Spousal Abuse

Part 2 of 2: What Does The Bible Say about Divorce and Redemption in Cases of Spousal Abuse?
with C. Gary Barnes, Darrell L. Bock, and Debby Wade
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**Darrell Bock:** Now we’re kind of working through a storyline here. The next move is if this is serious enough to kind of create a need for distance. I don’t know how else to say it. for space, something that sometimes churches are very, very hesitant to engage in. The illustration we just looked at is this woman’s going to the church. she’s looking for help. They’re not at all interested in giving her that space because they think the commitment to reconciliation requires that you remain apparently in the home. And yet that can be a very, very dangerous place to be and it doesn't create the space necessary that even if you’re going to work in a reconciliation direction, allow that to take place. So let’s talk about the need for space first and then talk about okay, if you need space, where might you go? So what about the need for space?

**Gary Barnes:** Yeah, we would always want to let people know that the calling for marriage does not mean to put yourself in harm’s way in marriage. So yes, God hates divorce but he also hates violence. He hates abuse. He hates control for self-serving purposes. And so if a person is ever at risk in their sense of safety in their own home then they need to have an option from that. Like we said, it could be a friend, could be a local shelter, see? There’s also a hotline if you’re, if you’re just feeling like it’s not safe to talk to anybody but you could call 800-799-SAFE. That’s a national hotline that will help a person who’s wondering sort through what’s safe and what’s not safe or what their immediate response might need to be in that moment. So I think that’s a really good thing for people to have that 800 number available.

**Darrell Bock:** Now some people would think, well I don't have a friend I can go to who I could ask to do this but that doesn't preclude the possibility of finding help. You’ve mentioned shelters a few times. Let’s talk about the role that shelters play. What, for someone who doesn't even know what a shelter is, what would that provide?

**Debby Wade:** We know the Union Gospel Mission, there’s the shelter here in Dallas and one in Fort Worth in this area. And you know it provides a shelter for women and children. They also have one for singles as well as those for families. They provide them a place to be during the day and at night and feed them meals. They provide care for the kids.
And then I know that there are also shelters that are for those specifically coming out of domestic violence, not just some are homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters and then there’s those that are just for the domestic violence. Also know there is a project going on right now for several apartments and all being built in Grapevine. It’s going to be called the Gate House. And it is for abused women and their children and they’re going to have a training program and everything for up to 2-1/2 years that will help them to re-stabilize and get balance back in life and equipped to go to work if they need to. So I know that they’re just in this area there are several places that are working together to provide for those in need.

**Gary Barnes:** I might add also Darrell for our listeners who are in the Dallas area, we have several of our counseling students who have interned and even gone on to work full time at the Genesis House in Dallas and I’ve done work with them as well. And so they are a great local resource.

**Darrell Bock:** Now what’s an indicator that space may be necessary? Is it the sense of not being safe in the home? Is it the level, the threat level becoming high enough that really, really is an indication that there just needs to be a cooling off?

**Gary Barnes:** Right. Well obviously any, any physical harm is okay, this is not safe, this is not appropriate. Just like the woman on the interview spoke of. If you could think of – if anybody else in my life was doing to me what my spouse was doing to me, would I allow that? Would that be okay? Would that – is there something wrong with that? Okay?

And so I think that’s a good guideline to ask yourself. But don’t just limit it to the physical. Think in terms of being controlled, whether it’s with the use of words, whether it’s a character assassinations or even ‘the look’ you know. So there’s a look that we all have that we give to someone when we are maybe angry or upset or frustrated with somebody. But that’s not the same as a look of I’m going to control you and if you don't do what I’m expecting you to do, things are going to get bad for you.

**Darrell Bock:** There’s a payback on the end of it.

**Debby Wade:** There’s a threat.
Darrell Bock: Yeah, yeah.

Debby Wade: There’s a threat in it.

Gary Barnes: Okay. All right well let’s listen to the next piece. I think it’s short on what’s called the battle.

Video

Darrell Bock: Okay now that pretty poignantly poses the dilemma. I go and share with someone in the hopes of getting help and instead what I get is resistance. I guess the natural question is what do you do then? You’ve made your effort to release the secret and it has flopped. Now what do you do?

Gary Barnes: You go up the chain.

Debby Wade: Right, right.

Gary Barnes: You hit a bad spot on the chain, don’t give up, don’t quit. So that – and this is where moving outside your circle sometimes may become necessary because some people live in a circle that’s so tight that there literally is, there may be one place to go but that may be at – you may only have one pitch. So then being, this is where the support groups that do exist that exist to pick up someone who doesn’t have support needs to be pursued. Is that fair?

Debby Wade: Right. Very much like this woman that I was just sharing that when she realized she was not getting the support that she needed from the staff at the church where she had been a member for years, she had to set outside of that and really got a safe place to go from a good friend and then sought out other counsel from others on what can I do to make sure that I’m safe and my girls are safe. And so I think certainly if you’re not being heard, be willing to find someone that will hear you. And I know that’s so easy for us to say that this is what they need to do when they’ve been so squelched and so broken that they feel like if somebody doesn't hear me that these people that I think that I can trust don’t hear me, their fear is that nobody will hear them. So I would give that encouragement.
Darrell Bock: Yeah in fact, in fact sometimes isn’t it true that what happens to a victim is that they tend to blame themselves for the situation that they’re in and so all that does is reinforce the attitude that they have that well maybe this really is, I mean this is bad but maybe I am really a ‘cause. So –

Gary Barnes: All the more reason to get a reality check from someone outside that can help you with that way of thinking.

Darrell Bock: Now, now let’s talk about I want to talk a little bit about churches that are put in this situation, particularly churches that might have a very strong stand on divorce. This is a hard move for churches to make because the reality is if you do advise a separation that oftentimes that is the first step towards a divorce. I think the statistics are there to say that that’s often what does happen, that oftentimes you don’t – you aren't able to pull it back together. So you’ve got that risk and I think the example I like to use, and I think I’ll get you to comment on is that sometimes you’re faced with two bad choices and the judgment to make is which choice is –

Gary Barnes: The greater good.

Darrell Bock: The greater good or which choice by opting not to act leads you in the worse situation. Is that a way to think about this? How should staffs think about this when this comes up?

Gary Barnes: You know I think of two things in response to that. Number one is we have to change our thinking about how God thinks about things because we are just thinking about the way think instead of the way God thinks. So if I’m thinking the ultimate thing here is divorce. That’s not how God’s thinking.

Yes, God hates divorce. That’s not his first choice. God’s made allowances for it out of the hardness of hearts. One person can’t do the work for two people to make a marriage work and if safety and sanctity of life is at risk, that’s a greater concern than divorce. And so I think we have to kind of say yes, we’re first and foremost for the marriage but we’re first and foremost for things that are even greater to the heart of God than that.
The other thing that I think the church could really do well on is to think in terms of the long term. This is a long-term need and if we can just make space for this to be addressed adequately, let’s not just say either you go back into the home and just put up with it or else you get divorce. You could have a long-term structured separation. See, when you look at the statistics on separations that lead to divorce, those are unstructured separations. And so with the right kinda supports around and each person and sometimes that separation might need to be where it’s unknown where the victim is just for their protection.

**Darrell Bock:** So they aren't chased down –

**Gary Barnes:** That’s right. That’s right.

**Darrell Bock:** And the control kicks in.

**Gary Barnes:** But I worked with one couple where that structured separation occurred over a two year time period and they actually were reconciled but it took that much time with each of them going through separate individual steps and stages before they could begin to have even structured contact while they were still separated. So that’s – we don't have to just think of those two options of oh, well you either have to go back in the house so go back in or divorce and we don't want you to divorce so just stick in the house and stick it out.

**Darrell Bock:** This is another place where if you’re talking about separation where the support of the church and the community at large is important if it exists because they can help really working with both partners in one way or another to try and take the time that’s necessary to let things settle down and also get a handle on what’s going on and then begin the process of trying to rebuild what’s been damaged. Is that –?

**Debby Wade:** And I think certainly for the men for churches for the men to come around and support the abuser in a way of making sure that he is going to be on a redemptive path and that he is going to be willing to seek out healing and to look at the internal issues. You know where’s the anger, where’s the fear, what’s the need of control about? And that you know believers come alongside him and walk with him and be willing to confront what is not okay behavior. What’s not appropriate behavior for a spouse?
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So that the reconciliation plan is one for both of them and the healing would have to take place for both of them. And then you know certainly we always hear what hurting people hurt people so part of it I would think would also be in willing for the abuser to be willing to look at what is the trauma or the pain in the past that he may be living in, still living with that causes him to need that kinda control and be abusive.

_Darrell Bock:_ Now here comes a strange question. I’ll acknowledge it’s strange before I start. Should the spouses seek the same counselor or different counselors or does it depend? It seems to me that the choice of support here is also important in how it works because sometimes I think you get two different counselors, sometimes you get in a situation where it’s like the two lawyers in a legal case where you got the counselor supporting one person and the other counselor advocating for another and I’m not sure that’s the healthiest situation. So how do you sort out the best way to pursue the counseling?

_Debby Wade:_ I would recommend two different counselors and a consentive release being signed by both parties for both counselors so that the communication can be between the counselors on staying on the same page, being able to validate what change is taking place. And then what I’ve done in cases like this periodically then the two counselors and the two parties, we all meet together and so that we’re working when we’re dealing with individual issues we’re dealing with their healing individually and then we come together, the four of us come together to work on the marital issues and what really has to be changed. Then both parties feels they have an advocate in the room and they have someone who’s there for them personally but believe that both are for reconciliation. And whether that reconciliation means for restoration of the marriage or whether it means that they’re reconciled that if it ends up in divorce it’s without bitterness and pursue continue abuse.

_Gary Barnes:_ It seems to me that’s an interesting situation ‘cause I can see where initially you might go to once counselor ‘cause that’s the person you know. But then the responsibility of the counselor I take it in that situation is to recommend you know, this is really better if each of you has your own person that you’re seeing. Is that often what happens?

_Darrell Bock:_ And it depends on where the problem is on the continuum.
**Gary Barnes:** Right, right.

**Debby Wade:** Right.

**Darrell Bock:** See, and there’s some cases where like what you were just describing, there’s so much that would have to happen before that could ever happen where people are coming together, maybe a year’s worth of work even. See so but the collaborative structured model would be the ideal thing and it may be the case that a lot of individual work would have to happen first before that joint work could happen.

**Gary Barnes:** Okay well we’re now to the last section of the video and so now we’re going to turn our attention to watching see how this wraps up.

**Video**

**Darrell Bock:** Okay, well that obviously puts another issue on the table and that is not only do we have a problem with divorce but now we got a problem we gotta go to court to get a divorce so that – I mean that’s two strikes against the person pursuing potentially a breakup of the marriage. What again, I think we’ve probably already answered this to a certain degree but it’s probably worth a reaffirming here. What process do you go through when you’ve tried everything, you’re at the end, the vow has been broken. It’s clear if the person goes back into the house they’re going to be at risk. There is no good conciliatory path to take.

**Gary Barnes:** That’s right.

**Darrell Bock:** What happens and how should communities do that?

**Gary Barnes:** Well you know I think biblically you just have to accept the truth that in this broken world with broken people one person can’t do the work for two people to have reconciliation occur. That’s a biblical concept. It requires two people. And so even though that would be very regrettable that it’s not able to happen it’s still the next greater good that you would be able to live a life of safety and dignity where you’re not living under control of another individual.
Darrell Bock: So and then the only way we have to do this is to go to court and get the divorce. I mean so –

Gary Barnes: Because you don't have two participating parties. So that’s the only recourse.

Darrell Bock: I mean there is, I mean if the person wants to disentangle themselves not just socially but legally then that really is the only option. So again, it’s not the best option but it’s a – but it sometimes is what we face and we have to sometimes face up to it and say this can’t be put back together. It’s regrettable but it’s the case.

Debby Wade: Oh I was just going to say I think that’s where we have to accept that I mean just some of life is so complicated. There’s not just this one answer that’s going to work for everybody or this one solution that is going to be the easiest solution. And where none of these solutions would be easy and there’s going to be a complexity that makes I think even us as believers have to step outside of our comfort zone in walking alongside people who are hurting in this way. But I think when it comes to we would never support someone going back into a situation where they are going to be harmed. And if there’s evidence such that change is not taking place we can’t support them in doing that. And so supporting them to make the wisest decision going forward for themselves on what they know they need to do for themselves, it will be the healthiest decision that they can do.

Darrell Bock: Gary you’re going to add something?

Gary Barnes: Yeah. And again we don't want to just jump to that as the immediate alternative.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Gary Barnes: See if we can allow space and time for the possibility of people to change over time as that would be the better approach. But even if there’s not that change over time for the person who is the victim and is following through with the divorce, that’s also something that is not outside of God’s redeeming work in that individual’s life. And so we want that person to be very much embraced by God’s redeeming work even following that bad situation.
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Darrell Bock: Okay well I think we’re down now to the last segment. Let’s hear the rest of the video.

Video

Darrell Bock: Well that’s pretty powerful to reflect on and think through. You know I personally find this particular topic the most difficult in terms of dealing with the exception passage in divorce. You know the two scenarios that the Bible mentions explicitly are sexual immorality, the Greek term is porne and the other is what’s called unbeliever desertion, that’s called the Pauline exception 1 Corinthians 7. And I often find myself wondering in all honesty whether a physical abuse doesn't come under a type of sexual immorality because of the abuse of the person that it represents. I’m curious as counselors what you think of that. That this, as you were saying earlier, this is such a fundamental violation of the person and of course that’s part of what sexual immorality also is driving at. It’s a violation of the vow in a profound kind of way. If this isn’t encompassed in those exceptions.

Gary Barnes: You know Darrell what I would think biblically on that is when you mentioned those two grounds for divorce, I don't really take from scripture anywhere where it says and these are the only two grounds. And so I would say yes, those two would be a factor and I don't really even have to think about how other factors might have to fit under one of those two categories. And so I think just out of the basic sanctity of life and the heart of God against violence I would say – and as she was saying on the videotape, and of course of all places within a covenant relationship that that one person should not be trapped into a situation like that.

Darrell Bock: Debby?

Debby Wade: To feel that they have no human rights in their own marriage. You know I certainly believe that if there psychological abuse and physical abuse, that typically what follows with that is also sexual abuse. And I just don't think at all that we can encourage somebody to stay in that or prevent them to get help by saying, “I’m sorry, neither one of our categories fall under what’s permitted in the Bible so you have to stay.” And I think that’s being able to interpret these things in scripture but also understanding the heart of God.
You know one of the things that strikes me about this discussion sometime about the nature and grounds for divorce is if you look at 1 Corinthians 7, Paul teaches with an awareness of what it is that Jesus taught. You know he even refers to this as my word, this is not the name of the Lord. Whatever it is that he knew that Jesus said gave him the comfort zone if I can say it that way, to talk about unbeliever desertion as a category even though it wasn't explicitly mentioned by Jesus in what he taught. So this is going in the direction that you’re suggesting that there’s something fundamental about what marriage is and what the partners are to bring to marriage that suggests that when we think about the fundamental abuse, not just must spousal abuse but the abuse of the marriage that that represents, that that does represent in some sense as a broken vow and that God’s heart in that situation wouldn’t be for the person to remain in a situation in which they are personally at risk.

Right.

Yeah.

So, well this has been a difficult topic to cover and it’s an important topic. I want to give you all each a chance to say kind of a final word so Gary, how would you?

Yeah, you know I would say a couple of things. This is a thing that grows with secrecy and so it’s a problem that we’re prone to not be aware of or to think about. And so I would say this is really worthy of the church’s attention. The other thing that I would really want to say is that this is not limited to a certain category of people. This is across all categories, rich, poor, whatever your background is. This is across all categories.

And so the third thing that I would want to say for the church is that this is also within the redemptive work of God, that change can happen. And it’s a very marvelous, wonderful thing to see the power of God’s Grace actually changing this kind of a problem. This is not just like a willpower behavior management plan. This is like a total transformation plan and that’s what God does in our lives. And so we need to always move with that kind of hope.
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Darrell Bock: And it will be an intensive exercise in many cases. It will involve a lot of investment and a lot of people to encourage and to support in such a way that opens the door for God to work and change people. Debby –

Debby Wade: Well certainly I would say to the church let’s make this a topic that we bring to the table and we’re willing to talk about. And to those who are listening that my question are they in abusive situation, they may be saying, well I’ve never been hit so I don’t know if I could call it physical abuse but yet they have many things in their home that are damaged or pets that are hurt. So property and pet abuse is also considered part of domestic abuse. Then certainly there can be the sexual abuse, the physical and or the emotional. But if one feels that they are in a controlling and abusive situation to reach out to someone to start with, first a good friend or a person on staff in a church that they trust or calling out to a counselor or a crisis line. Just start somewhere to see where they can get some help. And then you know we’ve talked about possibility of reconciliation or when it doesn't happen. There’s five years that I use a lot with clients whether I’m working with them individually and or with couples, what I see that God is able to do and we’ve got history of it and biblical accounts where he does it over and over again and he can in our lives, that he rebuilds, he reclaims, he redeems, he restores and he resurrects. And trusting how he can do that regardless of our situation, that those are four things that he’s committed to working on in our lives.

Darrell Bock: You know I was going to just wrap up but one other thought has come to me. What advice would you give to someone who hears from someone being abused? We didn't really cover that directly and I think it’s an important point because I suspect many of us may know people who find themselves in the situation and they’re – that’s kinda saying, okay, should I just be an ear or is there more left to do?

Gary Barnes: No, you need to be an advocate, not just an ear.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Gary Barnes: Because this person is isolated and needs support and they need very much to have somebody be an advocate for them.
Darrell Bock: And so that will mean what, going to bat for them, taking – what do you do with the confidentiality that a person may ask you to have about this? I could see getting boxed in if you will.

Gary Barnes: Confidentiality is always limited with the safety guideline. So if you're ever concerned about somebody being a danger to themself or others, see then that's a limit to confidentiality.

Darrell Bock: So then the next step is to go to someone who really is in a position to offer more help and support and see what you can do to rally that support around the person. Is that right?

Gary Barnes: Right yeah.

Darrell Bock: Okay.

Debby Wade: And I think sometime, you know with that listening ear we may hear something and we’re not certain what they were telling us, we have concern or question, be willing to go back to that person and say you know, the other day when we were talking you mentioned this. And I just really wanted to come back and see are you okay? Because I think sometime we will hear something and maybe shy away from it ‘cause we’re either scared to get involved or we think, “Oh I don't want to think that.” We semi-den you.

Darrell Bock: Or the other end of the spectrum might be well I don't want to be a gossip. I don't want to share something that really shouldn’t be shared.

Debby Wade: Right.

Darrell Bock: That’s another I guess limit or concern to have.

Debby Wade: But to come back to that person and say, “Are you okay? And if you’re not how can I help?”
Darrell Bock: Okay. Well I want to thank y’all for coming in and discussing this and we appreciate your joining us at the table today over a very, very serious topic, spousal abuse, not just domestic violence but spousal abuse and we hope this has been helpful to you as you think your way through what is something that often we don't talk about but we’ve brought it here because we think it’s very, very important to talk about. And we’ll welcome back, we hope to see you back at The Table soon.