



Does This Still Happen?

By Catherine Clark Kroeger

There is a joke in evangelical churches that it is easier to gain forgiveness after murdering one's mate than it is if a person divorces his or her spouse. Increasingly, this scenario is no longer a joke and the issues are more complex.

At PASCH, we get many appeals for help from the Christian community as well as from secular shelters and programs. One such appeal took us by surprise. Could we find a safe house for a woman who was suffering from severe depression triggered by intense abuse from her church? The population of her tiny New England town refused to speak to her (except to condemn her) for having sought a divorce from her adulterous and abusive husband. I will call the woman Rosemary (not her real name).

Over the twenty-three years of her marriage, the police had visited her home often, always bringing at least two cruisers to control the violence, and sometimes using mace and clubs to subdue the offender. After committing repeated assaults, her husband was adjudicated a "felon for life." This classification meant he was no longer permitted to vote, to

possess firearms, or to leave the country.

However, the pastor of her church continually badgered her to reconcile with her husband, and she was publicly condemned by the church leadership as having adopted action that was "unbiblical." Ostensibly the husband had been "converted," but his behavior did not change. None of his misconduct could be considered grounds for divorce because, the pastor said, all was now "under the blood." We wondered how much of Rosemary's blood would have to spill before her church would act to protect her. This man's "conversion" did not prevent the abusive blows from continuing to fall, nor the marriage vows from being violated.

After Rosemary's action, a lay leader from a neighboring church struck up a friendship with her, only to be warned that he must forfeit his position as an officer in the congregation if he continued to associate with her. Able to bear no more of the recriminations, and being at the point of suicide, she sought a church meeting to lay out the circumstances of her action. The church council simply refused to look at the thick pile of

police reports, the court documents, or a physician's report of the permanent disability resulting from the repeated injuries that she had sustained.

Nor would the council heed letters written by the victim's sister and her twenty-year-old daughter. Members of the council sat stony-faced as the daughter read a poignant appeal that declared in part:

You have heard only one side of the story and you have based your opinions and your advice on that. Well, here is my side of the story.

There are worse things than divorce—being beaten and having your children around to watch it, for one. You did not live my life. You did not grow up in my home—in the abuse, the mess, the disappointment, the brokenness, that I did. Do not sit there and tell me that God frowns upon divorce—that it is not godly for a man to leave his wife.

It is not godly for a man to beat his wife either, or to walk into church the next morning acting as though it never hap-

pened. If you think that my parents are better off sticking together and fighting through this, I am sorry, but you are ignorant and wrongly mistaken. No more!

For years, my mom has tried to make it work. But these last attacks have left her out of work and unable to support herself aside from the unemployment compensation she can receive from the state.

And nothing personal against the church, but I just think they're all a bunch of hypocrites there....To call yourselves Christians but yet turn right around and condemn and judge my mother for her decision to once and for all get herself out of the situation and get a divorce. The Bible says you have to take the stick out of your own eye before condemning that in others. Only God can judge us, so I find it funny that the church seems so set on running my mom down and sticking their noses in her busi-

ness to other churches. She is trying to heal and move on with her life, and I would greatly appreciate you letting her do so.

A sympathetic neighboring pastor who had attended the unfortunate church session wrote in protest:

Our concern to preserve the bonds of marriage and to discourage divorce does not mean that we should force the issue, when there are biblical grounds for divorce and any reconciliation could amount to a death sentence. I believe that you mean well, but I can't tell you how disappointed I am at the way that this has been handled. It all seems to play into the typical media caricature of evangelicals. None of you were willing to speak to those who witnessed what took place over the course of the marriage.

Overcrowded shelters told Rosemary that they did not have enough space for victims fleeing

abusive partners and could not accommodate a victim of church abuse. And so it was that we invited her to stay with us for awhile so she could be among Christians who would love and support her.

My strongest image is of her sitting on the back porch steps, devouring a Bible study about God's love and support of the abused and oppressed. These were indeed words of life, and ones she was anxious to read and share. In her eagerness to develop new patterns, she even assisted at a booth for abused women at the local county fair. She joyfully attended a missions night at a local church, and there she met others who had experienced similar trauma.

Incredibly, the sequel is that Rosemary has now formed a team and is planning a conference on Christian approaches to domestic abuse. As she seeks her own healing, it may well come as God uses her to bring healing to other abused women. Perhaps Rosemary's story will serve not as a punch line to a joke but as an agent of change in the body of Christ.✞



When Good Things Happen to Bad People

By Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner published *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. In this book he asks: If the universe was created and is governed by a good and loving God, why is there so much suffering and pain in it? The book is dedicated to the memory of his young son, Aaron, who died at age fourteen in 1977 of an incurable genetic disease.

Many people ask why bad things happen to good people. Far less asked, at least it appears to me, is why do *good* things happen to *bad* people? Why is it that things sometimes work out so well for some folks who are ignorant of, careless about, or even defiant of God, and so disappointingly for some people who love God and regard the Lord with the highest esteem? Wisdom Psalms 37, 49, and

73—as well as the Book of Job—are especially concerned with this problem that has puzzled people of faith through the centuries.

Psalm 73 begins with the orthodox statement of faith, “Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.” This, however, is followed by a big “but”: “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was

envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” The writer of this psalm was a man named Asaph, a leader of one of the temple choirs. He may not have been a wealthy man, but he had dedicated his life to serving God. In 1 Chronicles 25:1–2 we learn that “David and the officers of the army also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph....Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nathaniah, and Asarelah, sons of Asaph, under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied under the direction of the king.

Asaph was in a position of significant spiritual leadership in the temple, but like us he had experienced some difficulties and questioned the injustice of it all. In his experience, the wicked seemed to be healthy, attractive, prosperous, prideful, cruel in their speech and regard for others, openly defying God with no apparent cost or consequences whatsoever. When Asaph saw the unfairness of life, his faith was almost destroyed (verses 2–16). He was ready to throw up his hands and say, “Why bother with God? What’s the point? What difference does it make?” I suspect many of us have had moments like that when tragedy strikes, or we are knocked for a loop by unexpected news, or when we are struggling to get by while others who have no regard for God live long lives or get rich through greedy or unethical practices. Many of us have had moments when, like Asaph, we say, “C’mon God, if you’re there, why didn’t you do something to stop it or prevent it? If you’re there, why don’t you answer my prayers?”

The only thing that restrained Asaph from speaking out his doubts and giving up on God was his concern for the effect it would have on the faith of other people. Asaph was a leader of worship and a teacher, and he didn’t want his spiritual crisis and struggle to be the cause of others losing their faith.

It’s like the story of the small Eastern European town that was shaken and stunned by the news that one of its most respected citizens, Abraham the cobbler, had become an atheist. It was the sole topic of conversation in town. All said it had to be hearsay—they couldn’t believe it was true. No one had spoken directly to Abraham about it. It was still only a rumor, even though a shocking one.

On the following Sabbath, however, it became clear to everyone that for the first time in thirty years Abraham was not in his customary seat in the synagogue. Could he be sick? No, for when the service was over they found him walking quietly in the street, the very picture of health. All stared, and finally Yussel the tailor, with a sudden burst of brav-



ery, pushed forward and confronted the cobbler. “Abraham,” he cried, “there is a rumor you have become an atheist and you were not at the synagogue just now. Is this true? Are you indeed an atheist?” Abraham looked quietly at Yussel and turned away without saying a word. Everyone looked at him in consternation.

By the next day it was clear no work would get done in the town unless this matter was cleared up. So a delegation was appointed, with Yussel the tailor as its head. They went into the cobbler’s shop and Yussel said loudly, “Abraham, we must have an answer. You cannot leave matters as they are. Tell us, are you now an atheist?” Abraham replied, “Yes.” Astonished at the quick and unequivocal answer, Yussel said, “Then why didn’t you say so when I

asked you yesterday?” Abraham’s eyes grew wide with horror. “You wanted me to say I was an atheist on the Sabbath?”

Like Abraham in that story, there was still something inside Asaph that moved him to not want to cause other people’s faith to stumble. Searching for an answer to the problem of the success of the wicked was so much he was worn out by it. “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.” He just couldn’t find the answer, and here is the key: “Until I went into the sanctuary of God.” While worshiping God, Asaph received a new and deeper sense of God’s presence and power. He gained a longer-term perspective on the prosperity of the wicked that reminded him how temporary their success was, how quickly their fortunes could change, and how in a moment it could all be swept away.

Psalm 73 is valuable because it illustrates God’s openness to hearing our complaints when good things happen to bad people, as well as Asaph’s honesty in being able to admit it was stupid and ignorant of him to be envious of the wicked and to be feeling sorry for himself that God wasn’t rewarding him enough for being good or punishing others enough for being bad as he wanted. That is something we are wise to learn in our own experience—not to focus so much on why God doesn’t do something to someone else, but to focus on our relationship with the Lord in the midst of our struggles or situations.

We are to follow the example of Psalm 73. The psalmist realizes the most valuable thing we can have in life is something the wicked or bad folks lack—the Lord’s presence with us. None of us can take shelter in believing that we are all good and that there are people who are all bad. Romans 3:23 reminds us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”—all humanity is in the same boat. None of us is perfect; none of us

is without sin. When we focus on the wickedness or shortcomings of others to the neglect of our own relationship with the Lord, we are getting off the path. That is why the keyword in Psalm 73 is “nevertheless.”

“Nevertheless (even though I don’t understand it all, even though I have poured out my complaint), I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel.” There is a continuity and closeness of relationship for Asaph that is conveyed through wise counsel that is invaluable for him. The psalm begins in bitterness and estrangement with the problem of the success of the wicked and the disparity between faith and experience, which requires a new and deeper understanding of God. It ends with words of great devotion and faith.

The turning point in Psalm 73 is the great “nevertheless” that doesn’t turn us away from the problems of life, but turns us toward the world with all its disparities and unfairness with the confidence that God is still present and at work. It is good to be able to say and affirm,

Nevertheless, I am continually with you.... Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is

nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works.

The greatest thing we can have in life is a vital, real relationship with God that lasts forever, even after our body fails. While we may find it perplexing or even troubling, God is good to people both good and bad, sinner and saint. Jesus encourages us to an even higher spirituality than we see in Psalm 73 when he says in Matthew 5:43–48:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on

the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus wants us to pray for our enemies in a way far different from how we might want. He wants us to pray for their salvation and transformation, for them to develop a relationship with God so they can one day say with Asaph, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works.”

No matter what your circumstances or situation, I hope this can be your statement of faith as well—that though your flesh and your heart may fail, God is the strength of your heart, and that it is good for you to be near God because you have made the Lord God your refuge. ☞

Caring for the Weaker Sheep

By Catherine Clark Kroeger

Address given to pastors of the Russian immigrant community in West Springfield, Massachusetts

It is always good to be with those who love Jesus Christ and claim him as Lord and Savior. How humbling it is to stand before those who are giants in the faith. When I was very young and very new in the faith—back in the late 1930s—I heard of the witness of brave Russian Christians. One of the first Christian testimonials I read was about seven Russian evangelicals who went singing into heaven as they stood before a firing squad and professed Christ. Once in awhile we heard new

reports of believers undergoing great affliction, and I remember being told that Siberia was the most Christian place in the world.

Long ago, the Elder John wrote to seven churches, telling each, “I know your works,” and adding different commendations: “Your toil and your patient endurance, your tribulation and your poverty, your love and faith and service.” But in each case, there were matters in which they needed to improve. Of course, I do not need to tell you of the many sins harboring in the American church—you can see



that for yourselves! All of us need to look within our own faith communities and see if there are matters we need to address. The psalmist prayed, “Search me, O Lord, and see if there

be any wicked way in me” (Ps. 139:23–24). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews talks about “the sin that clings so closely us” (Heb. 12:1). And St. John wrote, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and His Word is not in us” (1 John 1:8). It is good to speak of the faith that Russian and American believers share, but sad that I must also speak of a deep sin we also share. Sadder yet, this sin lies in the very center of our Christian families, and we would like to conceal it or deny it.

Let us begin by considering the lives of the great families of the Bible. Long ago God chose out Abraham as the father of our faith, and then there was Isaac and Jacob and his twelve sons. From Judah arose the line of David and the promises of the Messiah who was to come from his seed. This was God’s plan to bring a Savior into the world—but think of the personal lives through whom our great Redeemer came. In these families there was murder, incest, adultery, and deception—cruelty, betrayal, and shame.

Why did not God—in his great wisdom—leave all those bad stories out of the Bible? This is the Word of God given to us by One who is faithful and just. God does not hesitate to put sinful attitudes and actions right out on the table, because then they can be dealt with and set right. Only think of Joseph’s brothers who sold him into slavery. Later they repented bitterly; and as Joseph tested them, they were given a chance to demonstrate their repentance and to live it out. In the end, they were forgiven, and the lives of the whole family of Jacob were saved. Think of Tamar who seduced her father-in-law Judah into impregnating her so that she could have a son to support her in her old age. Judah knew he had failed in his duty toward her and declared, “She is more righteous than I.” He confessed that he had not followed God’s command to provide her with a husband.

And Perez, the child whom he had fathered by Tamar, became an ancestor of the Messiah (Gen. 38:29; 46:12; Matt. 1:3). We might remember that King David bitterly grieved the death of the child who had been conceived by his adultery. He cried out to God, “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps. 51:4). After his repentance, there came from his union with Bathsheba a second son, Solomon, whose reign brought to Israel wisdom, strength, prosperity, and justice. Solomon, too, was an ancestor of the Messiah.

God’s way is not to conceal but to reveal what is wrong and to transform. It is about this that I wish to speak to you—about an evil that affects both your church and mine. It is the issue of abuse within godly Christian families. Much careful research has demonstrated that every faith community, every national and ethnic community, every economic and social class, every skin color, every geographic area knows this terrible scourge. All of us try to cover it up, ignore it, deny that it could happen in our midst. But that only makes it worse. Victims are ashamed to reveal what goes on within closed doors. Perpetrators sometime deny what has happened and sometimes confess the misdoing. Then they promise that it will never, never happen again, and we believe them without giving them a chance to prove their repentance. We must give these wrongdoers time to think over carefully what they have done. Think how long it took for the brothers of Joseph to demonstrate their repentance and to show a changed conduct. Think how long it took for David to recognize the evil he had done and how important was the role of Nathan the prophet. The Bible says that the Lord sent Nathan to David (2 Sam. 12:1–15), and he was faithful in declaring how the king had “utterly

scorned the Lord” (vs. 14). Yes, Nathan was faithful, for that is the task of the prophet.

Ezekiel, too, tells us that pastors and prophets are to defend the weak and rebuke those who use their strength wrongly:

Hear then, O shepherds, the word of the Lord! As I live—declares the Lord God: Because My flock has been a spoil—My flock has been a prey for all the wild beasts, for want of anyone to tend them, since My shepherds have not taken thought of My flock, for the shepherds tended themselves instead of tending the flock—hear indeed, O shepherds, the word of the Lord: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to deal with the shepherds! I will demand a reckoning of them for My flock. (Ez. 34:7–10)

God calls faithful pastors to defend the weak, to speak out against those who muddy another’s water or push and shoulder those who cannot defend themselves. The human sheep do not butt with horns but approach others with cruel hands and hard objects. Isaiah said, “You cannot strike one another with wicked fists as you do today and expect your prayers to be heard on high” (Isa. 58:4).

And sometimes abuse is dealt by sticks, knives, and guns. Sometimes there is pushing, slapping, and beating; and sometimes there are threats that terrify, even if no wounds are actually inflicted. There are words that hurt just as deeply. Sometimes there is neglect or refusal to provide food, clothing, or money; sometimes a refusal even to speak, a withholding of kindness and love. There are many forms of abuse, and all of them are wrong. God’s Word says so. Sometimes people argue that beating a wife is just part of the culture. That does not make it right in God’s eyes, and we are called not to conform to the

evils of the culture in which we live. God said, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 18:3–4).

There are many aspects of our American culture you should not wish to follow, and one of the worst is the calm way in which we accept the abuse of women. Usually those who suffer abuse are women, but sometimes they are men. Nevertheless we have a common evil, and as God’s people we must speak out.

Sometimes people say there is no abuse in the families of born-again, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled believers. That is far from the truth. The rate of abuse is equally high in the families of both believers and unbelievers because we have failed to proclaim the Word of God on this subject. The psalmist prayed, “By the word of your lips, I have avoided the ways of the violent” (Ps. 17:4). The Bible speaks of the need for the Word to be mixed with faith (Heb. 4:2). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to take the Scriptures and apply them to our hearts, but over and over again people tell me they don’t understand what the Bible has to say on this subject.

Proverbs tells us not to associate with the violent or to follow any of their ways (Prov. 3:31), and St. Paul writes that those who are violent must not become church leaders (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7).

There are many Scriptures condemning physical, emotional, mental, sexual, and spiritual abuse, but we have not proclaimed them. When Ezra read the Law to the people of Israel, priests stood by to explain it and to discuss what it meant in everyday living, how it could apply to their daily lives. Although it is the duty of a prophet to speak out against evil, we have not prepared our pastors well.

Only 8 percent of pastors say they are adequately prepared to deal with situations of domestic abuse in their congregations, and yet this is the issue that usually takes up most of a pastor’s counseling time.

What then can a pastor do? First of all, he can be fearless in proclaiming what the Word has to say. Many people will not like it, but the Bible says that the entrance of God’s Word gives light. The prophets of old were often very unpopular for the messages they brought. Sometimes laypeople tell us they did not know it was wrong

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to intimidate their wives. They can be taught, not only from the pulpit but also in Bible studies and prayer groups—even in the church parking lot! We can teach the flock to show compassion toward those who have been afflicted with abuse. Many times our reaction has been, “What did you do to provoke this treatment? Why don’t you go home and pray harder?” That lays yet another wound upon her. The victim does not need a scolding but a safe place to stay, food, clothing, kindness, and prayer support.

Now, of course, victims are not guiltless, but when another strikes, threatens, intimidates, scorns, mocks, or humiliates a family member, that is the fault of the abuser. Jesus said that even to insult another person or to call them stupid puts the speaker in danger of judgment (Matt. 5:22). It is important that Christians hold the evil-doer responsible. When there is a conflict in the home, we do not need to take one side or the other. We need to work for peace.

If the victim is in danger, it is important that arrangements be made for her and for the children. Often it is not safe for both the offender and the victim to remain under the same roof. Sometimes we think that a Christian should not call 911, but it brings help in dangerous situations. The Bible tells us that the police are God’s officers to work justice and to help you (Rom. 13:4). Actually, there are many services that can be accessed by calling 911. Sometimes pastors think they can handle the problem by talking with both husband and wife at the same time. This can be very dangerous if it is a situation of abuse. Only recently, a shooting took place at a couples counseling session in a church in Seattle. Often the victim is afraid to tell her side of the story because the perpetrator can become even angrier with her and even more dangerous. We should also note that it is very dangerous for a pastor to enter alone into a home where things have come to the boiling point. He should wait for an elder or a police officer to accompany him. If the woman needs to go into hiding, do not place her in the house of a relative or a good friend. The abuser can easily find her and may harm not only her but those who are sheltering her. Some pastors are fearful to place an abused woman in a community facility, but it is far better to place her temporarily in a safe place rather than to conduct her funeral.

The sad truth is that a great many women do die at the hands of their intimate partner—some fifteen hundred each year in America. There is much that pastor can do to save lives, to teach their congregations to care for the wounded and the oppressed, to help wrongdoers into new paths of righteousness, and to speak the peace that Jesus has promised us. In the days of the Bible, God dealt with families by exposing the evil and by bringing his people to new patterns of conduct. His mercy and justice remain unchanged forever. ❧

PASCH 2011 Conference
Emerging from the Shadows: The Church and Justice

May 12–15, 2011
Columbia Bible College
Abbotsford (Vancouver) British Columbia, Canada

PASCH's fifth conference will be a venue for the discussion of strategies, research projects, best practices, legal processes, and therapeutic initiatives related to creating peace and safety in the Christian home, Christian responses to wife abuse, and other forms of domestic violence. Come and join with other victim/survivors, researchers, theologians, therapists, pastors, social activists, community advocates, shelter workers, and faith community members as we network to respond to the needs of victims of domestic violence and to promote healthy, peaceful family living. Although a wide range of paper topics are encouraged, we especially solicit those concerned with the following:

- Faith-based batterer intervention programs;
- The impact of domestic violence on children;
- Therapeutic strategies for facilitating hope and healing for victims;
- Biblical mandate for peace and safety in the home;
- Safety planning;
- Pastoral leadership in understanding and addressing violence in families of faith;
- Justice system responses to domestic violence;
- Pastoral counseling for victims and those who act violently;
- Narratives of pain and despair of victims;
- Bridge building between sacred and secular agencies;
- Pragmatic strategies for assisting families in crisis;
- Liturgy and resources for individuals and congregations.

Paper proposals (title and 200-word abstract) are due by October 31, 2010. Send proposals to: Dr. Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Program Chair, 7 Duke Street, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada E3A 4J4 (506-453-7826); fisher.townsend@unb.ca.

Speakers

- Eva Sanderson, Zambian activist and former president of Pan African Christian Women's Association
- Juan Carlos Arean, director of Family Violence Prevention Fund, will speak on "The Effects of Love on Children"
- Nancy Nason-Clark, author of *The Battered Wife*, will report on her research on faith-based batterer intervention
- Russ Ervin Funk, author of *Reaching Men: Strategies for Preventing Sexist Attitudes, Behaviours and Violence*
- Natalie Collins, director of UK Faith and Freedom program, and catalyst in the British coalition RESTORED
- Catherine Clark Kroeger, founding president of CBE, president of PASCH, coeditor of *Women, Abuse and the Bible*

Modestly priced accommodation is available at Columbia Bible College, and there is a nearby motel for those who wish to stay off campus (rooms about \$26/night double occupancy; food about \$40/day for three meals and snack).

Registration fee: still to be determined (limited scholarships will be available).

Nearby airports: Bellingham and Seattle in Washington, and Vancouver, Canada. Abbotsford International Airport, closer yet, is a short one-hour flight from Calgary, Alberta, Canada with several flights each day.

For more information: e-mail wgoerzen@telus.net or telephone 604-850-4851.



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