

## “Is This Love?”

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Isaiah 53:3-6

Romans 5:1-5

I have a friend – I’ll call her Lydia. She is one of those larger than life people – one of those people that you’re just drawn to. She’s been full of energy ever since she was a kid. Her mother had to sign her up for every class imaginable because otherwise she bounced off the walls. Which means, by the time I met her, she had several black belts, designed costumes, danced professionally, and other wild and wonderful things. But a lot changed for her. She started seeing this guy and he was becoming more and more abusive. Once, after a particularly terrible incident, we had a long talk in a diner. All revved up, but with no clue how she would make it, she left him. I told her that I would be there for her – for anything that she needed, any time day or night. But that weekend, she went back to him and I didn’t see her for months.

She had moved into his house and followed him to clubs and parties, but she wasn’t allowed anything else. One day out of the blue, their roommate called me worried. He said she had started blacking out and fainting and that the EMTs said there was nothing medically wrong with her. It happened so many times that they started to recognize her and wouldn’t take her to the hospital any more. The roommate figured that I could tell him what to do to fix it. He was desperate, but he didn’t challenge the abuse either.

Even though she had rejected my calls for months, I reached out to her again and she agreed to meet with me. She had to sneak out of the house in the morning while he was hungover and we walked to a downtown park just a few blocks from their house. She didn’t look like Lydia anymore. She was somehow...smaller. She couldn’t look me in the eyes and there was something about her – she seemed to be trying to hide. We sat together in that park for several hours, sometimes not speaking. But I told her that I loved her; I told her that I missed her. She

blankly told me stories about the abuse she was facing on a daily basis, but in between, she told me how he was not such a bad guy and how he was stressed because he lost his job. She worried about him and told me that she loved him even though she often didn't want to. I listened to her pain and her sorrow. I held her hand and in between stories I asked her, "Is this what love looks like?" I must have asked her that question a dozen times – not angrily, not as an accusation, but to try to help her to think of her life in a different way even if she wasn't ready to leave.

One of the most common questions that people ask about domestic violence is: why do victims stay with the abuser? This is a complex question, but a very important one if we want to understand how to work for justice with sensitivity and love. Relationships with abusers don't start out with abuse at full tilt. Like most on a first date, they present a very different face than what lies beneath. They can seem sensitive, kind, romantic, and devastatingly charming. They tend to start whirlwind romances where the couple finds themselves spending all their time together. And apart from occasional questionable words or deeds, they seem like any other relationship with good patches and bad patches. Some abusers even hold off until after marriage to show their true colors.

But there are some red flags even early on. Abusers might be controlling – telling their partners what to wear or who they're allowed to talk to or where they should go. They can be very jealous and act easily hurt. But each of these things can be interpreted as romantic – jealousy proves he loves me; she likes how I look in this and wants me to be beautiful. Even insults can seem like a bridge to something good "you look ugly in that; why not wear what I got you?" These insults that can be explained away are only a bridge to far more intense emotional abuse.

The easiest way to understand how things go from relatively minor insults to abuse is to think of an abuser's tactics as being like brainwashing. They shift the blame for anything and everything to their partner – including their own angry moods and violence. In arguments, they deny any wrongdoing, they lie about what really happened, they twist things into an attack on their partner and others, they accuse others of their own faults. They generalize and exaggerate; they yell and shout over and interrupt their partners. They shame and humiliate their partners to break down their self-esteem and their sense of self. Then, they paint the world as a fearful place where their partner could never survive without them. However terrible the abuse seems, victims generally spend all of their energy just surviving day to day. The thought of a different life – a better life seems impossible. On top of all that, abusers typically isolate their partners from their friends and family. They want to shut out any voice or influence other than their own so that they can maintain control.

In the course of the relationship, abusers will lash out with abuse, but then follows a honeymoon period. They apologize, they swear they'll change, they act with some measure of kindness just long enough to convince their partner to stay. Then the tension rises once more. The victim learns to try to accommodate – try to do anything to prevent a moment of abuse or to get it over with quickly. And the longer the relationship lasts, the quicker this cycle turns. Victims have hope that that honeymoon person will stick around – that the change will be real this time. Victims often feel like their abuser really does need them and they dismiss their injuries as nothing, just as the abuser does. But they do truly feel trapped. In some cases the victim may have the means or the support system to get out, but in others they are financially dependent on the abuser. Or they may fear for the well-being and safety of children if they try to leave.

Victims of domestic violence generally believe that it's their fault. Having been brainwashed, they believe that if they had been a perfect partner, they would not have suffered from a violent outburst. Often, they believe that the only way to survive is to be more loving, more nurturing, to make more excuses for the violence.

And here, in the safety of this church – in this sanctuary – we can ask, “is this love?” Is this the love that G-d calls us to when we read, “love your neighbor”? No. No. Absolutely not. But there are those who read our scriptures, who identify as Christians, who would pick out Bible verses to tell victims that G-d ordered their suffering. Some Christians would read the passage from Isaiah, which tells of the suffering servant and proclaim that if we are to follow Jesus then we will bear injuries just like he did. Or from Romans, “We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Some would read that passage and say that it means that suffering is normal or even a good thing that strengthens our faith.

This is our book. It belongs to all of us and it is filled with beautiful truths that propel us into the light and goodness in this world. Romans 5 goes on to tell us, “G-d's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” G-d's love is in our hearts and any who seek to block it out do not follow G-d.

I tell you now, G-d does not require suffering. Suffering is not something we seek out or inflict on others; if we are doing that, we are not serving G-d – we are serving a twisted master, indeed. Because when Paul talks about suffering – when Jesus talks about suffering, they are usually talking about persecutions in the early church. They are talking about what we suffer as a result of spreading the gospel – of working in Jesus' name. We remember our history – in the early church, believers were beaten and stoned, tortured, imprisoned, and killed just for being

Christian and spreading the faith of their own hearts to others. In John 16:33, Jesus says, “In the world you face persecution...” “in me you...have peace.” G-d rescues from affliction – G-d rescued Joseph from slavery and Egypt from famine. Faith helps us to endure, faith helps us find strength and peace. Our hope is in G-d and G-d is greater than any abuser, any power, any evil in this world.

Domestic violence does not spread the gospel; it does not share G-d’s love; it does not lift up or build up, or illuminate anything true. In this book, we don’t just find ethical rules of what to do and what not to do. We don’t just find stories of heroes and villains of faith. We also find passion and love to help guide our romantic selves. Many throughout history have looked at the Song of Songs and said, “why is this even part of scripture?” And there’s a lot in this book that, well, might have made more sense in the romantic poetry of the day, but I think that this book is crucial. If we do not love well – if we do not know what love is then how can our houses be homes? And so, we find in our verses for today a beautiful poem of what romantic love really is. Our love poet tells us, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.” Love is a sign of faithfulness, one heart connected intimately to another heart. But not just hidden deep in our chests – it’s a seal on our arms, too. Love is proclaimed publicly, with joy in the presence of the beloved. Because, “love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.” Love does not cause death; love does not wear away at the essence of the beloved. Real love, inspired by G-d, is unconquerable, it’s enduring, it feeds both parties. This isn’t to say that real love never changes – yes, we change and we grow together; sometimes we grow apart. But real love is built on trust, a desire to see the best for the beloved, a celebration of all victories, and support through all difficulties.

When Lucus and I got married, we found another verse from Song of Songs that we liked a good deal. “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” *Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*. It is here, on our wedding bands as a seal upon our fingers. We belong to one another – equally. We are responsible to G-d and to one another, and it is part of our calling to respect and honor our calling as partners to one another.

When abusers redefine love for their victims, one of the most supportive things we can do for them is to ask them, “is this what love looks like?” Because it’s okay if you can’t leave just yet. It’s okay if any other life seems impossible right now. All you need to know is that I love you; G-d loves you; and that will be constant and true no matter what you decide. As 1 John reminds us, “in this is love, not that we loved G-d, but that G-d loved us.” And our song of scripture rings out, “Many waters cannot quench love, and rivers cannot sweep it away.” Love abides and real love is stronger than anything. Amen.

#### Motivating Factors

- Suffering for spreading the gospel/for Jesus’ name (early church and beyond)
- Suffering at the end times
- Suffer because Jesus died, but will have joy when he returns
- Marriage divides allegiance to G-d
- Correcting errors in the early church

#### Theology

- “In the world you face persecution; in me you find peace”
- Suffering can’t separate us from the love of G-d in Christ
- G-d rescues from affliction (Joseph, Egypt)
- Faith will give you endurance through suffering
- Those who do evil will suffer
- Pure religion is care for orphans and widows in distress

#### On account of the word

- Mt 13:21 (Seed sown)
- Mk 4:17 (Seed sown)

#### Because of my name

- Mt 24:9 (During the end times)
- 2 Cor 1:4 (Christ consoles us in all our affliction)

### General

- Mt 24:21 (end times)
- Mt 24:29 (end times)
- Mk 13:19 (end times)
- Mk 13:24 (end times)
- John 16:33 (in the world you face persecution; in me you find peace)
- Rom 8:35 (can't separate us from the love of G-d in Christ)
- Rom 12:12 (be patient in suffering)
- Rev 7:14 (those who came out of the great ordeal, washed in the blood of the lamb)

### Childbirth

- Jn 16:21 (pain at Jesus' leaving; joy when he returns)

### Slavery

- Acts 7:10 (G-d rescued Joseph from affliction)

### Famine

- Acts 7:11 (G-d rescued Egypt from)

### Suffering/Persecution of Early Church

- Acts 11:19 (persecution after Stephen)
- Acts 14:22 (many persecutions to enter the kingdom of G-d)
- Acts 20:23 (cities persecute Paul)
- 2 Cor 1:8 (affliction in Asia)
- 2 Cor 4:17 (momentary affliction prepares us for glory)
- 2 Cor 6:4 (afflicted as servants of G-d; beatings, imprisonment, etc.)
- 2 Cor 7:4 (pride over Corinthian church helps Paul withstand affliction)
- 2 Cor 8:2 (churches of Macedonia have joy and give generously despite affliction and poverty)
- Eph 3:13 (church in Ephesus should not lose heart because of Paul's sufferings in jail)
- Phil 1:17 (false teachers increase Paul's sufferings in jail)
- Phil 4:14 (Paul thanks Philippians for sharing in his sufferings in jail)
- Col 1:24 (Paul rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the Colossian church)
- 1 Thes 1:6 (Paul praises Thessalonian church for following Christ despite persecutions)
- 1 Thes 3:3 (Paul sent Timothy when he worried about the church enduring persecutions)
- 1 Thes 3:7 (Paul encouraged about Thessalonians endurance through faith)
- 2 Thes 1:4 (Paul encouraged about Thessalonians endurance through faith)
- Heb 10:33 (calls to mind persecution when newly converted)
- Rev 1:9 (John shares the persecution)
- Rev 2:9 (G-d knows the affliction of the church in Smyrna)
- Rev 2:10 (G-d knows the affliction of the church in Smyrna; do not fear what you will suffer)

### Those who Do Evil

- Rom 2:9 (will suffer)

- 2 Thes 1:6 (those who afflict will be afflicted)
- Rev 2:22 (those who consort with Jezebel will suffer affliction)

### Positive from Suffering

- Rom 5:3 (produces hope ultimately)

### Marriage

- 1 Cor 7:28 (marriage produces worldly troubles; divided allegiance to G-d)

### Spiritual Growth

- 2 Cor 2:4 (Paul is in distress over confronting the Corinthian church of its missteps)
- 2 Cor 8:13 (Paul does not want to put undue pressure on the Corinthian church)

### Vulnerable

- Jas 1:27 (pure religion is care for orphans and widows in their distress)

Word bank: affliction, tribulation, anguish, suffering, pressure