



Nothing New Under The Sun

There was a time when I did not think much, if any about the word *abuse* or the reality it represents. It's not that I had never experienced or seen it. I just didn't understand what abuse was. Somewhere along the way, about 20 years ago, I became aware and intrigued. I began to use the word abuse, and I began to explore the meaning behind the word.

What is abuse? Why do we hear so much about abuse these days? Is it real? If it's such a big problem, why doesn't the Bible say more about it? Seems like every time you turn around these days, someone is accusing someone else of being abusive. Does using the word "abuse" provide any real insight or direction, or is it more misleading than helpful?

The word abuse has no inherent meaning. Words communicate the meanings that we assign to them. That being said, I have come to believe that there is a meaning; a distinct and identifiable reality that does exist and is best described in this day and age by the word abuse. I believe the reality behind the word abuse has existed throughout time though the words assigned to it have varied. I believe God addresses the issue of abuse frequently in His word. I also believe that gaining a solid understanding of the realities associated with abuse can give us much insight and direction in dealing with our own relationships and in ministering to others.

In Ecclesiastes 1:9, Solomon states, "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun." A little further on in 4:1 he describes one of those things "under the sun" that was not new. "Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold, I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them."



God speaks in His word approximately 150 times (NASB) about oppression. He speaks frequently, as well, about other topics such as affliction, domination, the treacherous, the weak, the needy, and the crushed in spirit. These are the words used in the Bible that relate to our present day words: abuse, abuser, victim and trauma. Both our modern words and the words used in the scriptures identify a dynamic that goes beyond isolated, unrelated acts of mistreatment. Inherent, not in the word, but in the essence of abuse (oppression) is the dynamic of a power imbalance and the misuse of power to control and take advantage of vulnerable, less powerful people. God's teachings and admonitions regarding oppression and affliction imply or describe outright this power imbalance and misuse of power. Those with legitimate power (the wealthy, the strong, the leaders and the shepherds of Israel) are exhorted to protect the weak and needy, and to look out for the needs of the widow, the orphan, and the alien. Those with usurped or illegitimate power (fools, violent men, the arrogant, treacherous, and deceitful) are identified in God's word (especially in Psalms and Proverbs) as destructive and evil. We are warned repeatedly to avoid such people.

The Hebrew word most often translated oppression ('āshaq) literally means to oppress, get deceitfully or do violence. The editors of TWOT (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament; Harris, Archer and Waltke) say this about 'āshaq: "The verbal root is concerned with acts of abuse of power

or authority, the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in station. Important synonyms in the semantic range include: to deprive, take by force, to be crushed, to be violent, torment, ill-treat, abuse, and devastate.”

Affliction is probably the biblical word most related to the effects of abuse and is also used to describe those who are victims of abuse (the afflicted). The Hebrew word most often translated afflicted ('ānâ) has several meanings. It can be used to describe God’s humbling of sinners to prompt repentance. It can also be used to describe personal inner pain associated with contrition. It has a third meaning that relates to our discussion of abuse. This meaning has to do with forcing submission, punishing, and inflicting pain. It is recognized in the scriptures and highlighted in TWOT that the afflicted are those who are for some reason, powerless. They are “financially dependent, and socially defenseless”. They are the weak, the needy, the poor, the unfortunate.

As one begins to appreciate the realities behind the words, the issue of abuse emerges not as a marginal topic but rather as a major theme of the scriptures. It seems good and right for those of us who desire to have the heart and mind of God, to seek to become wise about an issue that God talked so much about. I challenge you to join me in reading the scriptures, open to seeing how often there is described an imbalance of power, a misuse of power, powerless victims, and the experience of being over-powered. Notice when you read through the Psalms, the groupings of characteristics of those who oppress (proud, wicked, boastful, greedy, haughty, deceitful and cursing), those who are oppressed (afflicted, innocent, unfortunate, humbled and orphaned), and the experience of being oppressed (caught, in anguish, terrified). Notice when you read in Proverbs what the scriptures say about fools: that they are proud, violent, selfish, stubborn, blaming, prone to addiction and lacking in empathy.

Why do You stand afar off, O LORD?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In pride the wicked hotly pursue the afflicted;
Let them be caught in the plots which they have devised.
For the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire,
and the greedy man curses and spurns the LORD.
The wicked in the haughtiness of his countenance,
does not seek Him.
All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”
His ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high,
out of his sight; as for his adversaries, he snorts at them.
He says to himself, “I will not be moved;
throughout all generations I will not be in adversity.”
His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression;
Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.
He sits in the lurking places of the villages;
In the hiding places he kills the innocent.
His eyes stealthily watch for the unfortunate.
He lurks in a hiding place as a lion in his lair;
He lurks to catch the afflicted;
he catches the afflicted when he draws him into his net.
He crouches, he bows down,
and the unfortunate fall by his mighty ones.
He says to himself, “God has forgotten;
he has hidden His face; He will never see it.”
Arise O LORD; O God, lift up Your hand.
Do not forget the afflicted....
O LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble;
You will strengthen their heart,
You will incline Your ear
To vindicate the orphan and the oppressed,
So that man who is of the earth
will no longer cause terror.

Psalm 10:1-12, 17-18 (NASB)

Does abuse exist? Yes, more than any of us like to admit or think about. Is abuse talked about in the Bible? Yes, a lot. Does the word abuse help us to understand certain realities or does it cause misunderstanding? It helps us to acknowledge and understand a complex but very real and very important reality. It seeks to identify the perversion of power that so contaminates our world that we often don’t even recognize it or believe it exists.

**There is nothing new under the sun. Those who have power oppress
and those who are oppressed need comfort.**