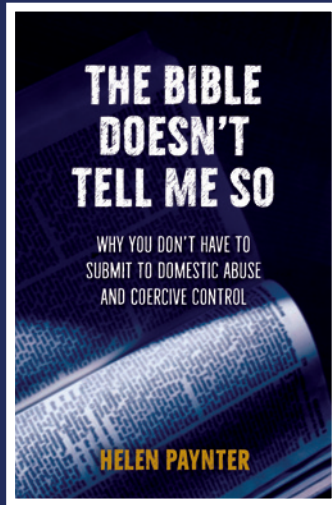


YOUR VALUE, WHICH NOTHING CAN DIMINISH



HELEN PAYNTER

‘He constantly belittled me. He told me I was ugly, stupid, a bad mother.’

EXTRACT

Dear reader,

In 2018 I received an email from a woman who had recently left her husband after enduring several decades of domestic abuse and coercive control. She wrote to me because I had been speaking publicly about the Bible in connection to the sexual abuse of women, and she had lots of questions for me because of the way her husband had quoted the Bible to her. Her email opened my eyes to something I'd never realised before – in Christian homes the Bible is sometimes used by abusers to manipulate their partners into putting up with violence and coercion. This is utterly horrible and is a complete abuse of scripture.

That email was the trigger for me to write a book called *The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So: Why you don't have to submit to domestic abuse and coercive control*. It's coming out in October 2020. It is addressed to women in Christian homes who are experiencing domestic abuse from their husbands or partners. Domestic abuse takes many patterns, but this is the most common one in homes where the Bible is being used in the way I described above.

As part of my research for the book I learnt quite a lot about how abusers operate. I listened to the stories of many women who had experienced a range of abuse and coercive control. And so, ever since the lockdown began, about a month ago as I write this, I have been deeply concerned about those for whom home is not a safe place. Because right now, abusers have much more opportunity to control and hurt people that they live with. For a good discussion of this, see mrsglw.wordpress.com.

If you live with an abuser, I've been praying for you since the start of the lockdown. I've been watching with concern the figures about the rise in reports of domestic abuse. I'm also aware that these figures are just the tip of the iceberg, and that it may be some months before we get a true sense of the scale of the problem in these days.

Maybe it was an answer to my prayers, because the publishers, BRF, have generously agreed to put one of the chapters out early in response to the current crisis. It's a chapter entitled 'You are of immense value', and I hope that it might be one little piece of the jigsaw for you as you wrestle with the horrible situation you find yourself in. I can only imagine what it feels like. Danger outside the house, danger within.

It's encouraging to read that the UK government is taking this seriously. On 11 April 2020 they announced additional funding for domestic abuse charities and a big awareness campaign that is kicking off as I write these words.

What this means is this: *you are not alone*. You do not have to put up with this. There are people who can help you, and if you need to leave, there are places you can go – with your children, if you have them. It is perfectly acceptable (more than acceptable) to leave your home for this reason.

But there are some important things that you need to think about, right now.

- First, it is likely that your abuser will be tracking your online activity. It may be dangerous for you if he discovers that you have been reading this. You can learn how to cover your tracks online at [womensaid.org.uk/cover-your-tracks-online](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/cover-your-tracks-online)
- Second, if what I have been saying is making sense to you, you need to be very cautious before you make any changes. A sudden alteration in your behaviour or even in your attitude could be dangerous. You are the expert on your situation. You know how you've been keeping yourself safe up till now. Be careful if you

decide to change your behaviour. First, take time to build your knowledge and understanding.

- Third, leaving an abuser can be a dangerous moment, and is something that needs to be thought about very carefully. Make a plan. Take money, phone and charger, and important legal documents with you if you are able. Know where you are planning to go in the first instance. You can get more detailed advice about this from ownmylifecourse.org/safetyplan, or I recommend Natalie Collin's book *Out of Control*.

You can find your local domestic abuse service at womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory.

Alternatively, call the National Domestic Violence Helpline: nationaldahelpline.org.uk, 0808 200 0247.

If you are concerned about your behaviour towards a partner, you can contact the Respect perpetrator helpline: respectphonenumber.org.uk 0808 802 4040.

I'm not an expert in domestic abuse, though I know a lot more about it than I did two years ago. But I do know quite a bit about the Bible. And I can, with 100% confidence, assure you of these things:

- 1 God loves you and you are utterly precious in his sight.
- 2 God is not on the side of anyone who is hurting you.
- 3 The Bible provides no support for anyone who would try to stop you getting to safety.
- 4 Anyone who tells you anything different is either mistaken or is lying to you.

I hope that this excerpt from my book (taken from chapter 8, 'You are of immense value') will help you believe this. May God give you wisdom, may you find a place of safety, and may you know the shepherd who leads us through the darkest valley (Psalm 23:4).

With my love and prayers,

Helen Paynter

Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence,
Bristol Baptist College

csbvbristol.org.uk

8

You are of immense value

‘He constantly belittled me. He told me I was ugly, stupid, a bad mother.’¹

In her brilliant book on domestic abuse, *Out of Control*, Natalie Collins lists eight classic abuse tactics. Very, very briefly, they are: isolating, humiliating, threatening, exhausting the victim, brainwashing (also known as gaslighting), use of overt violence, making demands and love-bombing (the use of extreme flattery, excessive gifts and so on). All of these tactics are ways of the abuser achieving and maintaining control. It is striking how many of them involve belittling and humiliating her. For example, Collins writes:

The Humiliator might compare his partner unfavourably to other women, sexually or otherwise, pointing out how other women are better wives, lovers, mothers. He tells her they are prettier, sexier, kinder, thinner, more intellectual, less annoying... He makes her beg for his love or forgiveness, possibly using Bible passages to justify himself. Calling her a Jezebel, he tells her she is sinful like Eve.²

But what an abuser will not tell you is that the Bible is enormously positive about your value, your dignity and your worth. Let’s have a look at what the Bible actually says.

You are made in the image of God

We’ve already looked at some of ways in which Genesis 1–3 might have been weaponised against you. In this section I want

us to consider one of the wonderful, positive things that it says – something you should revel in and take to heart.

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them.

GENESIS 1:26–28 (ESV)

Perhaps you are thinking, ‘That’s all about men – how does it show my value as a woman?’

If you read this in some more modern or looser translations (e.g. the New Living Translation or the Good News Translation), it will speak of God making ‘human beings’ rather than ‘man’. I’ve deliberately kept the ‘man’ language here so that we can see that, even in this more literal form, it does not exclude women. In other words, it’s not just modern versions smoothing it out for us – we women were in the mind of the author (and therefore of God) all along. Let me show you how.

★ ★ ★

There are a couple of clues that tell us that women are absolutely included here. First, the word translated ‘man’ is *adam* (which later is used as a personal name – Adam). The best translation of this word is ‘human’. There is a very common Hebrew word for a male human (*ish*), and if our writer had wanted to indicate that only males are being referred to, he could have used this word instead.

The second thing to notice is the poetic structure that is being used. Hebrew poetry uses a form called ‘parallelism’. If you’ve spent much time reading the Psalms, you’ll have noticed it. In the most common form of parallelism, the two half lines say more or less the same thing twice. For example, in Psalm 51:4, the writer says of God:

You are right in your verdict
and you are justified when you judge

The two halves of the verse mirror one another. We might loosely say that

You are right = you are justified

and

in your verdict = when you judge

In a similar way, we have a parallelism in the Genesis verses we looked at earlier.

In the image of God he created him
Male and female he created them.

By the same logic, we see that the poet is matching ‘male and female’ with the ‘image of God’. God created humankind in his image: both male *and* female. Neither sex has the monopoly on being image-bearers.

* * *

What is this ‘image of God’ all about?

It is a beautiful, rich idea – far bigger and deeper and lovelier than most people realise.

In the very ancient world, when this was written, ‘image of God’ would have reminded the people of an idol in a temple. In the ancient world, *every* pagan temple had the statue of its god inside. The people believed that the god would act through the idol. His image didn’t just represent him, but it somehow mediated the god’s power.

But the Hebrew temple did not have an idol. In fact, the making of idols was strictly forbidden in the ten commandments. Why?

Because God was *already represented* within the great temple of the universe – by Adam and Eve. By male and female, made in his image. By you and me. No carved statue can come close to us as the living, breathing representatives of his glory and mediators of his blessing. This is saying something incredible about the value and dignity of human life, female and male.

Sisters, we are made in the image of God. We are living, breathing representatives of his glory, and mediators of his blessing to the world.

★ ★ ★

The other idea which the ancient audience would think of when they heard ‘image’ is that of a king setting up a statue. You can go to the British Museum, or to a hundred other places around the world, and find carved statues of kings. Just think of the great Egyptian statues of the pharaohs. Kings have always replicated their image – they still do today. Statues, coins, stamps, paintings – it’s a way of asserting their authority. Where the statue stood, the king governed. It represented his royal sovereignty.

In a similar way, the human vocation to be the image of God is about us bringing God’s authority to bear. It is about us ruling the world as God’s vice-regents.

This is our purpose as humans – our vocation to do God’s work in the world, to represent God to the world, to govern the world with divine authority and in God’s good way. Yes, the role of governance is given to both men and women. Note again the plural language of verse 26: ‘Let *them* have dominion.’

That includes you and me, sisters. An abuser doesn’t want you to know this, but God does.

* * *

As Lucy Peppiatt says in *Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women* (another book you should definitely have on your bookshelf):

If man and woman have their origins in the being of God, then woman is not other to God but *intrinsically connected* to his being and image.³

God’s heart is to bind your wounds and restore your dignity

There’s one more cluster of passages that I’d like to draw your attention to at this point. We begin with the book of the prophet Isaiah, the continuation of the passage Jesus read at the synagogue in Nazareth when he was setting out the manifesto for his ministry.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour
and the day of vengeance of our God...

ISAIAH 61:1–2

The prophet is speaking about the ‘job description’ of the faithful servant of God – a role, of course, perfectly filled by Jesus (though when Jesus read it aloud, he omitted the last of the lines above). This job description is all about healing and restoration: recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. It’s a wonderful statement of God’s purposes for us – his purposes of blessing.

But the prophet continues, and the next part is equally beautiful, though less well-known.

... to comfort all who mourn,
 and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty
 instead of ashes,
 the oil of joy
 instead of mourning,
 and a garment of praise
 instead of a spirit of despair.
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,
 a planting of the Lord
 for the display of his splendour.

ISAIAH 61:2–3

Now, in the original context, these words are addressed to Judah, a nation that has been ravaged by war. The book of Lamentations describes the nation’s suffering in powerful, first person, *female* poetry:

How lonely sits the city
 that once was full of people!
 How like a widow she has become,
 she that was great among the nations...
 She weeps bitterly in the night,
 with tears on her cheeks.

LAMENTATIONS 1:1–2 (NRSV)

And then, in the most extraordinary, tender language, the Lamentor goes on to grieve for the violation of the city, which he describes in terms of sexual violence and utter desolation.

Enemies have stretched out their hands
 over all her precious things;
 she has even seen the nations
 invade her sanctuary...
 Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
 Look and see
 if there is any sorrow like my sorrow...
 the Lord handed me over
 to those whom I cannot withstand...
 the Lord has trodden as in a wine press
 the virgin daughter Judah...
 For these things I weep;
 my eyes flow with tears;
 Zion stretches out her hands,
 but there is no one to comfort her.

LAMENTATIONS 1:10, 12, 14–17 (NRSV)

It is to this violated people, into this situation of utter desolation, that Isaiah speaks the divine words of comfort:

Comfort, comfort my people,
 says your God.
 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

ISAIAH 40:1–2

And the comfort is still being expressed in Isaiah 61, in the words we just read.

... to comfort all who mourn,
 and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty
 instead of ashes,

the oil of joy
instead of mourning.

This is the mission of the servant of God. It was Jesus' mission; it is the church's mission. And it expresses God's love and tenderness to the bruised and the broken, the violated and the victimised.

But Isaiah is not done yet. The prophet warms to his theme. (Really, I'm struggling to choose which excerpts to share with you – it's all wonderful!) In the next chapter, we read these words:

The nations will see your vindication,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.
You will be a crown of splendour in the Lord's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah ['my delight is in her']
and your land Beulah ['married']
for the Lord will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.
As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.

ISAIAH 62:2-5

This does not exclude men. But do not forget this. Jerusalem was visualised as a woman who had been broken and raped, whom God tenderly restored, bound up and rejoiced over like a bride. A royal diadem in the hand of God.

This is God's desire for you.

But what about sin?

In this chapter, we have looked at female dignity and value in the sight of God. But you might have doubts about this. You might be thinking: What about sin? What about my brokenness? What about all the times I've let God, or other people, down? Aren't I just a... [*insert whatever horrible word the abuser has called you*]?

Let's take a look at this.

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners. You know that, I guess. That's why we need a Saviour. But there are four things I'd like to show you from the Bible.

1 Not all sin is the same

Most of us have been told this from time to time: 'All sin is equally black before God.' Maybe your abuser has told you this, to minimise his crimes and maximise any wrongs you have done.

It's just not true.

Yes, the Bible tells us that before the holiness of God we are all sinners. We are all in need of the saving work of Jesus Christ. But does it say that all sin is equal? Absolutely not.

Take Jesus' comments about the sin against the Holy Spirit, for example (Mark 3:22-30). This is clearly much worse than other sins. Or take Paul's self-description as being 'the worst of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15). How could he be chief among sinners if all sin is the same? The apostle John divides sins into those that 'lead to death' and those that don't (1 John 5:16-17).

If you want more evidence, look at the way that Jesus rages against the abuse of 'little ones' (Matthew 18:6-7) or his fury at the Pharisees who 'shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces'

(Matthew 23:13). Compare these with the gentle way he addressed the woman taken in adultery: ‘Neither do I condemn you... Go now and leave your life of sin’ (John 8:11).

Some sins are worse than others, and causing harm to the vulnerable is up there in the top rank.

2 You are forgiven

Perhaps the biblical truth about universal sinfulness has been used to make you feel worthless. Perhaps the abuser has used it to taunt you, humiliate you and diminish you. Perhaps he has dredged up things from the past that you wish could be forgotten. If that is your situation, know this: if you are a Christian, *God has utterly forgiven you.*

Corrie ten Boom was a woman who knew a bit about forgiveness. Her book *The Hiding Place* is an extraordinary story of a family’s courageous faithfulness to God during the Nazi occupation of Holland. She said this:

When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever... God then places a sign out there that says, ‘NO FISHING’.⁴

She’s absolutely right. The apostle Paul says the same thing, using the metaphor of a courtroom:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... If God is for us, who is against us?...Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?

ROMANS 8: 1, 31, 33–34 (NRSV)

If God has declared you forgiven, *nobody* has the right to condemn you. Nobody has the right to contradict God.

And, if you are reading this and wondering if this forgiveness and grace could apply to you, the answer is yes! Could *you* be included in that massive ocean of God's grace and forgiveness? Most certainly. If you have never put yourself into the loving hands of God, he is holding them out to you today. You don't need to be good enough. You don't need to *be* anything. Jesus said:

Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

JOHN 6:37

3 Jesus died for you

For those with low self-esteem and those who have been systematically blamed and ridiculed, even this wonderful truth could feel heavy. 'Jesus died for me. Does that mean I am responsible for Jesus' death?' Is this something else to blame ourselves for?

The Bible never uses this as a stick to beat us with. Anyone who says, 'Your sins were so bad that they killed Jesus,' is misusing scripture and forgetting their own sinfulness.

It is just the opposite. Jesus' willing death is a reflection of his love for you and of your value in his sight. Jesus said:

God loved the world *so much* that he gave his only Son.

JOHN 3:16 (GNT)

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

JOHN 15:13

If you still doubt that you are precious to God, I hope that the willing death of Jesus to make you part of his family can persuade you that you are indeed loved by God.

4 The cross is the remedy for it all

While we're on the subject of the cross, I'm going to touch very briefly on something that has inspired millions of pages of writing. Here, I'm going to give it just a few lines.

The cross is the remedy for your sin and for my sin. We touched on that a few moments ago. But the cross is also sometimes described as a battle victory. Do you remember this passage in Colossians?

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

COLOSSIANS 2:13-15

The language of 'powers and authorities' that Paul uses here refers to spiritual forces that seek to cause harm and disruption. While there is much debate about the idea of a 'personal devil', it's not hard to believe that evil exists – that there are forces and powers and structures that cause and perpetuate dreadful things.

They are defeated at the cross.

* * *

The Cross provide the remedy for it all.

It's not just about your forgiveness. It's about your healing, too.

It's not just about what you have done. It's about what has been done to you.

It all finds its healing at the cross.

At the cross, the forces of evil find themselves under judgement. They are condemned. At the cross they are defeated. They are paraded in humiliation, the way that a conquering Roman general would parade his conquered enemies through the streets of Rome. Oh, I wish we could see the full outworking of that right now, and we are not told why God makes us wait. But it is still true. Here, in the willing self-sacrifice of the Son of God, is the healing for all the pain of the world. For all *your* pain.

The cross is a measure of how much God loves you, and it is a measure of what lengths he will go to in order to eradicate the forces of evil.

Because you are so very precious in his sight.

Notes

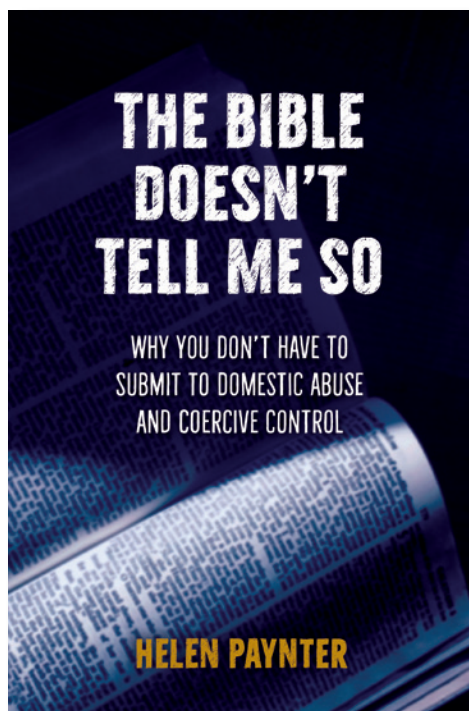
- 1 Quoted in Lesley Orr Macdonald, *Out of the Shadows: Christianity and violence against women in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 2001), p. 20.
- 2 Natalie Collins, *Out of Control: Couples, conflict and the capacity for change* (London: SPCK, 2019), p.34.
- 3 Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), p. 22.
- 4 Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (Christian Literature Crusade, 1974), p. 55.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers, © 2001 Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked GNT are taken from the Good News Translation in Today's English Version – Second Edition Copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.



Available: 23 October 2020

A **10% discount** is available on pre-orders
from 1 September until 22 October –
use discount code **TELLMESO10**

Want to be reminded when this book becomes available?

[Join our mailing list](#)

Helen Paynter's book *The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So* on domestic violence is publishing October 2020. One of the many tragic results of the coronavirus pandemic is the intensification of domestic abuse. This sampler is an extract from the book for people, and in particular women, who find themselves experiencing abuse at home. This chapter explores the negative traits that abuse victims have come to believe about themselves as a result of humiliation and belittling. While acknowledging these feelings, the author discusses what it is to be made in the image of God and what the Bible says about dignity, value and worth.

Church leaders and those involved in pastoral and safeguarding care will also find this sampler useful when talking with women who are experiencing abuse.



Helen Paynter is director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence. A Baptist minister and biblical specialist, she has published at popular and scholarly levels, including *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today?* (2019) for BRF. She speaks nationally and internationally about the interpretation of biblical violence and the abuse of the Bible to promote violence.



brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship is a Registered Charity (233280)