
Does the Grace of God Apply to Me?¹

There is an epidemic of abuse, and victims need the kind of hope and help that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can provide.

Many victims feel that God is punishing them, and they look for causes in themselves. They may think, “I haven’t been a good wife or mother, so God is punishing me,” or “I did something wrong when I was a teenager, so God is punishing me,” or “I haven’t been a good enough Christian, so God is punishing me.”

None of these are true. For God is a God of grace, not of karma. Karma says you get what you deserve. Grace says the opposite. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve and not getting what you do deserve. It’s the most important concept in the Bible, in Christianity, and—we believe—in the world. A shorthand way of thinking about grace is “mercy, not merit.” God is not interested in punishing you or making you pay. He’s interested in lavishing you with His grace.

This kind of unconditional love is a difficult concept to wrap your mind around. Many of us think—whether we admit it or not—there must be some breaking point where God gives up on us. This is so common for all of us, and particularly for victims. After all, if your partner has made a habit of reaching his limit of love for you, this shapes your understanding of relationships. In this chapter we want to connect the dots between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus² and the disgrace of domestic violence. The deepest message of the ministry of Jesus and of the entire Bible is the grace of God to sinners and sufferers. Grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely; the peace of God given

to the restless; the unmerited favor of God. Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues.³ Grace is unconditional love toward a person who does not deserve it.⁴

Grace is “one-way love,” and it is directed at you.⁵ This is the opposite of your experience, which is one-way violence. It seeks you out even if you do not deal out any violence in return.

Grace, on the other hand, is being loved when you are or feel unlovable. Grace has the power to turn despair into hope. Grace listens, lifts up, cures, transforms, and heals. To the experience of one-way violence, God brings one-way love.

One-way love does not avoid you but comes near, not because of personal merit but because of your need. It is the lasting transformation that takes place in human experience, able to change your experience with pain, suffering, and brokenness.

Disgrace is the opposite of grace and is experienced by the numerous victims of domestic violence. This experience of feeling disgrace has nothing to do with what you have done but because something disgraceful was done to you. You didn’t cause yourself disgrace—someone else did, and it was wrong. The disgrace that results from domestic violence has a way of grinding victims down and heaping huge burdens on them. But God uses the gospel of grace to eliminate that disgrace and heal its effects.

Hurting people need something from the outside to stop the downward spiral. Fortunately, grace floods in from the outside at the point when hope to change oneself is lost.

God, in His grace, declares that you will be healed of your disgrace. Contrary to the proponents of the healing benefits of self-esteem for victims, this promise does not come from within you but from outside of you. One-way love does not command, “Heal thyself!” but declares “You will be healed!” Take a look at this promise in Jeremiah 17:14, “Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.”

God’s one-way love replaces your need to save yourself and is the

true path to healing. In His eyes, you are already worthwhile. This is astonishingly good news, and it highlights the contrast between disgrace and grace or one-way violence and one-way love.

You don't need to heal your own wounds—God will do that. But what you can do is cling to the promise that God is strong when you are weak, and that He is close to the brokenhearted. Allow God to fulfill His promises to you, after so many promises have been broken.

Even if you have been wounded by one-way violence, please know this: your story does not end with abuse. Your life was intended for more than denial, identity crisis, shame, anger, and despair. The abuse does not define you or have the last word on your identity. Yes, it is part of the story, but it is not the end of the story. Let's take a look at how this one-way grace transforms even our darkest disgrace.

Some of the most prevalent responses to domestic violence include denial, distorted self-image, shame, guilt, anger, and despair. Let's look at each one and see how God applies grace to disgrace through the gospel of Jesus.

DENIAL

Denial and minimization are key methods victims use, as a means of lessening or coping with the trauma from domestic violence.

Initially, denial can slow the process down to create a buffer or safety zone so survivors can ease into coping with difficult emotions. Prolonged denial, however, may backfire by increasing the pain in the long run. For if a victim cannot come to terms with the severe mental and emotional tolls she has sustained, she cannot truly heal from it.

What's more, God never minimizes the pain you have suffered. Instead of denying what has happened to you, He mourns over it. He identifies with you through Jesus' pain on the cross, and He has compassion. Jesus, too, "was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isa. 53:3). Another version says He was "acquainted with grief." This is a God who not only suffered for His people but also suffers with them. Jesus knows what it means to be

alone, naked, bleeding, and crying out to God. He shared in absolute abandonment and the pain of sufferers, and was a victim of violence and suffered injustice. While the cross shows us that God understands pain and does not judge you for your feelings of grief, the resurrection shows you that God is active in restoring peace—that He conquered sin and is reversing its effects.

God knows your suffering. Rather than denying it, He grieves with you. You are not encouraged to be silent or deny but to feel and express your emotions, to cry or weep, to grieve the destruction you experienced. Because of Jesus, you have the privilege to confidently go to God and receive grace and mercy.

IDENTITY

Domestic violence victims fight the constant struggle to maintain their identity when the abuser is distorting it. This kind of disgrace slowly erodes a victim's self-image. A negative self-image, provoked by an abuser, fuels an identity founded on self-condemnation.

Domestic violence maligns a victim's sense of self and communicates that they are stupid, filthy, foolish, worthless, defiled, impure, damaged, gross, screwed-up, unwanted, or dirty.

But God never calls you any of these things. And this is not the identity He has given you.

Making the transition from a victim identity to an identity in Christ is offered in God's redemptive work through Jesus. Of course, if you are a victim of domestic violence, then that is a part of your story that you should not deny or minimize. But if you let it become *the* reigning story about you, then your identity will be founded on disgrace. God offers the redemptive story told in Scripture to you, and you may claim it as your story at any time. The identity from that story is founded on grace in at least two specific ways.

Firstly, if you have faith in Christ, God calls you certain things that convey value. The "people of God" is one of the most significant. This intimacy of God's concern for His people is seen clearly in the declara-

tion that you are a child of God if you trust in Christ (1 John 3:1–2). This is, perhaps, the most remarkable thing you can be called. This new identity is rooted in being adopted into God’s family. God adopted you and accepted you because He loves you. You didn’t do anything to deserve His love, and yet He loves you unconditionally.

Secondly, because of faith in Christ, you receive the righteousness or the goodness of God. The strength, wisdom, humility, courage, and generous love that define God slowly begin to define who you are instead of your past.

We find in 2 Corinthians 5:21 an identity-altering statement: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This passage tells us that God isn’t saving good people but damaged people. And we are all damaged because we all live in a fallen, broken world. He takes that damage on Himself, and in an incredible exchange, He looks at us and sees only His own righteousness. He tells us that this is our identity even when it doesn’t feel as though it is—even when we seem stuck in the things we’ve done and had done to us—and helps us grow into it. Theologians call this imputation, which is ascribing characteristics to someone that they do not have by nature. Imputation is the crediting in our favor, from the standpoint of God, who is the source of all judgment, the perfect moral worth of Jesus. It also implies the humility of Jesus, who took on our full burden of disgraces so that He could make this astounding transfer.

By faith, we are in Christ and as such we are seen as He is. His righteousness, holiness, and blamelessness are imputed to us. This dramatically transforms our identity.

Instead of damaged, broken, filthy, useless, failure, or sinful, God uses new words to lavishly redefine those who are His: redeemed and forgiven (Eph. 1:6–8), made righteous (Rom. 5:1), new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), God’s workmanship (Eph. 2:10), reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18), saint (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1), chosen, holy, and beloved (Col. 3:12), child of light, not darkness (1 Thess. 5:5), pure,

blameless, glory of God (Phil. 1:10–11), holy, blameless, and above reproach (Col. 1:21–22), and the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people,” God tell us, “and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one” (Rom. 9:25).

If you believe in Christ, your identity is deeper than any of your wounds. Your new identity is more secure and stable than any other identity that has been attributed to you. That means you are not doomed to live as a victim. It doesn’t eliminate your wounds nor silence your cry for deliverance or healing. But it does mean those wounds are not the final word on who you are. They don’t enslave you and determine your life.

As we will see in Part 3 of this book as we venture into the Psalms, it’s perfectly natural to ask, “If I belong to God, why am I suffering like this?” These questions are more than okay. In order to have the cycle of disgrace broken, we need a God before whom we can put aside the disguises. What we’re saying for right now is to trust that God hears you and won’t reject you, and that when He looks at you, He doesn’t see a “failure” or “damaged goods.”

SHAME

Even if abuse is not your fault—and it is never your fault—shame can be a difficult emotion to fight. Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist writer, accurately describes shame as “a hemorrhage of the soul”: that is, a painful, unexpected, and disorienting experience. Shame has the power to take our breath away and smother us with condemnation, rejection, and disgust. To be shamed is to be abased and dishonored, to be rejected from the community—especially when a victim is not believed or supported, told to be silent, or blamed.

Shame is a painfully confusing experience—a sort of mental and emotional disintegration that makes us acutely aware of our inadequacies, shortcomings, and is often associated with a shrinking feeling of failure. It can be particularly destructive if a victim feels stigmatized by withering, energy-draining feelings of worthlessness. Often victims

will attempt to numb this pain through drugs, alcohol, sex, power, success, or whatever else enables them to stop feeling.

We should be clear that we're not suggesting that you deal with shame by becoming "more religious." Whatever your current faith involvement is, trying to make up for shame with more religious activities will only short-circuit your healing process and make you feel worse. But we do believe in a God who deliberately became acquainted with shame, and because of this, He is well placed to deal with us in our own shame.

Jesus was well acquainted with this emotion. Throughout His adult life, He actively pursued the company of outcasts who were considered damaged and unfit for normal society. They were considered "unclean"—morally, socially, or religiously. His solidarity with the shamed and excluded of His day led to being shamed Himself. The Romans used crosses to humiliate the criminals they considered especially despicable.

So whatever shame you are experiencing in your life right now, please know that Jesus is no stranger to this ugly emotion. He's not at all put off by whatever deep, dark secret that is causing us to feel crushed; in fact, He is interested in reaching right into the middle of it and changing it. What's more, the domestic violence you experienced was not your fault—not at all. This realization all by itself can bring great freedom and relief from shame.

ANGER

Domestic violence is unquestionably an evil, sinful act that understandably elicits anger. The Bible condemns domestic violence and God hates it (more on this in chapter 8). Deep in the hearts of victims, anger swells up against the perpetrator, their rage inflamed by suffering. Anger is a natural and even healthy response to domestic violence. While nearly all victims appropriately experience anger, most express it poorly or not at all.

It is likely that you have been discouraged from expressing your

anger. Most victims feel pressure from their families, society, or religion to ignore or suppress it. But suppression does not help anger to dissipate over time. Instead, it will turn into bitterness, hatred, and revengeful obsessions. In fact, unresolved or denied anger can become a destructive force in your life. Anger holds you hostage and leaves you vindictive, addicted, embittered, immoral, and unbelieving.

It is important to note that Scripture does not always describe anger as sin. God is angrier over the sin committed against you even more than you are. He is angry because what happened to you was evil and it harmed you. Certainly Scripture is clear that anger is a dangerous emotion, though it can be righteous (directed at sin) or it can be sinful (delighting in vindication). God is the only one who can remain perfect in His anger and never sin in His anger. But we can exhibit godly anger by participating in God's anger against injustice and sin. In this sense, you are not only *invited* to be angry at evil, you are *expected* to be angry. You are invited by God to cry out for Him to do what He has promised to do: destroy evil and remove everything that harms others and defames God's name.

Because vengeance is God's, you are free from the exhausting hamster wheel of vindictive behavior. Victims can trust God to make all wrongs right so they can get on with their lives and not fixate on bitterness and hatred. God's wrath is a source of positive hope for the victim. You know that God loves you and will destroy the evil that has harmed you. Because vengeance is God's, you don't have to be vengeful; you can love and forgive your enemy.

Receiving forgiveness and love from God through Christ is essential to understanding forgiveness. Because God forgave you for your sins, you are now free to forgive others. Jesus received God's anger and punishment so those guilty of cosmic treason would be forgiven. As sinners who have received mercy instead of wrath, we have the otherwise inexplicable capability simultaneously to hate wrong and to give love to those who do wrong. What God did for us becomes the power to change. God's one-way love toward us amid our sin undermines our

bitterness and can prompt forgiveness of those who sin against us.

It is important to be clear on this topic because abusers may cite Scripture to insist that their victims forgive them. A victim may then feel guilty if she cannot do so. Forgiveness, however, does not mean forgetting the abuse or pretending that it did not happen. Neither is possible, because sin has consequences and forgiveness does not remove those consequences. Forgiveness is *not* permission to repeat the abuse. Nor does it require restoring the relationship. As a matter of fact, it may be dangerous and life-threatening to restore the relationship. Rather, forgiveness means that the victim decides to let go of the experience in order for God to deal justly with her abuser. It is the decision to move on and refuse to tolerate abuse of any kind again.

DESPAIR

If left unaddressed, identity issues, shame, and anger may all compound in feelings of despair—a commonly reported symptom of domestic violence. Feeling that you lost something—whether it’s your innocence, youth, health, trust, confidence, or sense of safety—can lead to despair. For those who have experienced the evil of domestic violence, it’s likely that you’ve had an encounter with despair and depression.

Depression adds seemingly inescapable weight to the existential experience of despair. For some victims, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness come and go, while for others these feelings seem inescapable every day. When the feelings of powerlessness are internalized, self-hatred and self-pity intensify to the point of despair. Despair deadens our hearts to the hope that we will be rescued, redeemed, and relieved of suffering.

But there is hope. Rather than being simply a desire for a particular outcome that is uncertain, hope is characterized by certainty in the Bible. Hope is sure because God is behind the promise, and the hope you need right now borrows from God’s faithfulness in the past and anticipation of His faithfulness in the future. The basis you have for hope is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Of course, looking to Jesus' resurrection is a spiritual truth that is powerful to lift you out of your despair. But sometimes you will need practical help as well. In addition to this great spiritual hope, we also are blessed to live in a time when we can seek medical and psychiatric help. All of us need the eternal hope of the gospel, but for some of us, we may need to consider the efficacy of prescription medication, or meeting with a psychiatric professional as well.

If you need medical treatment or professional help for your depression, it is our hope that you will seek it. But either way, the truth of Jesus' resurrection stands true for you as well.

Because Jesus conquered death through the resurrection, death and evil done to you is not the end of your story. Because of Jesus' resurrection, you also can have hope. In being united to Christ, you too will conquer as you look through the eyes of faith to the one who has accomplished everything on your behalf through His death and resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus has also launched new creation and the coming of a new heavens and new earth where disgrace will be replaced by grace, anxiety will give way to peace, and despair will be banished. In the new creation God will be with us; He will bring peace and we will be perfected. Jesus is the first of that new creation. He has already given you new birth into that new creation and promises to complete it in you, making you gloriously, perfectly like Him. What about now? God has not only given us a sure hope but sent the person of His Holy Spirit to comfort us in the despair and isolation we face in the present.

Godly despair is the groan of the Holy Spirit, and while you may see no explanation for your pain, He knows there is an answer and lovingly communicates your pain to a sovereign God who listens. Your God is strong and He—not the evil done to you—will have the final say about you. That hope animates groans within ourselves (Rom. 8:23) that everything will someday be renewed. We will be delivered from all sin and misery. Every tear will be wiped away when evil is no more.

So we groan in pain because the pain is still painful. But we also groan in hope because we know what is to come. Hope is a positive

expectation for something in the future as opposed to despair that sees only pain and hardship. Biblically, hope has the power to encourage in the present because it is based on sure future expectations. As French philosopher Gabriel Marcel wrote, “Hope is a memory of the future.” This side of glory, we will not be fully redeemed and satisfied. But sorrow opens the heart to the desire for the hope of redemption to be fully realized.

WHAT GRACE HAS TO SAY TO YOU

Domestic violence is uniquely devastating precisely because it distorts the foundational realities of what it means to be human—the realities of our relationships. As we look to Scripture, we find domestic violence perverts relationships to a place where they are so far removed from the true way God intended relationships to be—filled with peace, love, and mutual serving. Yet domestic violence creates in the victim’s mind a tragic and perverse linkage between love, intimacy, sex, and shame that was never meant to be.

This is where grace has something to say. Trusting Jesus isn’t a faint hope in generic spiritual sentiments but is banking our hope and future on the real historical Jesus who lived, died, and rose from the dead. Grace is available because Jesus went through the valley of the shadow of death and rose from death. Jesus responds to victims’ pain and past. The gospel engages our life with all its pain, shame, rejection, lostness or bewilderment, sin, and death.

So now, to your pain, the gospel says, “You will be healed.” To your shame, the gospel says, “You can now come to God in confidence.” To your rejection, the gospel says, “You are accepted!” To your lostness, the gospel says, “You are found and I won’t ever let you go.” To your sin, the gospel says, “You are forgiven and God declares you pure and righteous.” To your death, the gospel says, “You were dead, but now you are alive.” The message of the gospel redeems what has been destroyed and applies grace to disgrace.

