. She can easily think of things that sound better than the Spirit, more tangible, more immediate, more gratifying, more satisfying things. But she gets the very best. She gets more than she could dream. A powerless woman is given Power. A woman who doubts her own sanity is given the Truth. The pastoral task is to root her in Christ and remind her of this larger reality of her life.

The Spirit of God's Presence.

The Spirit mediates the presence of the God who sees. Look at Hagar. God is Spirit. He is everywhere, unbounded by time and space. He sees the oppressed, and He acts on their behalf. He rescued both Hagar and her young son, and He blessed them: They were the beginning of a nation (Gen. 21:8-20). When God sees, He acts.

In the New Testament we encounter the same God, but everything is amplified. God doesn't simply see; God is *with*. "He tabernacles even within you" (1 Cor. 6:19). This verse clearly expresses God's intimate relationship with us. The Spirit is always with us. He is the One who comes near to us and comforts us.

An abused and victimized woman feels desperately alone. No one seems to be able to break into the isolation that her husband provokes. But the Spirit is always with her. He is the One who will never leave her and never

forsake her. She is united with the Spirit because of the finished work of Christ, and her husband is not strong enough to separate this bond. If she has professed faith in Jesus, that is the evidence that the Spirit is within her, mediating the presence of Jesus Christ to her.

The Spirit of Truth. The Spirit is also the Spirit of Truth. How perfect for a woman who is so confused by the incessant accusations of her husband. The Spirit of truth testifies about Jesus Christ (John 14:16). The Spirit has been with Jesus from the beginning. The Spirit is a witness to the cross of Christ, a witness to the resurrection. The Spirit is a witness to the fact that Christ presently reigns. The Spirit of Truth comes to us, and He impresses the reality of Christ and the cross on our hearts.

Will the Spirit of Truth give her clarity on her home situation? Yes. But that clarity begins by first receiving clarity on the character of God and the gospel of Christ.

The Spirit of Wisdom. And there is more. The Spirit also knows the mind of the Father (1 Cor. 2:11). Why is this important? Here is a woman who is in dire need of wisdom. She asks, "Lord, how am I supposed to act today? How am I supposed to respond today? What am I supposed to do today? What am I supposed to say today? Do I say something? Do I say nothing?" In the midst of that God has promised the Spirit of wisdom to her.

Living with an angry husband is like living on the witness stand with the prosecuting attorney standing in front of you. Sometimes the prosecutor can seem cordial, friendly, and even sympathetic; the next moment the attack comes where you least expected it. The Spirit of wisdom guides her at those times.

While on this path of gaining wisdom it will be essential for the victimized woman to attend to the intricate balance between loving and wanting to be loved. In our marriages, we should aspire to a subtle imbalance where our commitment and desire *to love* outweighs our desire *to be loved*. When the scales are tipped in the other direction we don't really love. Instead, we love in order to get love. Also, we will feel manipulated and controlled because we desperately want something that the other person has. If our primary goal is to love, no one can thwart us or sabotage our mission.

Does the Spirit seem far away? He isn't. Call out and ask for even more.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Spirit to those who ask Him?

(Luke 11:11-13)

Here is the truth, and once the “destroyed and scattered” woman gets spiritually oriented, she will be blessed. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7). She feels utterly powerless, helpless, and out of control. But she has the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit is Power, Presence, Truth, and Wisdom.

Speaking the Truth in Love

The grace of Christ leads us to action. Our faith expresses itself in love. What does speaking and doing the truth in love look like for the person in an abusive situation? How do you disarm an angry person, if that is even possible? How can this woman speak and do in truth in love to her angry spouse? She has to do this in small steps, surrounded by prayers of people. She must remember that her husband is created in the image of God so that when she moves toward him, she moves towards him with respect and humility. Where she has not treated her husband with respect, she can ask forgiveness. Will he hold any confession of sin against her? Perhaps. An angry, selfish husband can use *anything* against his wife. But his reactions don't steer her away from a godly course.

Aim to disarm with the unexpected. The gospel of Jesus took everyone by surprise; no one anticipated it. They expected far less from a Messiah. As recipients of the gospel, our message and method brings surprises. It unbalances and subverts worldly expectations. So how can she do the unanticipated? She can

- Ask him why he thinks she is the enemy. Does he have a reason to be murderous to her? Does he really want to destroy her and the relationship?

- Leave the house when he is sinfully angry. Let him know that murder is wrong: “No. Stop. Here and no farther.”
- As frightened as she feels, notice that *he* is the one who is in danger. His injustices are ultimately against God, and God opposes proud oppressors. It is truly a frightening thing to act like an enemy of God.
- Go and get help instead of being silenced by shame and threats. She should seek help for her own good, the good of the other person, and for the good of the relationship.
- Accept responsibility for her own sinful responses, but do not accept responsibility for his.
- Tell him what it is like to be the recipient of his anger and hatred. Angry people are blind to how they hurt others.
- Ask him if he thinks that *she* has a problem. Ask if he thinks that *he* has a problem.
- Speak with humility. It's more powerful than anger. “Do you hate your brother [your enemy, your spouse] in your heart? Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt” (Lev. 19:17).
- If he claims to want to change, ask him what steps he will take to do this.
- Keep James 4:1, 2 in mind. You witness his selfish desires running amok. Be careful that you don't become an imitator of such behavior. Don't fight the way he fights.
- Don't minimize his destructive behavior. Sinful anger is called hatred and murder (Matthew 5:21, 22).
- Read through the book of Proverbs and underline all the sayings about anger. Proverbs like “reckless words pierce like a sword” will validate her experiences (Proverbs 12:18).
- Remember, it is possible to overcome evil with good.

The Kingdom Advances

We live in an era where sin and its wretched consequence exist even in the home. But we also live on this side of the cross, and everything has changed as a result. When Christ

ascended to heaven, He did the unexpected. He gave us gifts rather than received gifts. He *gave* us the gift of the Spirit and this Spirit leads us in hope and power. The Spirit gives us power and a vision to overwhelm evil with good, to overwhelm evil with love.

The Kingdom of God is unrestrained and advancing. This victimized woman, who feels so alone, is very precious in God's sight, and God

Himself empowers her to be light in a place that is otherwise dark. It is a myth to think that darkness beats the light. Satan is restrained; the Kingdom grows. Sin and darkness are no longer contagious. Instead, as she is united with the Spirit of Christ, she receives God's holiness, and holiness transforms everything in its path (1 Cor. 7:14).