

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME Claude and Patricia walked through my door. It was a Tuesday. It was cold and raining. A swirl of pain, confusion, and anger entered the door alongside them. You could see it. You could feel it.

They had been married almost four years, none of them easy. The previous night had been especially difficult. In Claude's words, "it was our typical fight," beginning when he had initiated sexual intimacy and she recoiled. Claude had sighed and stomped away, feeling angry, rejected, and wronged. Patricia had retreated to a shell of bitterness and shame. While the minutes passed, Claude sat in their living room, wondering why he had married Patricia and why marriage to her was so disappointing. In their bedroom a few paces away, Patricia wondered why he demanded so much of her and had so little respect for her suffering.

The silence was broken by his accusations against her. He returned to the bedroom with a single question: "What's wrong with you?" The words cut deep. After a long pause, his other questions followed: "Why are you so selfish?" and "Don't you care about me or our marriage?" Patricia perceived no choice but to defend herself and offer a few accusations of her own: "Nothing is wrong with me . . . you're the problem . . . you don't care about me or what I have been through . . . you just want sex!" Her words cut deep, too. The situation escalated into shouting before Claude retreated to a spare bedroom for the night, slamming doors along the way.

The scene was not unfamiliar to them. It may be somewhat familiar to you, too, or to those you love. At first glance it just seemed like a big fight, but beneath the surface raged an ocean of shame, bitterness, and despair. There was a world of painful

memories, confusion, and dishonor that they had never thought to bring before God and face together through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The suffering that Patricia had experienced and to which she now felt enslaved was physical and sexual abuse from her childhood. According to Patricia, it was “always in the background of our marriage.” Her experiences of abuse subtly influenced the way in which she saw God, herself, and her husband. She didn’t like the realities of her past, but tried to live with them as best she could. Claude didn’t like the realities of her past, either, and wanted them to fade away quietly. He wanted the past to stay in the past. Neither Claude nor Patricia thought God had anything profound or transformative to say about their situation.

GOOD NEWS IN A BROKEN WORLD

None of us can escape the brokenness of our world. We are sinful, hurting people surrounded by other sinful, hurting people in a universe groaning under the curse of sin. The reality of physical and sexual abuse in our world provides a blatant and painful proof of this brokenness. If we look and listen carefully, we see and hear of abuses and assaults everywhere. Some of us have experienced these horrors firsthand. Some of us know loved ones and dear friends who have suffered under cruelties unspeakable. What are we to think and do? What does the gospel have to say to us when we are victims of evil? How do we love and help men and women who have suffered under various forms of abuse?

I have wrestled with these questions for years. Perhaps you have as well. Abuse stirs up all kinds of questions: “How do I face and understand the abuses I have suffered in the past?” “Where was God, and why did he allow it?” “What am I to think of him . . . of myself . . . of the pain?” “Was it

God's will for me to be abused?" "Did my abuse grieve and anger him?" "By not stopping it, was he a part of it?" "How am I supposed to believe that God loves me if, according to his sovereign purpose, he ordained for me to be treated with such brutality?" I think the list of doubts and wonderings could go on for pages.

These are a few of the questions that we are interested in exploring throughout this booklet. In no way do I propose to have all the answers. I do believe, however, that God knows all the answers and has shared some of those answers with us. He has spoken to us in his Word. The answers that Scripture offers are not easy to digest, but they are available. God comforts the afflicted through his Word. The gospel speaks into our worst nightmares. The beauty and light of the gospel often shines most brilliantly through the darkest and most distressing surroundings. Present-day evils and afflictions can, by the grace of God, help us to taste and see the glory of Christ.

"He delivers the afflicted in their affliction, and opens their ear in time of oppression" (Job 36:15). The ways and words of the Lord do not always take the form we expect, but they always deliver at the proper time. The God of all grace opens our eyes and ears to see and hear whatever comfort and hope we require in the moments or seasons when we require them. I think we should be glad for this.

The stories, realities, and truths of the Scripture are often not very clean and tidy. I think we should be glad for this, too. After all, real life on earth can be very unclean and untidy. The lives unfolding in the pages of God's story can be brutally messy and deeply disturbing, just like our own. The world that God sees and documents in the Bible runs full of sin and strife, just like the world we live in today. He describes the realities of human life with rugged honesty. He refuses to make it tame. He helps us to see the world just the way it is.