



**Bible Studies**

# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Material to help us reflect on the heart of God in  
response to Domestic Abuse





At first glance, an assumption could be made that the Bible says little about domestic abuse. However, although such terms and language are not found among its pages, biblical stories still illustrate the concept. Mary Donovan Turner says that even a casual read through Scripture demonstrates ‘that violence between family members and towards women and children is “part and parcel” of the story of our ancestors.’<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that because these stories embarrass and bring discomfort that often they are omitted from lectionaries and preaching plans. The stories remain unspoken and unheard, creating an assumption that the bible speaks little of violence or abuse within the family. The unspoken nature of these passages in turn, fuels the unspoken reality of domestic abuse. The embarrassment and discomfort we feel at hearing the real stories, often means that many suffer in silence and shame.

The following studies are to help us discern the heart of God when it comes to domestic abuse. As we look to some biblical examples, we want to acknowledge the very different context that they come from, but trace in them the response of God to one that is suffering. As we do this, we want to examine our own attitudes and responses to those who bravely share their story of abuse and pray that we may be people of safety and love to those who need it most. These three studies are only a glimpse of both the biblical story and the reality of domestic abuse. The invitation to you, and indeed the encouragement, is that you continue to study, learn, and wrestle with Scripture as you seek to be a witness of God in this world. Our prayer in this journey is that we would see a change in the church’s response to domestic abuse, and that we would become a place of safety where victims can feel secure to journey well to become a survivor.

This area of discussion is sensitive. If you feel triggered by anything you read, please speak to someone. Contact your minister or group leader or use one of the contact numbers at the back of this booklet.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Donovan Turner, ‘Lenten Light: Domestic Violence and Preaching’, *Journal for Preachers*, 30 no.2 (Lent 2007), p.23.

# STUDY 1:

## Abram & Sarai



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In Genesis 12 we are introduced to the character of Abram (soon to be called Abraham) and his wife Sarai (soon to be called Sarah). Genesis traces for us that Abram was a descendent of Shem, the son of Noah, and at the beginning of chapter 12, we hear God call Abram to leave his father's land and go to a land that God was calling him too. There is a promise, or covenant, made between God and Abram that declares incredible blessing of a great nation. So, Abram packs up and heads off following a promise and taking his wife and nephew with him. Abraham has many qualities that we can both admire and learn from; however, he also made some questionable choices.



**READ:** Gen 12:10-20 (NRSV)

*Now there was a famine in the land. So, Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So, Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.*



### QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Abram ask Sarai to pretend to be his sister?
2. Why did Sarai obey such a request?
3. What was God's response to this pretence?

# STUDY 1:

## Abram & Sarai



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In this story, we see Abram trying to save his own skin at the expense of his wife. This is not the only time that he acts this way. If we glance forward to Genesis 20, we read again that Abraham asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister and she is once again taken away to be the ownership of another man. Abram is concerned for his own well-being, however, shows little concern for his wife. Her safety, dignity and purity are compromised for the protection of her husband, and indeed for his wealth. In Genesis 12, Abram is rewarded well for giving his wife away to Pharaoh.

In these accounts, Sarai is treated as the property of her husband. She has no voice to express objection, rather she is to exercise an obedience to the direction of her husband. Such patriarchy is a common thread through biblical stories and often women are referred to as being lesser than men, therefore reducing their status to that of property. Often, conclusions have been drawn that this was God's attitude towards women also. However, examining the intervention of God in these biblical stories might challenge such a conclusion.

What is interesting in these two accounts is the involvement of God. Pharaoh's house is inflicted with plagues (Gen. 12:17) and King Abimelech is warned in a dream that he will die because of Sarah (Gen. 20:3). These actions are suggestive of a God who is protective over the vulnerable woman and seeking to free her from bondage.

Due to God's intervention, Sarai is returned to Abram and restored in her status as wife. There is a protectiveness and rescue shown to Sarai by God that is not shown to her by her own husband. He does not leave her in shame or risk, but he provides freedom and restores dignity.



**READ:** Margaret's Story (Sourced from Women's Aid)

*Margaret is a woman who went to church every week with her husband. They had been married in that same church over 40 years ago. Their children had been brought up attending Sunday school and youth organisations. Her husband was seen as an upstanding member of the community and active in the life of the church. Margaret's husband on a regular basis abused his wife in the bedroom and she believed that she had to obey her husband because he continually quoted scripture at her telling her so. When he hit her, he did it on parts of her body that no one could see, and if they were at times visible, she would stay in the house until they had healed.*

# STUDY 1:

## Abram & Sarai



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*One day Margaret went out to put something in the bin outside and got talking to her neighbour. They talked for about 20 mins, when she stepped back into the house, she realised that she had 10 missed calls from her husband. She tried calling him back, but he didn't answer. He arrived home later and started to quiz her about where she had been and who she was talking too without his permission, she tried to explain. Margaret knew what was coming but couldn't get away, she tried to get to the bathroom to lock herself in. That evening Margaret's arm was broken, and she received stitches in a nasty gash on her head from 'falling down the stairs.' This was something she could not hide. Friends came to visit, her pastor came to visit, all asking what had happened. She wanted to explain, but she was scared, scared not only of her husband, but also of the shame she felt, and she was so frightened that she wasn't going to be believed and that she would be judged. On the outside her husband was seen as a good man. She felt that it was her fault, that she was in the wrong, she needed to be a better wife, that she had got what she deserved. She felt she had no choice; she had to forgive him and give him a second chance.*



### QUESTIONS:

1. Where would God's heart be in this circumstance?

2. How might you support and encourage Margaret?



### PRAYER:

In silence, we pause, as we acknowledge all those, who like Margaret are living in a home that is not safe. We ask God for his protection, for his provision, and for his courage.

### GRACIOUS GOD,

You created each of us in Your image and breathed life into us, a life You want us to live abundantly. We ask You to free those living with abuse physically, mentally, or spiritually. May they be freed from their oppression to walk in peace and enjoy a life full of Your blessings. Amen.

## STUDY 2: Abram, Sarai & Hagar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

For this second study we remain with Abraham and Sarah, but we add Hagar to the family unit. Hagar was an Egyptian slave girl who was in the household of Abram & Sarai, and a 'possession' at Sarai's disposal. Understanding the dynamics of households in that age is very different than how we understand what households look like today, however, take a read at what happens.



**READ:** Gen 16:1-10 (NRSV)

*Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.*

*The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."*



### QUESTIONS:

1. What are the power dynamics in this household?

2. Who do you think is most vulnerable? Why?

3. Who do you think is most in the wrong? Why?

## STUDY 2: Abram, Sarai & Hagar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

4. How do you understand God's response?

Neither Abram nor Sarai act in a way that they should be proud of. Sarai, taking matters into her own hands, offers her slave girl to become a wife. However, jealousy sees her exercise abuse within this new family unit. Abram, following his wife's instructions, does not afford to Hagar the respect or protection she should now deserve as a wife. As a part of Abram's household, Hagar has been used and abused to provide a son, and even when that son is born, her status and value remains dismissed. If you look to Genesis 21, you read that when Sarah's son Isaac is born, the need for both Hagar and her son, Ishmael, ceases, and they are sent away. Abraham does not hold to his obligations of fatherhood and, from this point on, there is no mention of any connection he may have had with this son.

The abuse within this family network is troublesome. Understanding God's instructions to Hagar and Abraham can also cause us tension as we try to understand God's revelation of himself to a nation through Abraham. However, in God's instructions to Hagar to return, there is a guarantee of provision. Hagar had no way to provide for herself as a pregnant woman, outside the household of Abram. If we look then to Gen 16:13, we read that Hagar names God, El Roi, which means The God who sees me. For her, this encounter with God left her feeling seen and known, and indeed provided for, under a promise to greatly multiply her offspring.

Despite Hagar's pregnancy being outside the promise that God made with Abram, God still provided and cared for her. She was not cast aside from his presence like she had been by Abram and Sarai. Likewise, when we read of Hagar and Ishmael being sent away under Sarah's instructions in Gen 21, we once again see God speak to Hagar and provide for her and continue to speak over Ishmael a promise to be a great nation. Gen 21:20 says, 'God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.' Once again, we see God advocating and providing for the one most vulnerable in this story. We see his protection amid the abuse in this family unit.

## STUDY 2: Abram, Sarai & Hagar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS



**READ:** Michael's Story (Sourced from ManKind Initiative)

*Michael was married to his wife for six years. The emotional abuse started first, and Michael was rarely allowed to go anywhere by himself. When at work, his wife would constantly phone him throughout the day. When he tried to leave, she emotionally blackmailed him by overdosing on tablets. The first time she assaulted him, she stabbed him viciously. The second time, she followed him around the house punching him in the head, hitting him with a pint glass. It was ferocious and Michael feared for his life. The most shocking attack happened on their wedding night. She beat him, kicking and punching Michael repeatedly, when he tried to leave, she threatened to kill herself. Michael was once again attacked after his honeymoon because the scars from her attack had ruined their honeymoon photos. Michael kept thinking that things would get better. He feared for his own life, but he also feared for hers. Eventually, she was convicted of assault and issued with a restraining order. Michael has been left with a lot of fear, and the journey of recovery before him is a lengthy one.*



### QUESTIONS

1. Where would God's heart be in this circumstance?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How might you support and encourage Michael?



### PRAYER:

In silence, we pause, as we acknowledge all those, who like Michael are journeying in recovery from both fear and trauma. We ask God for his healing, for his strength and for his peace.

### COMPASSIONATE GOD,

Protect all those who suffer, or witness, abuse at the hands of one they love. Bring them to a safe place where they can begin to heal. Restore their minds to trust and their hearts to love. Surround them with your protection. Amen.




## STUDY 3: Judah & Tamar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In this third study we look to a descendent of Abraham and Isaac, namely Judah. This story is found amid the story of Joseph who is sold into slavery by his brothers and carried off as a slave to Egypt (an example of familial domestic abuse perhaps!). Judah is a son of Jacob, who is the son of Isaac, son of Abraham. To understand this story, in light of domestic abuse, we must understand the law around marriage. For example, if a husband died then the widow would be passed on to the next male in the family. It would be so that the widow might be able to conceive a son who would bear the inheritance of the deceased man. Although this action of being handed on like a piece of property will sit uncomfortably with us in today's context, the heart of this law lay in the protection of the widow, who would have no way to provide or support herself.

 **READ:** Gen 38:6-26 (NRSV)

*Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So, Tamar went to live in her father's house.*

*In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He went over to her at the roadside, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So, he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she got up and went away and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.*

## STUDY 3: Judah & Tamar



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*When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. He asked the townspeople, "Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here." So, he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'" Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."*

*About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover, she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.*



### QUESTIONS:

1. How were the actions of Judah's sons abusive?

2. How was Judah being abusive towards Tamar?

3. What do you make of Tamar's actions?

Tamar is left at the mercy of many abusive men. Their actions are unjust, controlling and denigrating, and Tamar is facing destitution because of their selfish and abusive acts. If she is not able to bear a son, she has no livelihood or status, and being sent away to her father's household as a widow is like facing a life of doom with no prospects or hope to that young woman's life. She is totally at the mercy of the controlling behaviour of these men.

## STUDY 3: Judah & Tamar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

*Tamar takes matters into her own hands when she realises that Judah is not going to keep to his word and provide for her. Her actions are deceptive, yet are focused on justice, which Judah himself realises when he discovers her deception. Her actions are incredibly risky, and she places herself in harm. However, in the context of that age, for her to not take the risk, meant her life was over.*

*So, where is God's intervention in this story? Firstly, we see that God was protective over Tamar in how he dealt with Judah's sons. He saw the injustice and wrong that was being done against her, and Judah's sons were punished because of it. Secondly, we see that Tamar is blessed to conceive, and at the end of Gen 38 it records that she has given birth to twins. Such a birth redeems and restores her to status and sees provision for her guaranteed.*

*That is not the last we hear of Tamar either. If we cast our eyes forward to Matthew 1:3 we see Tamar's name recorded in the genealogy of Jesus. One of only four women named in the lineage of Jesus. Such an honour placed on this courageous woman, who did not accept that a story of controlling abuse would be her legacy.*

*This story presents another picture of a God who protects the vulnerable and brings justice to those who are oppressed.*



**READ:** Christine's Story (Sourced from Women's Aid)

*Christine is 23 years old. She believed that the reason why her partner hit her was because he had one too many drinks and didn't know what he was doing, he wasn't in control of his actions. And besides he had a really stressful job in IT and needed a drink to relax every weekend. He didn't really mean it when he hit her, he wasn't responsible, it was the alcohol that made him out of control.*

*Her support worker listened carefully, then presented Christine with some questions:*

*When he was out having a few drinks, did he ever hit the bar tender serving him? Did he hit any of his friends he was with? Did he hit the doorman on the way out? Did he hit the taxi driver? Did he hit the girl walking the dog on his street when he got out of the taxi?*

*So, he was in control of his actions when he was with all those people, yet when he closes the door and comes home to you, he is out of control?*

*This man is not out of control. He is in control of his actions, and he chooses to hit you.*

## STUDY 3: Judah & Tamar



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS



### QUESTIONS:

1. Where would God's heart be in this circumstance?

2. How might you support and encourage Christine?



### PRAYER:

In silence, we pause, as we acknowledge all those, who like Christine are trapped in a web of lies and blame. We ask God for his wisdom, for his courage and for his provision.

### LOVING GOD,

Be with all those who are in doubt about their relationships. Give them clarity of mind and peaceful hearts so they can make good decisions guided by Your love. Grant them courage and protection in the decisions they make. Challenge those who cause harm to others, call them to true repentance and change. Amen.



### SOME ADDITIONAL STORIES TO CONSIDER:

Here are some other stories of violence and abuse that you might want to take time to look at. As you sit with the discomfort of these stories, look to see where you see God at work within them. Don't be afraid to ask the difficult questions of the text, and to turn those questions into prayers for protection and provision for those today who face such trauma as their reality.

- Genesis 34 – The rape of Dinah
- Judges 19 – The Levite's Concubine
- 2 Samuel 13 – Amnon and Tamar

### A FINAL THOUGHT:

The violence and abuse that we read in Scripture can give us much cause for wrestling. There are a number of stories that cause us to ask difficult questions as we consider language used around God that appears to incite violence and particularly violence against women. It has been our tendency to shy away from such questions, to push aside the discomfort in favour of a simpler and more convenient message.

However, we face a reality in which our shying away has allowed for scripture to be used inappropriately, and to be used as a weapon to further beat a victim with. It is imperative that we wrestle with difficult questions so that we truly find the heart of God among each chapter and verse. In finding such heart, we can then seek to speak freedom over victims, and advocate and encourage until those victims become survivors.

Taking Scripture as a whole, we see illustrated a God who is just and holy and good. A God who proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, who binds up the broken-hearted and brings freedom to the oppressed. (Is 61). This fundamental nature of God speaks truth into our response to domestic abuse which must be understood as destructive, unjust and corrupting to our understanding of community, marriage and family.

As God's people, we must truly love one another as Christ has loved us. In such love, we must protect, support, provide and advocate for those experiencing domestic abuse.

### GUIDING LORD,

Give us the courage and strength to stand against abuse. Make us witnesses to Your true and abundant love. Amen.



**Anyone who feels in immediate danger  
should call 999.**

IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

**Police Service in NI 101**

**Nexus**

(Domestic & Sexual Abuse 24-hour helpline)

0808 802 1414

**Women's Aid Federation for NI**

028 90249041

**Men's Advisory Project**

028 90241929 (Belfast)

028 71160001 (Foyle)

**Samaritans**

116 123

**Lifeline**

0808 808 8000

IN REPUBLIC OF IRELAND:

**An Garda Síochána 112**

**Women's Aid (24hr Helpline)**

1800 341 900

**Men's Development Network**

1800 816 588

**Men's Aid Ireland**

(01) 554 6811

**Samaritans**

116 123

**Mental Health Ireland**

(01)284 1166