

Does the Bible Say Women Should Suffer Abuse and Violence?



by JUSTIN S. AND LINDSEY A. HOLCOMB _____

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

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

Scripture Misapplied

Christian women caught up in the cycle of abuse² may think, “I can’t leave this abusive situation because the Bible says divorce is wrong.” Likewise, abusive hus-

Justin Holcomb (MA, PhD) is an Episcopal priest and teaches theology, philosophy, and Christian thought at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He is the author of several books, including On the Grace of God.

Lindsey Holcomb (MPH) counsels victims of sexual assault and domestic violence and coauthored Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault with her husband.

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¹ Susan Hall, “The Theology of Domestic Violence,” *Views from the Edge* (Seattle: Mars Hill Graduate School, January 2006), 1.

² We use the words *abuse* and *violence* to refer to both physical and non-physical acts and behaviors that are in opposition to the rights of another.

bands may claim, “The Bible commands that my wife should be submissive to me.”

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

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

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

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

You Were Not Created to Suffer

Jesus’ reason for not asking sufferers to accept their circumstances goes back to

the beginning, to God's original plan for humanity. God's intent was for *shalom*, a term that means fullness of peace, universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight. Shalom is the vision of a society without violence or fear: "I will give you peace (*shalom*) in the land, and none shall make you afraid" (Lev 26:6). It entails harmonious relationships with both God and others, a profound and comprehensive sense of well-being, overflowing with peace, justice, and common good (Isa 32:14–20).

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

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

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

Biblical Examples of Avoiding Suffering

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

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

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

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

God's favor provided a way of escape and safety.

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

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

Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.

But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.” (Gen 15:13–14)

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

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

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

The vulnerable are to be protected.

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

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

The Lord cares for the oppressed.

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

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

don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed." So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped. (1 Sam 19:11–12)

Later, David fears for his life and again flees.

But David thought to himself, "One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand" . . . When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he no longer searched for him. (1 Sam 27:1,4)

It is not wrong to escape violence.

Esther and her people. Instead of passively accepting the unjust slaughter that she and her people were about to receive, Esther mustered all her courage, risked her life, and pled her case before the king. This act of courage and refusal to accept a violent fate resulted in the deliverance of the people of Israel from annihilation.

The woman caught in adultery. Jesus intervened before a mob of religious hypocrites stoned a woman for adultery. In addition to protecting her from death, Jesus also speaks graciously to her.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" . . . When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." . . . At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:1–11)

Dealing with one's own sins is not incompatible with escaping violence.

Jesus. Jesus' life was marked by suffering that he willingly took upon himself. But the purpose of this suffering was so that we could avoid it—so that he could suffer *in our stead*. Jesus was motivated to undergo suffering so that *we* would be spared.

Even so, there were times when Jesus avoided suffering because it was not his

appointed time to die. Because of God's plan for him to succumb to violence at the cross, Jesus' life was preserved up until then. It started early in his life. As a baby, his family whisked him away from danger.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt. (Matt 2:13–14)

When trouble is in sight, the normal response is to preserve and protect life.

As an adult, Jesus often withdrew or hid from people because he was in danger of physical harm. British scholar R. T. France notes that Matthew repeatedly uses the word *anachōreō*, "depart/withdraw," for Jesus getting out of a place of danger (Matt 2:14; 2:22; 4:12; 12:15).³ For example:

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. (Matt 12:14–15)

This repeated motif of Jesus' withdrawal is too important to ignore. Jesus is taking precautions to avoid premature confrontation. When the time comes for the showdown in Jerusalem, he will not flee. But for now he has a wider ministry to fulfill. If controversy is forced on him, he responds vigorously. But he takes care to avoid initiating it.

This is the same instruction Jesus gives to his followers—to avoid violence whenever possible.⁴ For example:

- If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. (Matt 10:14)
- When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. (Matt 10:23)

Some other examples of Jesus avoiding abuse are found in John's gospel.

- "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:58–59)
- Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him . . . Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. (John 10:31, 39)
- So from that day on they plotted to take his life. Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim,

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 466.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 469.

where he stayed with his disciples. (John 11:53–54)

D. A. Carson notes that in these texts “Jesus repeatedly escapes arrest, until the appointed hour of the Father arrives (John 7:30, 44; 8:20; cf. 18:6).”⁵ In similar fashion, we all have our “appointed hours” of suffering and death, but these are in God’s hands, not ours. When we do face suffering, however, we can know that it is God’s desire that we be protected. And this protection can involve our own initiative to flee from harm, as Jesus did.

When we face suffering, we can know that it is God’s desire that we be protected.

Just as Jesus’ choice to hide himself from physical threat was part of God’s way of protecting him, so a woman’s choice to escape from her abuser is part of God’s loving protection.

Paul. Though he suffered persecution and was eventually martyred, Paul also repeatedly fled from physically abusive civil and religious authorities throughout his life (Acts 9:22–25; 14:5–7; 17:10, 14). At one point, Paul could have endured an unjust and illegal beating for the name of Christ. Instead, he made use of Roman law to avoid it (Acts 22:25–29). Paul was not about to undergo such torture unnecessarily.⁶ New Testament scholar Darrell Bock adds that this passage “indicates that sometimes God can use the governmental systems devised by men to protect Christians. Christians have nothing to fear from systems that seek justice.”⁷

On another occasion, Paul made use of a providential situation to avoid suffering and death when his nephew overheard a plot against him (Acts 23:12–13, 16–24).

These passages show that Paul repeatedly fled abusive situations— just as Jesus did. He used various means to avoid suffering, and he saw them as God’s deliverance. And he never sought out martyrdom for himself, but rather took pains to avoid violence whenever possible.

All this testimony from Scripture, from Noah to Paul, shows that the fundamental human desire to avoid pain is not wrong in itself. Thus, in an abusive

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 358.

⁶ John B. Polhill, *Acts, The New American Commentary*, vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 464.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 665.

relationship, there is every reason for a woman to flee and to see this as God's loving means of rescuing her and her children from harm.

Choosing Life—Not Suffering

If you are in an abusive relationship, we know that you are in a complex, dangerous, and desperate situation. When you are in this place, it seems that no choice is easy to make. But we also believe that God has better things in mind for you than to stay in your suffering. One scholar puts it this way:

It is up to us to choose where we place ourselves: on the side of violence and death or on the side of peace and life. Fatalism and an existence doomed to violence are not a part of biblical thinking. As the biblical text exhorts: "Choose then life, that you may live; you and your children after you" (Deut 30:19).⁸

Again, if a woman has an opportunity to be safe and away from abuse, we believe that God would rather she take the opportunity.⁹ More than trying to reform the abuser, or staying because marriage is forever, or staying to show forgiveness—it is better to be safe.

How to Support Women in Their Avoidance of Suffering

Perhaps you are not the one who is suffering domestic violence, but you are a pastor, or friend, or family member of someone who is in this situation. How can you be supportive of this woman? Here are several ways to respond in a loving and helpful way to an urgent situation.

Reassure her that abuse is not part of God's original plan. What we have seen is that suffering, abuse, and pain are not part of God's original intention for creation, nor for the world to come. One of the best things you can do for a victim of abuse is to reassure her of this very truth.

There is a certain mystery about the presence of evil in the world, but when God's children face suffering and pain, he is portrayed as one who seeks to protect and care for them. He rescues and liberates those who are oppressed. He is present with them in their pain, and ultimately redeems everything painful and evil that they have suffered. Thus, biblical wisdom calls us to avoid suffering where we can and to make use of the deliverance God provides.

⁸ Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, "Violence and the Bible," in *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, eds. John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998), 32–33. On page 32, Wijk-Bos writes: "The liberative word from the Bible issues from the biblical indictment of relationships of violence as contrary to God's intent for the creation and the community called into covenant with God. Law and prophets denounce such relationships as destructive of the community's relationship to God."

⁹ Appendix 1 in our book contains resources on practical steps.

Encourage her to flee from abuse. Part of the deliverance God provides is the ability to separate from the abusive husband—to flee. This is supported by numerous biblical examples of people removing themselves from dangerous situations. Assist victims in every way to find safety and physical security. We would add that while an abused woman with no children has strong biblical warrant to flee an abusive husband, she has additional warrant to do so if she has children.

Discuss how abuse violates the marriage covenant. This brings us to an important point. Some abused women believe that teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. But no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Marriage is a covenant; divorce is the breaking of that covenant. When a man chooses to be abusive, he breaks the covenant. An abusive man forfeits the right to remain married unless the woman wants to stay married. If his wife chooses to divorce him, then she is making public his breaking of the covenant, and this does not go against what the Bible says about divorce.¹⁰ The abuser must be confronted concerning his breaking of the marriage covenant, and “victims need to know that leaving is well within their rights as a child of God.”¹¹

Abuse is a form of oppression that twists God’s good intention for marriage. One scholar puts it this way: “Spousal abuse not only violates an individual victim but also ravages the covenant of marriage itself, affecting families, society, and the community.”¹² If God provides the means to flee and find healing, we should take it—and encourage the same choice for others.

Rebut the argument that the sufferings of Christ justify abuse. Additionally, clergy or friends should be careful not to use the story of the cross to justify abuse. Marie Fortune, the founder of an interfaith organization dedicated to ending abuse, explains that the cross is not meant to show us that suffering is good. In fact, it shows us just the opposite. She writes:

¹⁰ Craig Keener cogently argues that physical abuse is conceptually a form of infidelity that breaks the marriage contract (*And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teachings of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1991], 105–9). David Instone-Brewer argues based on 1 Corinthians 7 and Exodus 21:10–11 that emotional and material abuse (neglect) are grounds for divorce (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002], 275). David Clyde Jones lands in a similar place, but on slightly different grounds. He asks whether Jesus’ exception clause states the one and only exception. “If so, does porneia have an exclusively sexual reference?” (*Biblical Christian Ethics* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994], 202–204). He answers that Paul’s allowance for divorce on the grounds of abandonment (1 Cor 7:15) means we must conclude that either porneia “is not the one and only ground for divorce, or it does not have an exclusively sexual reference in the exceptive clause.”

¹¹ Ron Clark, *Setting the Captives Free: A Christian Theology for Domestic Violence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 172.

¹² Erin Dufault-Hunter, “Spousal Abuse,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 747.

Sometimes Jesus' crucifixion is misinterpreted as being the model for suffering: since Jesus went to the cross, persons should bear their own crosses of irrational violence (for example, rape) without complaint. But Jesus' crucifixion does not sanctify suffering. It remains a witness to the horror of violence done to another and an identification with the suffering that people experience . . . The resurrection, the realization that the Christ was present to the disciples and is present to us, transformed but never justified the suffering and death experience.¹³

The cross was a cup Jesus did not want to drink. But he was willing, for our sake.

Refute "doormat theology." Marie Fortune also cautions against taking a fatalistic view of God in suffering. Pastors, ministry leaders, and supportive friends and family must take care not to promote the simplistic view that God brought on the abuse for his purposes. This is a distorted view of what is actually happening. Fortune explains:

"Doormat theology" teaches that it is God's will that people suffer and the only option is to endure it. There is no space to question or challenge the suffering that comes from this injustice, to feel anger, or to act to change one's circumstance.¹⁴

The tragic result of this misunderstanding, Fortune continues, is that the victim is essentially revictimized by being convinced that she can do nothing to alter her situation.

Ultimately, Fortune says:

There is no virtue in enduring suffering if no greater good is at stake . . . There is no greater good for anyone—certainly not for the victim and children and others who witness the violence but also not for the abuser.¹⁵

Making it clear that there is no greater good at stake refutes a common reason women stay in abusive relationships, which is they believe God wills them to do so. When women realize that this argument is invalid and that continuing to be abused *in no way* furthers the gospel, they are freed to alter their situation. They are not expected to continue receiving abuse from anyone, especially in a way

¹³ Marie F. Fortune, "The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Brown (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1989), 145.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 144-145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

that enables the sin of their abuser to keep perpetuating itself.

Remind her that God calls us to live in peace. Remember, God's purpose is *shalom*. Violence works at cross-purposes with *shalom*, and he does not want women to suffer under it. Fleeing from such a person, so that a woman and her children are safe, is a means of deliverance from the Lord. And it is also in the best interest of the abuser, because he is no longer enabled to act out this pattern of sin. The abuser is someone who needs to come to the end of himself and see his need for help. *Shalom* is God's purpose for him, too.

Find ways to serve her and others like her. The Christian church has, at its best, been known for exemplary love and sacrificial service to “the least of these”—the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Such service has provided a powerful apologetic for the gospel. By upholding the dignity of all human life as the image of God and tangibly expressing the biblical ethic of personhood that flows from it, the church has the opportunity to be a light to the nations by welcoming the weak and powerless to find grace, mercy, and rest in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, many victims who reach out to churches in times of need receive blame, disbelief, suspicious questions, bad advice, platitudes and shallow theology, instead of care and compassion. Rather than pat answers, victims need practical help and victim advocacy that is full of biblical and theological depth.

Churches have a great opportunity to offer love, safety, patience and counseling to victims of violence. Caring for and responding to women at risk is an opportunity for Christians to take the gospel to those who are most in need, provide an alternative community centered on Jesus, and show the transformative power of the gospel to the watching world. Moreover, responding to the epidemic of violence against women is a way the church can follow the charge of James to practice “pure religion” (James 1:27) by caring for vulnerable women.

Here are seven ways your church can reflect Jesus' heart for women at risk.

1. ***Stand with the vulnerable and powerless.*** God calls his people to resist those who use their power to oppress and harm others (Jer 22:3).
2. ***Believe the women; don't blame them.*** Blaming victims for post-traumatic symptoms is erroneous. Blaming also contributes to the vicious cycle of traumatization because victims who experience negative social reactions have poorer adjustment. Research has proven that being believed and being listened to by others are crucial to victims' healing.

3. *Respond graciously, offering comfort, encouragement, and protection.* Also respond with tangible, practical care. Spiritual and emotional support needs to be accompanied by actual deeds (e.g., providing groceries, picking up children from school).
4. *Get informed about the prevalence of women at risk.* These women are right under our noses, in our cities and neighborhoods, and in our churches and small groups. The prevalence is staggering.
5. *Learn about the traumatic effects of domestic violence and other forms of abuse.* The only thing more staggering than the prevalence of abuse toward women is the acute damage done to them. Trauma is not only *done to* but also *experienced by* victims. The internal and deeply personal places of a victim's heart, will, and emotions need a clear application of the gospel of redemption, along with tangible expressions of love.
6. *Clearly communicate the hope and healing that is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ.* Unfortunately, the message victims hear most often is self-heal, self-love, and self-help. The church's message is not self-help but the grace of God. God does not command "Heal thyself!" but declares "I will heal you!" God's love for and toward abused women replaces self-love and is the true path to healing.
7. *Get involved with the issue of violence against women.* This can include addressing the issue in sermons, praying about it in corporate prayer, and working toward the prevention of abuse together with community and national organizations.

As we react to the pain and suffering of women at risk, we should meditate on Jesus' love and care for women. God's love should lead us to imitate his care for his children, to take action against evil toward the vulnerable, and to pray for God's peace and salvation to cover the earth.

As we have seen, God cares for those at risk and hates violence. Throughout the Bible we read about God's unrelenting concern for those who are weak, powerless, and oppressed. The complement of God's care for the oppressed is his hatred of violence. With abuse numbers so high, there are women in every church who either have experienced it or are experiencing it now. This is a prime opportunity for the church—for you—to wisely love and to serve.

Prayer for the Church

To end, we'll leave you with a prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*.¹⁶ It is good and right for the church to pray about these matters, to pray for our sis-

¹⁶ *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 260.

ters in Christ who are in distress. We urge you to do so.

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.