

Marriage Lessons

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WHAT IS THE PROMISE OF MARRIAGE?

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Lifelong commitments can be better than engaged couples want to believe. The dating, caring, and affection of premarital enjoyment doesn't have to be lost forever in failed expectations and disillusionment. Marriage is worth the risk in a world where divorce claims one out of two marriages. Yet, to reclaim the vision of what a marital relationship can be, we need to take a look at our expectations, our motives, and our faith in God Himself.

In the following pages, RBC staff writer David Egner shows us how the wisdom of the Bible can renew and rekindle the promise of marriage for very imperfect people. Martin R. De Haan II

A FADING PROMISE

Bob stormed into his workshop, picked up a piece of wood from his workbench, and hurled it into a pile of scrap in the corner. He and Peggy had just had another fight. He was so sick of it and so unhappy. He thought about getting in his pickup and driving away once and for all. But then he thought of 14-year-old Amy and 16-year-old Marcie.

Bob worked hard—sometimes 60 hours a week. He had built the house they lived in, as well as the barn for the purebred quarterhorses they raised. He had tried to give Peggy and the girls a comfortable, trouble-free life. But Peggy had become distant and unappreciative of what he was trying to do. When they tried to talk, it was like they were speaking two different languages.

Sometimes the girls didn't help matters. Bob had forgotten how much his own dad had done for him—and how little he as a young person had appreciated his own parents—until Amy and Marcie had become almost as hard to live with as Peggy. Daddy's little girls were turning into demanding, ungrateful teenagers.

Bob was not one to analyze his feelings. He had always pushed them aside so he could concentrate on the work that had to be done. But now he could ignore them no longer. “Is this all marriage amounts to,” he wondered, “being lonely and angry and frustrated and disappointed? I feel so empty.”

Sandy and Dave had been married less than 10 years, and she was exhausted. Dave had gone from job to job, never quite finding “people who appreciate what I have to offer.” He had wanted a family right away, and Sandy just learned that number three was on the way. The news scrambled her emotions. She would love to have another child—but not now. They just couldn’t afford it.

It had been too easy for Dave to buy things he wanted for himself—after they had purchased a little too much house and a little too much car. Sandy was working as much as she could, but the more she earned the more Dave spent. He seldom mowed the lawn, the dryer needed repair, and the window in the basement was still broken.

Her parents helped some, but Sandy hated to ask for more unless it was really necessary. If Dave would only keep his promise to find a regular job and develop financial responsibility. Oh, she had talked to him. And he had made such sincere promises—promises that he just never kept.

Now another baby was on the way. Sandy felt trapped and miserable. Ten years ago when she stood at the altar and exchanged vows with Dave, she never imagined it would be like this!

A VISION RENEWED

Both Bob and Sandy feel angry, hurt, and betrayed. This was not what they had anticipated. The honeymoon didn’t last nearly as long as they had dreamed it would. The promise of happiness and security and intimacy and mutual care is fading away in the hard realities of their marriages.

They are not alone. Their feelings are duplicated in marriage after marriage. And divorce rates would be even higher if so many young people were not choosing to just live together.

In addition, 50 percent of all young adults today grew up in homes that went through the sad, bitter, sometimes violent process of a marriage breakup. They saw what it did to Mom and Dad, and they don’t want it to happen to them.

But marriages don’t have to turn out that way. In spite of divorce statistics, and in spite of the additional number of unhappy relationships that remain intact, marriage still offers a “made in heaven” opportunity to discover the real meaning and richness of love.

True, it will take a lot of work. But so does everything worthwhile. True, we’ll have to make sacrifices. But what we receive in personal dividends from a healthy relationship far outweigh the losses.

True, current odds may be against it. But if we follow a few basic principles, the odds change dramatically in our favor.

True, it’s a big responsibility, especially when children come along. But with that responsibility comes the authority and help of God to turn that responsibility into satisfying results.

True, there are other ways to satisfy the pangs of loneliness and feelings of discontent. Our generation is infatuated with “love triangles,” “office affairs,” and the illusion of “safe sex.” But who on his deathbed will say he’s glad he had the chance to enjoy sexual intimacy outside of marriage?

True, it may seem that the best idea is to get out of a bad marriage before the bitterness and anger destroys you. But many hurting people have already discovered that as terrible as a loveless marriage is, an anger-filled divorce can’t put it all behind you.

We need to see the possibilities of people who will put as much into marriage as they did into their dating relationship. We need to see husbands and wives filled with gratitude for being treasured in spite of all of their flaws and imperfections. We need to see the possibilities of two mature people who love each other deeply, not because of what they don’t know, but because they have learned the meaning of a love and a forgiveness that endures. We need a vision of husbands who, in spite of children and tight finances, will find ways to date their wives as they did before marriage. We need a vision of people touching and talking and embracing until parted only by death itself.

FOUR PHASES OF A GOOD MARRIAGE

So, what’s in it for me?” It’s a question worth asking about marriage, and not without reason. Just what is the promise of marriage?

- To the high school girl, it’s her wedding day, a white gown, four beautiful bridesmaids, candles, flowers, and a friend-filled reception.
- To the newlyweds, it’s shared vows, intimacy, friendship, and adventure.
- To the couple married 15 years, it’s children, companionship, and building.
- To those married 35 years, it’s watching grandchildren grow, the first signs of aging, and slowing down.
- To those who value God above all else, marriage provides a testing ground of faith—a laboratory of the heart that has promise not only for this life but for the life to come. People change, situations differ, and dreams are shattered. But the same God who made marriage made it to endure the disappointments and predictable seasons of life that mark all good relationships. God can help us grow through the cycles of (1) expectation, (2) covenant making, (3) disillusionment, and (4) growing fulfillment, which we will be considering in the remainder of this booklet.

Keep in mind, however, that the issue is not just what our Lord says about marriage. Solutions are found by discovering what He has said about basic issues of faith and character and then applying those perspectives to the seasons of marriage.

EXPECTATION

“What can I expect to get out of marriage? What’s the payoff? My hopes are high and my dreams are bright. But will they be realized?”

Let's take a look at some of the more common expectations people have for marriage today. Then we will turn to the Bible to see what God expects of this relationship.

Our Expectations.

Our society, both religious and secular, has established expectations for the marriage relationship:

1. Marriage will meet my needs.

- The need for affection and sexual intimacy.
- The need for companionship.
- The need for family.
- The need for conversation.
- The need for financial security.
- The need for social acceptance.
- The need to leave home.

Many of these expectations reflect reasonable and even God-given desires. The problem comes, however, when we pursue these desires with shortsighted strategies and motives. Many enter into marriage expecting it to solve their problems. A daughter who cannot any longer tolerate the anger and coldness of her father or the criticism of her step-mother may get married merely to get out of the house. A son who feels that he isn't respected by his parents may see marriage as a way of finding some of the personal affirmation he longs for. Yet all too often those who enter into marriage to solve their problems end up in the humiliation of a divorce court saying, "She [or he] just isn't meeting my needs, your honor."

Why don't couples see this coming? Part of the answer is that many of them assume that . . .

2. Marriage will change him/her. Many enter marriage with a predetermined idea of what they want their partner to become. They may disclose it a little before the wedding, but it becomes all too obvious soon enough. John, a student in seminary, was looking for his concept of an ideal pastor's wife. He wanted a woman who would be an excellent hostess, who would promote him in every way, who could speak to women's groups, who would be content to live in the parsonage next door to the church, who could live thriftily on a tight budget, who would produce two children on schedule (preferably a boy and a girl), and who would always be upbeat and happy.

It wasn't long into his marriage before the trouble began. Becky was sometimes moody and sad. She wanted a little money to spend without having to account to him for every penny. She hated speaking to any group. The first baby didn't come on schedule, and she was often ill. The more John pushed Becky to fill his expectations, the more she withdrew. She simply could not fit his ideal, no matter how much he pressured her. To avoid such mistakes, some people try the opposite approach.

3. Marriage can be as free as we let it be. Some enter marriage with another, more subtle expectation. They are generous in offering their partner a great deal of latitude and freedom—more than the partner is comfortable with. But at a high price. They want even more freedom for themselves. In return, they expect few demands to be made on them. It's a live-and-let-live approach. "I won't ask any questions, and I don't expect you to ask any either." Such attitudes are quite different from . . .

God's Expectations.

The Bible shows that God's expectations for marriage are apt to be different from our own. When God said, "It is not good for man to be alone," and when He created Eve as an answer to that aloneness, He did more than just make a provision for man's needs. The rest of the Bible shows that God has the following expectations for marriage.

1. Marriage will enable us to serve someone else's needs. In writing his New Testament letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul made it clear that those who are married can expect not only the joys of the relationship but also the responsibilities that come with it (1 Cor. 7:28-35). Paul indicated that in committing themselves to one another, husbands and wives actually must spend much of their time working hard to please one another (vv.33-34).

In one sense, Paul said that such a relationship, while not wrong (v.28), actually limits the amount of time that a person can spend in undistracted service to the Lord. Paul must have been very aware that much of what he accomplished as a traveling ambassador for Christ could not have been accomplished if he had the responsibilities and cares of a wife, home, and family. For all of its joys, marriage has responsibilities that limit our freedom to serve God in an unencumbered way. Our Lord knows that when we marry, we are choosing to serve Him by serving the needs of our partner. Over time, we even have to learn how to keep the marital commitment from rivaling our commitment to, and dependence on, the Lord. That brings us to a second expectation. While we might enter into marriage hoping to change our partner, God's expectation is that . . .

2. Marriage will change us for the better. Scripture doesn't tell us to make sure our life-partner loves, respects, and gives us all the affection, financial, and physical satisfaction we long for. The Bible never promises that God will make our mates into the kind of people we pray they will be. It does tell us, however, what kind of a heart God can enable us to have if we do our part in bringing out the best in our mate.

Marriage by its very nature demands our own spiritual growth. For us to live with and love someone else "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health" requires that we learn to put his or her interests ahead of our own. Such love is a general biblical principle (Phil. 2:1- 4), but the closeness and responsibilities of marriage give us an ideal setting to help us learn the real meaning of love. More than any other relationship, marriage will expose our hearts and demand our growth.

By its very nature, marriage demands commitment, risk, and unselfish investment. For a couple to achieve the unity and love and loyalty and blessing God expects, they must take giant strides of personal growth. They must learn how and when to abandon personal rights so they can experience the richness that comes when the true needs of others (not the selfish demands) are put before their own desires.

As a husband and wife learn to love in this way, they become a window through which others can see the kingdom of God at work. As they surrender themselves to the Spirit and rule of God, they become exhibits of the kind of spirituality that God designed marriage to produce. Friends, children, and extended family are given a chance to see the kind of faithful love, honesty, moral courage, true humility, incredible patience, and tender understanding God can give in marriage. People will not see manipulative or fearful compliance that so often marks marriage. They will see honest caring and friendship.

This kind of love requires us to focus not primarily on our mate's faults but on our own motives and actions. Such love, however, does not give us permission to assume, "If I don't demand anything of you, then you won't demand anything of me." God's expectation is that in the most intimate and interdependent way . . .

3. Marriage will place us under the mutual spirit of love. The Bible makes it clear that when a man and woman join in marriage, they become one. And the controlling factor of their oneness is their mutual commitment to care for one another's well-being for as long as they both live.

This commitment to love means that we must always be looking for positive ways to bring out the best in our mates. It also means that after dealing with our own faults and sins (Mt. 7:1-5), we will find timely and sensitive ways to discourage significant faults in one another. Proverbs 27:6 reminds us that to be faithful, a friend must sometimes say things that will be painful to hear.

The Bible does not give permission to nag, harp, or harshly criticize one another. Proverbs says that it is better to live on the roof than in a big house with a brawling or contentious woman (21:9). But with love comes the responsibility to do everything possible to bring out the best in a mate rather than the worst. Love will not let us indulge the immorality or support the destructive addictions of our partner. As our God shows us by His own example, love is tough when circumstances call for it. The most significant of God's expectations for marriage, however, seems to be reflected in His intent that . . .

4. Marriage will be a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. God's expectation is that husbands and wives will develop an enduring love by keeping their eyes on the "marriage" between Christ and His church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33). After urging both husbands and wives to see their distinct roles defined by the relationship between Christ and the church, the apostle Paul wrote: We are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Eph. 5:30-32). These expectations of God offer great promise for a new or restored marriage. They are expectations that lift us above ourselves, and call from us the kind of love that has its source in God. These expectations form a basis for the covenant that is at the heart of marriage.

COVENANT

The relatives and friends are seated. The organ is playing softly while candles flicker in the background. The attendants are standing in place. The father has said, "Her mother and I." The soloist has just finished. The audience is silent. The minister speaks. "Please join hands and repeat after me. I, James, take you, Susan . . ."

Expectation moves into reality through the exchanging of vows. The man and woman make solemn promises before God, family, and friends that they will "love, honor, and cherish" one another until "death us do part." By repeating vows and signing the license, a man and woman enter into a covenant relationship that embodies all that God intended for marriage.

Exchanged vows also anticipate those times of married life that are always more than we bargained for. The covenant anticipates those experiences of life in which marriage, with its

unexpected twists and turns, reaches deeper, becomes more absorbing, and pulls more out of us than we ever anticipated. “Worse,” “poorer,” and “sickness,” do happen. And when they do, we can go back again and again to the promises we made to one another. Understanding what the Lord intended those vows to mean—at a depth we could not have anticipated when we made them—will help us over and over again as we experience all that marriage is.

A Lifetime Commitment. When a man and woman say, “I do,” they are vowing to each other before the Lord that they will stay together until one of them dies. The Lord Jesus clearly taught what God expected when He said: Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mt. 19:4-6). “But what about divorce?” someone asked the Lord. “Isn’t that always an option? Can’t I keep a back door open just in case it doesn’t work out?” Jesus replied: Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery (Mt. 19:8-9). The marriage vow is the verbal expression of a lifelong commitment made in the mind and heart. That’s God’s design. The richest fulfillment of the promise of marriage is anchored in that concept. When we say in the vow, “from this day forward,” we mean a lifetime. This promise is not made to be broken (Eccl. 5:4).

“How limiting!” some might say. Yes, such commitment is limiting. But it also sets a man or woman free to concentrate on the task of living out and adjusting and improving a loving relationship through the sincere give-and-take of life. Such a covenant allows husband and wife to give one another the gift of a vowed love—a lifetime promise—that will carry them through physical illness and divergent interests and job pressures and problems with teenagers and unbelievable stress in the relationship. So complex—yet so simple. “I made a promise, and with the help of God I intend to keep it. I’m a person of my word. I’m in this for life.” The marriage vow is the verbal expression of a lifelong commitment made in the mind and heart.

A Shared Identity. In the fulfillment of the marital covenant, two become one. The man no longer lives only for himself, nor the woman only for herself. A new unity, a new diversity, a new family is established. Both remain distinct persons. Yet, from the Bible’s point of view, two now share a mystery of oneness. The apostle Paul wrote: So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Eph. 5:28-32).

As the church is united to Christ, so woman and man become one. They walk up the aisle a diversity—a man and woman apart. They come back down the aisle as one flesh—a shared identity. Different backgrounds, different families, different educations, different hurts, different habits—yet now, in covenant, they are one . . .

- When he is stationed in the Middle East and she must stay in New Jersey.
- When she is struggling through the first trimester of a difficult pregnancy.
- When he is told that his job has been phased out and she gets a promotion.

- When she contracts MS or he hears the words, “I’m sorry, but the cancer is inoperable.”
- When he must devote a lot of time and energy to caring for his aged parents.
- When their youngest child walks down the aisle to say her marriage vows.

Yes, the man and woman are one. These two unique people have promised to walk the pathway of life together as one in a new, shared identity.

An Exclusive Relationship. The covenant relationship the man and woman enter when they say their vows calls for total faithfulness. Husband and wife are to love and be true to and cherish each other—exclusively! The man is to be true to his wife and she to him. The Bible gives no ground on this point. Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be seared? So is he who goes in to his neighbor’s wife; whoever touches her shall not be innocent (Prov. 6:27-29). Current social practices notwithstanding, the covenant of marriage is with one person only. Paul told Titus to have the older women of the church at Crete teach the younger women “to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste” (Ti. 2:4-5).

The seventh commandment given at Sinai is, “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). Jesus repeated this commandment (Mt. 19:18). And Paul named adultery first in his list of the sins of the flesh (Gal. 5:19).

“I pledge you my faithfulness.” About these words, Mike Mason wrote, “This is how we must love one another, with a vowed love that is not dependent on happiness nor any of the external hallmarks of success. Where is such love to begin if it does not begin with the one closest to us, the life partner whom we have chosen out of all the other people in the world as the apple of our eye?” (The Mystery Of Marriage, p.106).

From this commitment onward, The man is to be true to his wife and she to him. The Bible gives no ground on this point. the man and woman are expected to be true to each other. This is God’s expectation for marriage. And if they follow it, they will experience the wonderful promise of marriage. Because of this . . .

- We will concentrate our love on our mate.
- We will not be disloyal, even in little matters.
- We will not initiate nor encourage flirtations.
- We will flee temptation. Oh, we will be tested. From within our own deceitful hearts, and from outside, will come urges to ignore that vow. The promise of marriage is built on a covenant, on the integrity of our word still being intact when one of us is called home. Only by remaining true to our word, and only by a deep desire to trust God’s plan, can we weather the next important phase of marriage . . .

DISILLUSIONMENT

It might begin as early as the honeymoon. The suspicion, the shadow that might already have been cast on the back edge of his or her thinking or emotions. A little smudge has appeared on her halo; a little tarnish on his suit of shining armor.

She ignores it. But it keeps coming back. He’s not the gentle man she thought he was. He forgets about her feelings. She makes plans without consulting him. He makes financial commitments without telling her. She ends their arguments without resolution.

Meanwhile, she's disturbed by the thoughts she's having. She has become preoccupied with his shortcomings. She remembers how good it felt as a single to be able to make her own decisions and spend her money on whatever she wanted. The more time goes by, the more unhappy and disillusioned she becomes.

Christian counselor Norman Wright, in his premarital counseling workbook titled *Before You Say I Do*, indicates that every marriage goes through stages of disillusionment. The new husband and wife run headlong into a gap between what they expected of their marriage and how it is actually turning out. It may occur on the honeymoon or while they are arranging the furniture in their apartment. They work it through, only to discover that disillusionment keeps on coming. It appears during the first months of the pregnancy, while their children are small, in career changes, when their children reach the teens, during their late 40s and middle 50s, and if the Lord gives them good health, into their 70s and 80s.

This is how it is with a man and woman. Neither can be God to the other. Both are inclined toward their own selfishness. Neither is always satisfied to find contentment in God (Phil. 4:11-13). Both struggle with and often give in to a heart that is as sinful as the Bible says (Rom. 7:14-25). And nothing exposes the flaws of human nature like marriage.

The Closeness Of Marriage. The very intimacy and shared identity of the marital relationship can cause disillusionment because that degree of closeness exposes our hearts. Unlike business relationships, where the roles are defined to allow for professional "distance," marriage is designed for oneness. The man and woman soon know each other so very well. They share the pleasure of sex, the stages of pregnancy and childbirth, the excitement of purchasing a new home, the good news of his promotion or her opportunity. They work through health or parental or teenage or financial crises together. They become so close that they know how each other feels and what the other is thinking.

But this closeness has a dark side. They know the best and the worst about each other. His inattention and absorption with work frustrates her. Her refusal to listen and trust his judgment angers him. She knows which words will make him angry or humiliate him. He knows she'll be hurt by his compulsive spending, but he does it anyway.

In the intimacy of marriage we show our selfishness, our impatience, our insensitivity, our anger. We become insulting, punitive, wounding. The closeness of marriage brings it out. It exposes us to our mate and, perhaps even more painfully, to ourselves. We begin to realize that our mate is not fulfilling our longings for security and affirmation and contentment. We feel betrayed. We trusted one another. Yet in unexpected ways marriage has exposed not only the faults of our mate but also of ourselves. The closeness of marriage shows us what our hearts are really like.

Wrong Motives For Marriage. All men and women, often without realizing it, enter marriage for some unhealthy reasons. Oh, they have a lot of right reasons—to find companionship, to have someone to love and care for, to enter a lifelong relationship, to honor the Lord. But as time goes by, it becomes obvious that even though "opposites attract," this can become a source of frustrating opposition.

Suppose the man knows he tends to be impulsive. He's never learned to manage money. He makes compulsive purchases that keep him at the edge of financial disaster. So he chooses a marital partner who is not only physically attractive to him but who also is a steady,

self-controlled person. Before marriage, she seems to like his casual and spontaneous approach to life. He, on the other hand, feels safe when he's with her.

After the marriage, neither can figure out what's happening. Suddenly they find themselves in a battle of wills over money. She has to play the role of the one who always says no. She's disappointed in him. She feels the isolation and pressure of carrying a burden that should be shared. She married him to be his wife, not his mother.

The marriage is in trouble because he entered into it with a wrong motive. Other wrong motives a person may carry into marriage are:

- To get strength to fight an addiction.
- To get away from a bad home situation.
- To get protection from a domineering parent.
- To promote a career.
- To find much-needed approval.
- To resolve unhealthy sexual issues.

Sooner or later, these underlying motives will show up. And when they do, they will lead to disillusionment that is also rooted in . . .

Destructive Behavior In Marriage. Some of those sinful, destructive patterns may be:

1. Nagging Criticism. It is "better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman" (Prov. 21:19). This is also true of a critical husband. Either may be motivated by feelings of inferiority or a need to divert attention from his or her own behavior. (Those addicted to alcohol are usually extremely critical of the spouse who does not drink. They want to "prove" that they are not the only one whose behavior is destructive.)

Such criticism helps us to see why Jesus taught us to first deal with our own sins before "helping others" with their problems (Mt. 7:1-5). Criticism is a dangerous source of disillusionment when it is used to keep attention off our own faults.

2. Anger. Outbursts of anger, unchecked and often over minor issues, attack the security of the marriage. Uncontrolled anger is dangerous to any relationship. Proverbs 22:24 says, "Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man do not go." Yet, when anger suddenly shows up after vows are exchanged, the partner feels disillusioned and trapped.

3. Self-centeredness. When one spouse always has to have it his or her way, the result is contrary to the ways of God (Phil. 2:1-4). This can be disillusioning to those who thought that marriage would provide someone who would care for them.

4. Irritating Behaviors. The apostle Paul wrote that love "does not behave rudely" (1 Cor. 13:5). So when selfish insensitivities show up either in public or private, a spouse feels unloved. He or she feels vulnerable, undermined, disrespected, and endangered. If our "best friend" treats us like this, where can we run from our enemies?

5. Emotional Dishonesty. One spouse may deny his or her feelings of frustration or disappointment. The perceived reason may be not to "hurt" the other person. The deeper motive, however, is to protect oneself from further hurt or conflict. Self Protection results in a lack of truth, a lack of love, and a growing distance and coolness that leads to deeper feelings of hopelessness.

Disillusionment appears in every marriage. It's inevitable. To claim that it hasn't or won't happen to us is to deny reality. How we face it when it appears may be the most crucial element of our marriage.

FULFILLMENT

The key question is, “Now what? Now that we have hit this rough spot in our marriage, what are we going to do about it?” The man’s and woman’s commitment to work through and resolve the issues creating the disillusionment is vitally important. It can lead to the kind of reconciliation and acceptance that makes marriage worth it for life.

Some of us have known what it is like to feel the frustration and fear. The marriage is stuck. It isn’t growing. Yet we also see that running into the bedroom, slamming the door, and staying there for hours is not working.

At this point, we need to realize that all is not lost. There still is hope. In fact, our disillusionment has actually brought us to the threshold of the very love and security we’ve been looking for. To cross over this threshold of fulfillment, however, we must . . .

Let Our Marital Disappointment Help Us To Face Our Disappointment With God.

This step won’t be easy. After all, God is the One before whom we took our vows. He is the One we asked to bless our marriage. Yet, once again, He is the One who seems to have let us down. We may ask, “Should I be surprised? Isn’t He the One who let me have an alcoholic father or a suicidal mother? Should I now be surprised that He didn’t reach in and stop me when I drifted into a difficult marital relationship? He’s the One who hasn’t answered my prayers. He hasn’t changed my mate or taken away the gnawing emptiness inside me.”

In his book *Bold Love*, Christian counselor Dan Allender wrote, “A sexually abused person once told me, ‘When God did not intervene to stop the abuser, He lost any right to require me to do anything. He owes me; I owe Him nothing.’ Her words are stark and brutal, but I believe she represents the core posture of the heart that struggles with God. She simply had the angry courage to put words to the battle to understand God’s goodness, His response to injustice, and the burden of fulfilling the royal law of love” (*Bold Love*, p.70).

We may be angry with God because our marriage is not going as we expected. We may be holding Him accountable or accusing Him of breaking His promise of happiness to us. But as we struggle, we are at least taking Him seriously. And in our struggle we can compare our experience with the stories of other people who have been disappointed with God before finding fulfillment in Him.

The Bible tells about a man named Job who felt that God had been unfair to him. It tells us about a man named Joseph who was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and then falsely accused of trying to rape his employer’s wife. The Bible tells us about a whole nation of people who, after being delivered from the slave-yards of Egypt, concluded that God had led them out into a barren wilderness to destroy them. The Bible tells us about Jesus, the Son of God, who on the night before His betrayal and death pled with the Father to deliver Him from the suffering He was about to face. Over and over, the Bible introduces us to people whose disappointment with God bleeds through the pages of their lives.

Yet again and again the Bible shows that disillusionment can become the doorway to fulfillment. Job lived long enough to see his confidence in God restored and deepened (42:1-6). Joseph lived long enough to say to those family members who had harmed him, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Time after time the children of Israel saw

bitter and frightening experiences turn into opportunities to witness the power and goodness of God. Jesus endured to the point of saying in Gethsemane, “Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42).

No one has ever suffered the betrayal, aloneness, abandonment, and abuse that Christ did in the course of His life and death. No one ever experienced the kind of unfair treatment that He endured when He paid the price for our sins. Yet He lived and died and rose from the dead to declare along with Job and Joseph and other godly men and women of Israel, that, in time, God always shows Himself good and powerful and faithful to those who are willing to trust Him to the end. He can do the same for us in our marriage. Christ showed us by His own example that we were not made to find complete fulfillment or security in any human relationship. He showed us that we are made to find our protection and contentment in God, and that only in this realization can we be free to love and submit to one another. By His own example Christ also helps us . . .

Let Our Relationship With God Become Our Source Of Marital Fulfillment.

Followers of Christ are in a great position to face the issues that have brought disillusionment to their marriage. Biblical counselor Larry Crabb wrote, “The difference between godly and ungodly people is not that one group never hurts and the other group does, or that one reports more happiness than the other. The difference lies in what people do with their hurt. Either they do what comes naturally: use their hurt to justify self-centered efforts to relieve it, caring less about how they affect others and more about whether they are comfortable; or they do what comes unnaturally: use their hurt to better understand and encourage others while they cling desperately to the Lord for promised deliverance, passionately determined to do His will” (Men And Women, p.93).

Once we learn that our ultimate well-being depends on God and not on our spouse, we will begin to experience the strength of the Lord. Once a husband believes that his relationship to God is more important than his relationship to his wife, he will begin to find a personal sense of significance that doesn’t depend on his wife’s responses or affirmation. He will begin to love her out of the love that he has found in Christ (Eph. 5:25).

Once a wife believes that her relationship with Christ is more important than her relationship to her husband, she can begin to find a source of security and acceptance that doesn’t depend on her husband’s ability to meet her needs. She can begin to accept her role as a wife out of the conviction that rightly motivated submission is actually a way of submitting herself to the lordship and provision of Christ (Eph. 5:22-24). This is not to say, however, that godly husbands and wives become independent of one another. It is important that we also . . .

Let Our Dependence On God Become A Basis For Loving Interdependence. A husband and wife who depend on God—who find their strength and sufficiency in Him—will not be overly dependent on each other. Nor will they demand an unhealthy independence or domination. God made man and woman as unique, specially gifted beings in His image. Neither of them is to rob the other of that God-given uniqueness. But when they say, “I do,” they are choosing to give themselves to each other in a lifelong relationship.

The Bible helps us to understand how a husband and wife can be one, yet also be true to the unique person God made each to be. God made woman to be a companion and helper her husband can depend on. Genesis tells us, “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’” (2:18). Proverbs 31 describes an

initiative-taking, God-gifted woman who did just that. She entered into an enterprise that her husband fully supported.

There was an interdependent relationship between this couple in Proverbs 31. God gave the wife multiple gifts, including good business sense. Her husband apparently was not jealous of her gifts, nor did he deny her their use. He did not try to remake her into something she was not. We can assume that he loved her for the woman God made her to be. She, in turn, used her gifts in a way that produced harmony and marital success, as well as business success. Scripture gives no evidence of her doing anything but respecting her husband and his gifts as the man God made him to be. This kind of interdependence does not come easy for a generation that has seen divorce become epidemic. Yet for those who find their security in the Lord, and for those who are rightly motivated, it is possible for wives to accept and trust the Bible when it says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church" (Eph. 5:22-23).

The interdependence of husbands and wives also has implications for their sexual relationship. The Scriptures make it clear that husbands and wives are to protect, enjoy, and share mutual expectations in the intimacy of the marital bed. The sexual dimension of marriage is designed by the Lord to bring continuing pleasure and exhilarating renewal to the relationship. The wise author of Proverbs wrote these words to husbands:

Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love (Prov. 5:15-19).

When a man and woman marry, they have the right to expect sexual fulfillment from each other:

Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor. 7:3-4).

If one partner decides to abstain for a time, they must mutually agree and keep the time brief:

Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:5).

For such mutual pleasure, husbands and wives are to depend on one another. When we offer ourselves to one another in love, God Himself is pleased. When we fail, the pleasure goes to Satan.

THE ACTIONS OF LOVE

Love is both a motive and an action. Jesus Christ's love for the church led to action: His sacrificial death on the cross. It will result in the wonderful fellowship of heaven (Rev. 19).

Paul told husbands to love their wives (Eph. 5:25). He instructed older women to teach the younger women to love their husbands (Ti. 2:4). In a marriage where the promise is fading, love translated into action can bring the brightness back into the promise.

This brings us to 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter about love has no greater application than within the context of marriage. Verses 4-8 tell us what love does. As you read these verses, consider how they apply to your marriage.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

You might want to read this passage again. Where the word love appears, put in your name. Now ask yourself if this is how you treat your husband or your wife. This is what it means to love.

People who experience the joy of marriage for 20, 40, or 50 years without one “swallowing up” the other have learned how to work through the differences that lead to disillusionment and, perhaps, divorce. They are not merely “married to marriage” for the sake of marriage but because it is a fulfilling, rewarding, adventurous, loving relationship for both. They have stayed together in part because of a mutual willingness to talk, compromise, and work through their differences. Let me illustrate.

Suppose there’s a stalemate in a marriage. Say the woman is a “neat freak” and the man is kind of sloppy. The differences begin to drive them apart. She nags incessantly; he gets a severe case of “selective deafness.” Both withdraw.

What would love do? It would take action. Facing the problem and overcoming fear, love would initiate the kind of communication that would lead to resolution, calling constantly on the help of our all-sufficient God.

But how do we do this? One way is to make a determined effort to look at the issue through the other’s eyes. See it from that person’s perspective. In this case, he needs to remember her home life and understand how insecure she feels when things are out of place. She needs to admit that it’s not a major crime nor a sin to leave a shirt hanging on the back of a chair. Then they both need to change their behavior.

True, it will be hard. In deeper marital issues, such as rage or emotional abuse, it will seem impossible. But the principles of love are backed by a God who is love (1 Jn. 4:7-8), and by a Savior who fills us with His power.

In some cases, Biblecentered counseling may be necessary. That’s okay. The point is that love takes action and trusts God to give the promise of marriage to couples who are willing to trust Him.

THE REALITY BEHIND THE PICTURE

Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Jesus called the church His bride, and the Bible refers to Him as the Bridegroom. The church is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. The allegiance, sacrificial love, and faithfulness of the husband and wife is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. The promise of their “marriage” will be fulfilled when Jesus returns for His bride.

What about you? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Are you part of His bride through faith in Him? Or will you be left behind at His coming because you have never trusted in Him?

The way to experience the promise of heaven is through faith. If you will acknowledge that you are a sinner and cannot save yourself (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:8-9), and if you will trust Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will become part of His bride. He came to earth to live the sinless life you could not live. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. And by His resurrection from the dead, God showed that His sacrifice had been accepted, that the penalty for sin had been paid in full.

Your part is to believe. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

Trust Jesus today. You will experience the promise of a wonderful relationship with Christ and can look forward to the promise of heaven.

Divorce and Remarriage What Does the Bible Teach?

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Some students of Scripture say that the Bible gives no grounds for divorce or remarriage. Others suggest that the Bible allows for divorce under some circumstances but does not allow for remarriage. Some say that if a divorce is justified, so is the possibility of remarriage. Still others say that God's primary concern is our happiness.

In the following pages, RBC research editor Herb Vander Lugt offers help in the midst of all the confusion. He comes to this difficult subject not only with 60 years of marriage and over 50 years of pastoral ministry but also with many years of careful attention to the biblical issues. After performing hundreds of marriages and providing countless hours of marital counseling, Herb has come to conclusions that combine reverence for the Scriptures with compassion for those whose marital hopes have turned into regret and loss.

Martin R. De Haan II

Chapter 1: Mixed Signals

Divorce statistics can be confusing. On one hand, we are told that one of every two marriages will end in divorce. What we observe seems to bear this out. Far more children than in the past are growing up in single-parent families. On the other hand, we are told that the divorced segment of our population only equals about 12 percent of the married segment. According to *Grolier's Encyclopedia*, "In the United States in 1987, there were 123 divorced persons for every 1,000 married persons."

Public opinion expert Louis Harris offers an explanation. He says, "The fact is that in 1981 the number of divorces did hit a record total of 1,213,000. Marriages also reached a record of 2,422,000. Some quick-read experts then put the two sets of facts together and concluded that since there were half as many divorces as marriages, it could be concluded that half of the marriages were doomed to failure. But the facts show that only 10% of all ever-married men and a slightly higher 13% of all ever-married women are divorced" (p.86, *Inside America*, Louis Harris, 1987, Vintage Books, New York).

Mixed signals also come from the painful experiences of life. During many years as a pastor, I have been involved with scores of divorce situations. Sometimes, as in cases of extreme mental or physical abuse, I longed to see a woman become freed from the terror of an abusive husband. Yet, I was uncomfortable advising action that had no clear biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.

In many cases, I wanted to help the abusive husband overcome his problem. Changed lives seemed more preferable than divorce action that would divide children, friends, and family assets.

Yet, sometimes I felt great relief when the divorce proceedings began. In one instance, a wife patiently endured a heavy drinking, sexually immoral husband for 4 years, during which she twice contracted a venereal disease. He had professed faith in Christ shortly before they were married, attended church with her for a short time, and then went back to his old ways.

The confusion over divorce, however, is not just rooted in statistics, or even experience. Mixed signals are also found in the Bible. On one hand, the Old Testament prophet Malachi declared, "The Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce" (Mal. 2:16). Yet God Himself admits to divorcing Israel (Jer. 3:8). On one occasion, the prophet Ezra insisted that the men of Israel divorce the pagan wives they had married (Ezra 10:10-17). Later, Jesus said that sexual immorality is the only grounds for divorce (Mt. 19:9). Yet the apostle Paul taught that divorce is also permissible if a Christian is married to a non-Christian who no longer wants to be married (1 Cor. 7:15).

Does the Bible contradict itself about divorce? No. Even though many godly Bible students disagree on what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage, I believe the Scriptures offer guidelines for those contemplating divorce and remarriage. Even in cases of physical abuse,

which has become such a troubling issue in our day, I am convinced that the Bible gives us answers.

Chapter 2: The Divine Permission

While God desires that a husband and wife stay together until death, He permits divorce in some circumstances. Three Bible passages give us His guidelines on this matter. They are: Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 19:1-10, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. We will study each passage, taking into consideration the historical situation, the permission given, and the restriction imposed.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

In this passage, Moses declared that after a man had divorced his wife because he had found “some uncleanness” in her and both had entered new marriages, they could not dissolve the new marriages and marry each other a second time. Men apparently were already divorcing their wives for “some uncleanness.” We don’t know when Moses began allowing such divorce, but that he had done so previous to the writing of Deuteronomy 24 is clear. Jesus, some 1,500 years later, told a group of Jewish leaders, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, *permitted* you to divorce your wives” (Mt. 19:8).

The Historical Situation. At the time of Moses and throughout the Old Testament era, a man became the master of the woman he married. This was true in all the cultures of the time, even among the Israelites. A wife was a husband’s possession in a manner similar to his property, his animals, and his slaves (Ex. 20:17). Jewish law did not permit a woman to initiate a divorce. She could remarry only if given a certificate of divorce. Any promise she made could be overruled by her husband (Num. 30:4-16). The husband could have his bride stoned if on the wedding night he discovered that she was not a virgin (Dt. 22:13-21). The society in Israel was definitely patriarchal like that of neighboring nations.

God, however, did not permit men unlimited power over their wives. They could not sell a wife into slavery, like neighboring nations could— not even if she were a war prisoner who had been made a secondary wife (Dt. 21:10-14). The children were commanded to honor the mother as

well as the father (Ex. 20:12). A man could not humiliate his wife by marrying a sister as a rival (Lev. 18:18). The Lord gave these laws as a merciful provision for women in a maledominated society. Through these regulations, God showed the men in Israel that their wives were to be viewed as people, not merely as property.

The Permission Given. Because of the hardness of men's hearts, Moses allowed divorce (Mt. 19:8). In the process, however, God provided guidelines. A man had to obtain a certificate of divorce and give it to the unwanted wife. When he did take such action, the divorce certificate would show that the woman had been legally released from marriage and that she was now free to marry another.

Moses permitted such action if a man found some uncleanness in his wife. The exact meaning of the expression "uncleanness" is not clear. It is a word that was almost always translated "nakedness" by the King James translators. An exception is when the word was used to describe an "unclean camp" in which human excrement had not been properly buried (Dt. 23:14). In some cases, as in Leviticus 18 and 20, the word was linked to specific instances of family sexual abuse. Given this usage, it's possible that if a man suspected his wife had been sexually molested by a family member prior to marriage, he could give her a certificate of divorce. Such an allowance might seem unmerciful. But keep in mind that this stipulation was granted because of "hardness of heart" circumstances. If a man could not deal with something that caused his wife to be despised in his eyes, the law allowed for her to be freed rather than to be subject to his contempt.

We know that Moses was not allowing divorce just in instances of adultery, because adultery was an offense punishable by death (Dt. 22:22). The "uncleanness," therefore, must have referred originally to conduct on the part of the wife that the husband deemed shameful or offensive, but not limited to physical adultery. We have no knowledge of how this was interpreted during Israel's early history.

At the time of Christ, Jewish rabbis disagreed about what Moses meant by the expression "some uncleanness." The followers of Rabbi Shammai limited this term to some kind of sexual impropriety (not necessarily adultery). The followers of Rabbi Hillel (the vast majority) gave it almost unlimited latitude— even making minor offenses like burning food a legitimate basis for divorce.

The Restriction Imposed. The focus of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the following restriction: Once the divorced pair had married new mates, they could never marry each other again. The reason for this restriction is difficult to determine. One widely accepted explanation is that it would make a husband think carefully before divorcing his wife and marrying another woman.

In summary, while we have no record of the occasion when God led Moses to make it possible for the men in Israel to divorce their wives, Jesus made it clear that it happened. He declared that God did this "because of the hardness of your hearts" (Mt. 19:8). Callous-hearted men would perpetrate greater evils against wives who were despised in their eyes if divorce were not

an option. As noted earlier, God had already forbidden the sale of a wife into slavery. But a hard-hearted man in a male-dominated society could find many other ways to make life difficult for a wife he no longer wanted to support. He could vex her by marrying and lavishing all his attention on a second wife. He could burden her with too much work while openly resenting her continued presence.

I believe it was God's tender concern for women that led Him to permit divorce in Israel.

Matthew 19:1-10

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

This is the second key passage on the divorce issue. It expresses our Lord's teaching on this subject more fully than any other Gospel passage.

The Historical Situation. As noted earlier, the religious leaders among the Jews disagreed sharply on the divorce issue. The followers of Rabbi Shammai were far more strict than the followers of Rabbi Hillel. The enemies of Jesus asked Him, "Can a man divorce his wife for any reason?" hoping they could force Him into giving an answer that would put Him at odds with one group or the other. Jesus didn't fall into their trap. He corrected their statement that Moses *commanded* men to divorce their wives by reminding them that Moses *permitted* divorce because of the hard hearts of the men. He also called them back to God's ideal before making a pronouncement that agreed with the teaching of neither of the prominent rabbinical schools.

The Permission Given. Jesus said that divorce is wrong "except for sexual immorality." The Greek word He used was *porneia*, a term covering a wide range of sexual sins. When used in a sentence alongside *moicheia* (adultery), it denoted a sexual sin involving at least one unmarried person or a perverted form of sexual behavior. The feminine form of this word *porne* means "prostitute." The masculine *pornos* denoted either a man who was promiscuous or who engaged in perverted sexual behavior. On rare occasions, when specified by the context, it referred to a marriage of close relatives. Therefore, all the modern versions render the word *porneia* here as either "unchastity," "unfaithfulness," or "sexual immorality."

In sanctioning divorce for sexual immorality, Jesus also permitted remarriage for people thus divorced. A careful study of the Bible passages dealing with divorce makes clear a principle that we can apply: *Whenever a divorce occurs on grounds God has declared valid, that divorce carries with it the right of remarriage.*

We can express this principle with confidence on the basis of the historical situation into which Jesus spoke these words and on the grammar of the words themselves.

First, let's place ourselves in the shoes of those to whom Jesus spoke. The Jews in His audience, whether followers of Hillel or Shammai, agreed that legally divorced people had the right to marry new mates. As far as we know, no Jewish teachers of that time differed on this point. We can therefore assume that the people Jesus addressed had never heard of a divorce that did not carry with it the right to remarry. The divorce regulations mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 completely dissolved prior marital commitments. The only prohibition was that a divorced couple not remarry each other after marrying and divorcing new mates.

The second basis for our conviction that a Godpermitted divorce carries with it the right to remarry is found in the very words recorded in Matthew 19:9, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." The phrase "except for sexual immorality" appears in the middle of the sentence. But the meaning would be the same if it appeared at the beginning of the sentence. "Except for sexual immorality, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery." It would be the same if it read, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, except for sexual immorality." An exceptive clause grammatically applies to the whole sentence, whether it appears at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end.

The idea that God permitted divorce for sexual immorality but forbade remarriage arose in the post-apostolic era when some of the Church Fathers began to view human sexuality as a necessary evil and exalted celibacy as the most God-honoring lifestyle. Not only did they discourage marriage, they forbade remarriage either after a divorce or the death of a spouse.

We conclude, therefore, that Jesus permitted divorce on grounds of sexual immorality, and that this divorce assumed the right of remarriage.

The Restriction Imposed. The words of Jesus, "except for sexual immorality," express a restriction as well as a permission. If a person obtains a divorce on grounds other than sexual immorality and remarries, he commits adultery. The Lord's use of the word *moicheia* rather than *porneia* is significant. *Moicheia* focuses on the broken marriage covenant. When two people whose divorces were not valid in God's sight come together in the sexual union of marriage, they break their former marriage covenant. But this is not a continuing state. From this point on they are husband and wife.

God considers two people as married when they have met the civil requirements. This is true even when their divorces were not valid in God's sight. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that

she had five husbands before her present live-in arrangement (Jn. 4:17-18). It is unlikely that she was widowed five times. We can therefore assume that at least a couple of her marriages followed a divorce. Jesus still recognized each man she married as a husband.

In 1 Corinthians 7:20 Paul urged first-century believers to do their best to remain in the marriage they had when they were converted. The people he addressed must have included some who had married new mates after divorces obtained on trivial grounds. If these people were living in perpetual adultery, we can assume that Paul would have told them to separate immediately.

This leads us to the conclusion that when two people marry after a divorce on grounds less than specified by Jesus and Paul, they sin against the covenant they made in the previous marriage. But this occurs only once. Their first sexual union breaks the former bond. The new marriage covenant is now in effect. This fact, however, should not be taken as weakening the force of Christ's restriction. Deliberate disobedience is always a serious matter. Believers who truly love the Lord will not lightly ignore or disobey Him.

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Apart from a passing comment in Romans 7, these few verses contain everything Paul wrote about divorce. Some critics say that in the process he contradicted Jesus' stipulation that the only basis for divorce was sexual immorality. But a careful consideration of the historical circumstances makes it clear that Paul was faithful to Jesus' words on this matter.

The Historical Situation. When Jesus made His statements about divorce, He addressed Jewish people living under the Mosaic law. But Paul addressed believers, both Jews and Gentiles, on this side of Calvary and the empty tomb. Many of these Gentile believers undoubtedly came out of a paganism that was morally decadent. Its worship involved temple prostitution and sexual orgies. The city of Corinth itself was known far and wide as a center of sexual indulgence and other forms of immorality.

The pagans who became Christians often needed to be reminded of God's moral standards. Then too, some of those who had become believers were living with a mate who had not become a Christian. Apparently, a number of the non-Christian spouses were content to allow

the marriage to remain intact. Other nonbelievers, however, wanted the mate either to renounce Christ or to end the marriage.

Paul was concerned that fellow believers be as unencumbered as possible from the normal cares of life so they could serve Christ freely in the difficult days that were ahead. Therefore, in chapter 7 of his first epistle to the Corinthians he gave inspired advice and instruction about singleness, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. We will consider only the verses that deal directly with the divorce and remarriage problems.

The Permission Given. Paul advised single people to remain single, and married people to remain with their present mate. However, he declared that the unmarried would not sin by marrying a believer. He also said that a Christian married to a non-Christian who wanted out of the marriage would not sin by allowing the unbeliever to obtain a divorce.

But if the unbeliever departs [the word Paul used here was an official term for divorce on the certificate of that day], let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases (1 Cor. 7:15).

The fact that Paul made the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever grounds for divorce, while Jesus gave the only valid reason as “sexual immorality,” does not put him into conflict with his Master. He was addressing a different situation—a mixed marriage. Jesus, addressing Jews under the law, had in mind marriages between Jews—marriages within the covenant community. Paul confronted a different problem—marriages between believers and nonbelievers.

God through the apostle Paul mandated that a believer does not sin by allowing a divorce when the unbeliever wants out. A divorce in such circumstances is therefore valid. God sees the marriage as ended. Therefore, the believer thus divorced has the right to remarry.

From the words of Jesus in Matthew 19 and from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15, we have found only two grounds upon which God sanctions divorce: sexual immorality and the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever. This raises the question, “Is divorce wrong under all other circumstances? What about abuse? Must a woman continue to live with a man who is beating her and sexually abusing her?”

There is no verse in the Bible specifically stating that a woman in an abusive marriage has a right to obtain a divorce. Nor is there any mention of a legal separation. Many pastors and other Christian leaders have gone through great emotional and mental turmoil when confronted with extreme cruelty situations. I know I have. And in my searching of the Scriptures, I have found a principle that I believe we can apply in such situations. It has permitted me to advise some women to seek a divorce even when the husband was a professing Christian and free from sexual immorality. Let me explain.

God in His compassion sometimes allows His people to set aside strict conformity to certain rules He has given. He did this on one occasion when David and his men were hungry. He allowed them to eat consecrated bread in the tabernacle—bread which He had declared holy (1 Sam. 21:1-6).

God also did this with His Sabbath rules. He had commanded the Israelites to keep the seventh day as a day of absolute rest— even for domestic animals (Ex. 20:8-11). He forbade the kindling of a fire to cook food (Ex. 35:1-3). The importance of these rules was seen when He ordered that a man be stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). It was to be a day of absolute rest!

Yet Jesus healed on the Sabbath. When rebuked by His adversaries, He reminded them that even a legalistic Jew worked to free an animal that had fallen into a pit (Mt. 12:9-13). The strong “no work” regulation could be set aside when an animal needed help or a person needed healing. The Bible doesn’t say this explicitly, but the Jews knew it to be true. The Lord Jesus expressed this fact when He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27).

Let’s apply this principle to God’s regulations about divorce. Why did God give men permission to divorce their wives? Jesus answered this question when He told His critics, “because of the hardness of your hearts” (Mt. 19:8). God had declared that a man should cleave to his wife in a one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:24). He never rescinded this rule. Yet He permitted men to divorce their wives. Why? The only logical reason I can think of is that He did so to protect the wives of hard-hearted men. If a man didn’t want a woman as a wife any longer, he couldn’t just discard her, he had to give her a certificate of divorce. This would give her the freedom to marry another man.

The Old Testament divorce laws were a merciful provision. God hated divorce then just as He does now. But He preferred divorce to the abuse of wives and mothers.

Divorce is often a terrible evil, but in some situations it represents a wise and loving course of action. Ezra insisted that Israelite men put away their pagan wives and children (Ezra 10:10-19). God Himself divorced the northern tribes of Israel (Jer. 3:8). He took such action only after enduring their prolonged spiritual unfaithfulness which He compared to sexual unfaithfulness.

Since divorce is not always wrong, it is not like lying, stealing, coveting, or sexual immorality. These other actions are always wrong. God can never approve of them. But divorce is not always a sin. It is always caused by sin, but is not an act of disobedience when permitted by God.

Believers are not necessarily sinning when they divorce a spouse who through sexual sin has shattered the exclusive commitment of the marriage covenant. In fact, a woman who is married to a physically abusive husband may not be sinning when, with the encouragement of her spiritual counselors, she seeks divorce action—even if her husband is not guilty of sexual

immorality. If such a wife has given careful consideration to the name and reputation of Christ, if she has sought to fulfill the requirements of love, and if she has followed the biblical procedures for confronting a sinning brother (Mt. 18:15-17), then she may have reason to seek divorce action against someone who is no longer being treated by the church as a brother.

As noted earlier, Jesus taught that sometimes the spirit of the law allows specific legal requirements to be overridden (Mt. 12:1-13). By His own example, Jesus allowed His hungry disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, just as He also took the opportunity to heal a man with a crippled hand on a day when no work was to be done.

I believe the apostle Paul could have had this same spirit of the law in mind when he wrote:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Notice that after commanding the Christian wife not to divorce her husband, the apostle inserted, "But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband." Why didn't he just tell both husbands and wives to refrain from divorcing one another without inserting "but even if she does"? I believe that Paul may have been making a compassionate provision for an abused woman.

I have encountered situations in which I could not in good conscience tell a woman to remain with her husband. One man quit beating his wife after she called the civil authorities and had him arrested for assault. But he would push her, put a knife to her throat, or point a gun at her in front of their terrified children. After much effort at getting him to change was unsuccessful, and after the psychological damage to the children became obvious, I encouraged her to obtain a divorce. The man, to avoid child support, left for places unknown. To this day she doesn't know where he is. Paul could have had such situations in mind.

The Restriction Imposed. Paul told the woman who obtained a divorce on grounds other than sexual immorality that she was to "remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband." Such a divorce is not as complete a severing of the marriage bond as one where a mate has been guilty of sexual immorality or where an unbeliever refuses to continue living with a believer. To enter a new marriage while the possibility of reconciliation is still open is to commit adultery, as specified in Matthew 19:9. It seems logical to assume that once one of the parties makes remarriage impossible by entering a new union, the other party is released from this requirement just as if the former mate had died.

I realize that there is an element of subjectivity in determining when principles of wisdom and love call for a divorce under such conditions. But we make such decisions all the time in all areas of life.

What's important is that our personal judgment be guided by the right principles. Any exception to the "law" should be considered only in light of the most basic principles of Scripture. We cannot be justified in a divorce action if we have not first considered what effect our actions will have on the name and reputation of the One whose name we bear. Is this action being taken to please the Lord? (1 Cor. 7:29-35). Is the motive for the action godly? Is the action being considered only for a person's own self-protection, or also for the good of the sinning mate? (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Has the sinned-against spouse sought safety in the advice of wise counselors? (Prov. 11:14). Has the one considering divorce carefully weighed the implications of two Christians pleading their dispute before a civil judge or jury? (1 Cor. 6:1-7). Is divorce a last-resort action taken with the support of wise counsel, when the other party can no longer be treated as a follower of Christ? All of this and more is necessary to assure that persons who are taking exception to their marriage vows, and to the binding law of marriage, are doing so according to the proper biblical procedure.

Chapter 3: The Proper Procedures

When nonbelievers decide to get a divorce, they can go directly to the civil authorities and take action. Not so for Christians! In the first place, we must think of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, where Paul said that we dishonor Christ before the unbelieving world when we go to court against a fellow believer.

Second, the love principle calls on us to seek the spiritual good of fallen Christians, no matter what they have done. Then too, a believer should think very carefully before breaking the "for better or for worse as long as we both shall live" marriage vow.

After failing on their own to get the attention of their mate, wronged or hurting Christians can take steps to increase pressure on the offending spouse by asking one or two others to act as witnesses to the problem. This procedure was outlined by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 18:15-21.

In my experience as a pastor, I have found that following the confrontational strategy of Matthew 18 can be effective. I vividly recall occasions when I felt nervous and actually trembled at the thought of going with a church member to confront an erring spouse. I expected anger and defiance. Instead, I observed the husband's embarrassment and sense of shame, and I was deeply stirred as the wrongdoer repented before God, his wife, and myself.

Such confrontation, however, does not always work. The next step is to ask the church to use its influence in seeking to bring about a change of heart. If the offending mate still doesn't respond, then the church must formally disassociate itself from the sinning member. Paul gave us an example of this when he told the church in Corinth to excommunicate a man who was living in an incestuous relationship (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

After much prayer and serious effort to lead the sinning person to repentance has failed and the excommunication process has been carried out, the wrongdoer is to be treated “like a heathen and a tax gatherer” (Mt. 18:17). The person may be a genuine believer, but he is now looked upon as an unbeliever. This means that though we still love him and desire his spiritual restoration, we can now go to a secular court for a divorce. Even then, the wronged believers must be careful about their testimony. It should be apparent to the judge and all other observers that the innocent mate is not a greedy or vindictive person. We must always keep in mind our Lord’s exhortations to go the extra mile (Mt. 5:41) and to love our enemies (Mt. 5:43-44). Remember too that the apostle Paul declared that we should be willing to be cheated rather than to bring reproach on Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:7).

This suggested procedure cannot be followed completely if the erring spouse is not a church member. But even then, wronged persons can seek counsel, exercise patience, and be conscious of their testimony when reaching a settlement.

Chapter 4: The God Honoring Goal

The apostle Paul told us that we are to do everything to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This should be our goal, even when considering a divorce. In such a situation we glorify God by doing all we can to protect the name of Christ from reproach and by seeking the eternal good of everyone involved—including the offender.

A divorce between Christians tends to reflect badly on the Lord Jesus. It can be viewed by nonbelievers as an indication that faith in Christ is not as life-changing as we proclaim it to be. Even after church discipline has given believers the authority to deal with the sinning mate as an unsaved person, the people in the court and the public will view both parties as believers. It seems to me that the Christian who has been wronged should be fair, even to the point of being overly generous. A bitter court fight should be avoided if at all possible. This is in line with Paul’s challenge to believers to let themselves be cheated in order to protect the name of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:7).

We also glorify God by showing love for the offenders. We can do this by treating them kindly, by doing our best to lead them to repent, and by forgiving them when they do. These repentant offenders should feel the warmth of our love.

After they have given good reason for the church to believe in the reality of their repentance, they should be restored to fellowship. Paul had to address this situation in 2 Corinthians because the congregation was apparently withholding restoration to the man who had been excommunicated for an incestuous relationship (see 1 Cor. 5:4-5). In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 he wrote:

If anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. . . . Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven

that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Those who repent should also gradually be restored to places of service. The time frame and the degree of the restoration must be determined case by case. It is almost impossible to set up a rigid timetable procedure. The situation is quite similar to that of restoring a pastor who has fallen into sexual immorality. Sometimes full restoration is possible; sometimes it is unwise. After immoral conduct or an unwarranted divorce, we must be keenly aware of Paul's requirement that a church leader be "blameless" and "have a good testimony among them who are outside" (1 Tim. 3:2,7).

One mistake often made is that divorce is viewed as the sin of all sins. Men who repent of sexual immorality are often restored to service far more readily than those who wrongly obtain a divorce. I have seen Christian workers who had been guilty of sexual immorality restored to their offices, while innocent victims of an unfaithful mate were rejected.

A former pastor I know lost his position in a Christian organization when his wife left him and married another man. She admitted that he had been a good husband and father, but said his income level had been too low. He now is not permitted to serve as an elder because he is viewed as not meeting the "husband of one wife" requirement of 1 Timothy 3:2. This man, an innocent victim of his wife's greed, had been dealt with far more severely than many pastors who repented after immorality. This troubles me. A man thus divorced still meets the "husband of one wife" qualification, even after a new marriage. The Greek expression is literally "a one-woman man." This refers to a man whose life as a husband was marked by fidelity to his mate. A good husband who remarries after his wife dies is also a "onewoman man" in spite of having a second wife.

We must therefore recognize that divorce is sometimes permitted by God. Since this is true, a person does not sin when he or she obtains a divorce on grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unsaved spouse. Let's not treat such people as somehow and somewhat tainted!

People who have divorced on inadequate grounds and remarry have sinned. But their sin is just as forgivable as any other sin. They should be treated the same way as those who are guilty of fraud, theft, sexual immorality, or any other sin. We are to forgive all who repent. And we must seek their restoration to usefulness in the Lord's service.

Restoration to leadership—a deacon, elder, pastor, Bible teacher—is to be handled with much care. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the apostle Paul placed much emphasis on making sure that the prospective elders and deacons be "blameless" and have a "good reputation on the outside." When Christian leaders obtain a divorce and remarry, a group of Spirit-filled believers should work with them. Sometimes these church-appointed people may be led to grant full restoration; sometimes not. The wrongdoer, realizing that the name and reputation of Christ is at stake, should humbly accept their decision.

In summary, the Bible permits divorce and remarriage on two grounds: sexual infidelity and the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever. However, a Christian should never rush into divorce, no matter what the situation. Sincere effort must be made to bring the wrongdoer to repentance. Spirit-filled men and women should be involved with the wronged spouse to reach this goal. If the sinning party is a church member, the discipline procedure of Matthew 18 must be carried out. If not, fellow believers can offer counsel and be involved in supportive prayer. People who disobeyed God in their divorce and remarriage must be shown love, even though we do not approve of what they did. The aim should be their repentance and restoration to fellowship. Restoration, especially to that of leadership, must be handled very carefully to protect the name and reputation of Christ.

Chapter 5: Questions People Ask

Why did Mark and Luke (along with Matthew 5:32) omit the “except for sexual immorality” clause found in Matthew 19:9?

Some critics theorize that Jesus did not say “except for sexual immorality” in His original statement, but that Matthew (or somebody who copied his gospel) inserted these words to make Christ’s teaching more acceptable to the public. But they can produce no evidence for this conjecture.

This exceptive clause was omitted in the other gospels simply because it wasn’t needed. All first century readers—Jewish, Greek, and Roman— agreed that sexual infidelity was legitimate grounds for divorce.

Commands that have well-known or obvious exceptions are often stated without a repetition of the exceptions. For example, Paul in Romans 13:1-7 told us to obey governing authorities and states no exceptions. Peter in his first epistle (2:13-16) told us to submit to “every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” and gave us no exceptions. But both knew full well the principle expressed by Peter and recorded in Acts 5:29, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” They assumed their readers did too.

Why repeat the obvious and well-known? We normally don’t. Peter and Paul didn’t when they commanded obedience to civil authorities. Why should it be deemed strange that Mark and Luke didn’t?

Isn’t it unfair to suggest that Christians who divorce on grounds other than infidelity or desertion should remain unmarried? Didn’t Jesus say that some people can’t live the single life?

No, it’s not unfair. God has a right to call for celibacy. Moreover, He gives grace to those who look to Him for strength to obey Him. Jesus was not discussing a celibate life for divorcees when He said, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given” (Mt. 19:11). He was responding to the disciples’ objection that if sexual immorality is the only grounds for divorce and remarriage, it is best to stay single. Moreover, though Paul declared that one practical reason for marriage is to avoid sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:2), he wasn’t giving

improperly divorced people an excuse for marrying a new mate. The fact is that later in this chapter he suggested that remaining unmarried was a good option (7:27,39-40).

What about the teaching that a sexual relationship makes two people married and that sexual infidelity automatically breaks a marriage?

I believe that's wrong! When Paul declared that a man who has sex with a prostitute becomes "one body with her" (1 Cor. 6:16), he was making the point that there's no such thing as casual sex. It's always significant. Marriage and divorce have always required some kind of legal commitment or action.

Some pastors accept divorced and remarried people as church members but have a policy of never performing a marriage if one or both parties have had a divorce in their past. Do you think they are acting consistently?

Yes, they believe that remarriage after all divorces is wrong, but at the same time they hold that people who have repented after remarrying should be received back into the fellowship of the church.

However, pastors who take the position set forth in this booklet but don't perform weddings for any divorcees because they wish to avoid criticism are not being fair to those who have a biblical right to remarry. The spiritual welfare of a believer is so important that pastors should be willing to take the time necessary to determine the rightness or wrongness of remarriage in each specific case.

I have heard it said that Jesus was thinking only about sexual immorality during the Jewish betrothal period when He used the term *porneia* (fornication) instead of *moicheia* (adultery) in Matthew 19:9. The proponent of this view referred to Joseph's intention to divorce Mary when he learned that she was pregnant. What about this idea?

This theory doesn't take into consideration the fact that betrothal among the Jews was far more significant than a presentday engagement. The betrothed woman already belonged to her man. If she committed sexual sin during this time, she was executed just as if she were married (Dt. 22:22-24). She was considered guilty of adultery—of infidelity to her betrothal vow. Therefore, the technical word would be *moicheia*, not *porneia*.

Why do we find it harder to forgive and restore people who remarry after an unbiblical divorce than those who committed adultery but were able to preserve their marriage?

Perhaps it's because it just seems wrong to us that people who have an unbiblical divorce can have a happy marriage while their former mates are brokenhearted. I've felt this myself. It has troubled me that they can repent and be restored to fellowship as if nothing ever happened.

However, we should realize that the second marriage is no more blissful than the first. After a short time, they settle down to the same kind of married life as everyone else. I have met men who confessed that they were actually more happy with their first mate. In fact, the percentage of failure is greater with second marriages than the first. People in second marriages need our love and fellowship.

In Romans 7:1-6, Paul declared that a woman who leaves her husband and marries another man is called an adulteress as long as her first husband is alive. Doesn't this indicate that the apostle didn't consider remarriage after divorce a valid option?

No, it doesn't. First of all, in Romans 7:1-6 the apostle was not dealing with the subject of divorce and remarriage. He was simply illustrating the truth that we have been freed from the law system. In that we have died to all that we were before we were saved, we are now set free.

Second, Paul didn't mention the wife obtaining a divorce. A Jewish woman at that time would have had to go to the Roman civil authorities to do so. Such a divorce was not recognized as valid by the Jewish religious leadership.

Another possibility is that the apostle was thinking of a woman who ignored or bypassed the Jewish divorce laws. It appears that this was done among the elite Jews like the Herods. A man and woman simply left their mates and started living together as husband and wife.

Whether Paul was thinking about a woman who obtained a divorce through Roman law or changed partners without legal action is not clear. It really doesn't matter. It is not relevant to the truth he was illustrating.

When Words Hurt

Verbal Abuse In Marriage

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Marsha's stomach tightened. She had innocently asked her husband Dan what he had planned for the afternoon. She wanted to make sure he wasn't depending on her to be at home. She was still shaken from the anger Dan had expressed the day before when he found out she had gone shopping without telling him. For several long minutes in the middle of last night's dinner he had glared and shouted, and threatened to take away the checkbook and the car if she didn't start checking with him first. So now, the next morning, Marsha was cautiously asking him about his plans for the day. Typically, Dan misread her motives: "Why do I always have to tell you what I'm going to do?" he snapped.

Marsha could feel her body beginning to tense more. "You don't," she said timidly. "I was just wondering if you might like to do something this afternoon."

"Well, I just don't know why you expect me to tell you everything I'm doing," Dan said, even more angrily.

“Why are you getting so upset? I never said you had to tell me everything,” Marsha replied.

“I’m not upset. You always make such a big deal out of nothing!” Dan snarled.

“I wasn’t trying to make a big deal out of anything,” Marsha reasoned. “All I did was simply ask—” Before she could finish explaining herself, Dan cut her off and in a loud voice shouted, “Don’t try to deny it. You always do that!” After a few seconds of awkward silence, Dan slammed his fist on the table and continued, “Why don’t you just shut your big mouth and drop it! You don’t have a clue what it means to be a submissive wife, and you’re probably too stupid to ever get it!”

“Okay, Dan, I’ll drop it,” Marsha conceded.

“You’re not going to get off that easy,” Dan shouted. “You always try to get in the last word!”

Exasperated, Marsha exclaimed, “But I thought you wanted me to drop it!”

Marsha continued trying to explain herself, but there was no reasoning with Dan. He persisted to twist what she was saying and to call her more derogatory names. A phone call mercifully ended the episode. But Marsha left that conversation, as she had left many others, feeling belittled, confused, and guilty. She wondered what she had said to make Dan so mad and why she couldn’t get him to understand her.

Conversations like Marsha and Dan’s illustrate how spouses can hurt their partners by what they say. No punches were thrown. There was no slapping or shoving (although there could have been). Instead, Dan used his words to beat up his wife.

Using words as weapons is a practice that is as old as human language, but we still don’t give it the attention it deserves. While we have come a long way in understanding the damage that physical and sexual abuse can do, many of us have still not realized that we can injure others with our words perhaps even more than with our fists.

The purpose of this booklet is to call our attention to the power of words to help or to hurt. While we’ll deal primarily with the misuse of words in the marriage relationship, the principles covered can be applied to other relationships. Our chief concern is for the countless husbands and wives who need help in understanding and reacting in a proper manner to varying degrees of verbal control and harm. Together we need to think carefully about words that violate the spirit and promise of the marriage covenant.

The Power Of Words

We cannot afford to underestimate the importance and power of our words. The New Testament writer James said that even though the human tongue is a small part of the body, it has the power to make a tremendous impact (Jas. 3:1-12). The book of Proverbs reminds us that “the tongue has the power of life and death” (18:21). The language we use to communicate with one another is like a knife. In the hands of a careful and skilled surgeon, a knife can work to do good. But in the hands of a careless or ignorant person, it can cause great harm. So it is with words.

The Power To Do Good. The Bible teaches that a kind word can uplift, nourish, and

mend a broken heart. Proverbs 16:24 says, “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” A well-considered word can help to restore confidence, hope, and purpose to a spouse who feels dejected, lost, and confused. For example, a husband could lift the spirits of his wife by saying, “Honey, I appreciate your patience with me lately. I know I’ve been absorbed in my work. I’ve taken you for granted. You’ve been hurting, and I’ve been too preoccupied to realize it.”

The Power To Harm. Remember the schoolyard comeback, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” It’s a lie. Unkind words do injure—sometimes deeply. Being yelled at or called a name like “stupid” or “idiot,” especially by a spouse, can inflict a wound that will fester for years. We often don’t take seriously the power of the tongue to assault and its ability to devastate. A few inconsiderate words can kill the spirit of a spouse or a friend. Proverbs 12:18 states that “reckless words pierce like a sword.”

We often don’t take seriously the power of the tongue to assault and its ability to devastate. A few inconsiderate words can kill the spirit of a spouse or a friend. Proverbs 12:18 states that “reckless words pierce like a sword.” James described the tongue as being “full of deadly poison” (3:8). Psalm 52:2 speaks of the tongue as a “sharpened razor” that works to bring about the destruction of another.

Does this mean that we should never cause pain with our words? No. There is a time for “verbal surgery.” Some situations require the compassionate and skillful use of incisive words that may cause pain (Prov. 27:6). All of us need admonition, correction, and constructive criticism at times. Even though they are necessary, such words still hurt. But this is not the kind of pain that harms (2 Cor. 7:8-10). It is pain intended to help us grow.

Far too often, however, a loving motive is missing in the pain we cause with our words. It is more likely that we will use hurtful words in the process of attacking one another. Unfortunately, such instances of verbal warfare are all too common in most of our marriages. As regrettable as it is, almost all marriages experience the conflict and discord that occurs when both partners use their words to control and hurt each other.

Marital Conflict

Conflict is unavoidable in marriage. Because each partner brings his or her own perspective into the relationship, which is influenced by gender, family background, and life experiences, most marriages encounter frequent disagreements and profound differences of opinions.

In healthy relationships, most of these disagreements are resolved in a nondestructive manner. Although married couples may strongly disagree, many learn to work through their conflicts in a way that allows them to disagree with each other in a controlled and respectful manner.

It is just as true, however, that most couples go through periodic moments or seasons when they misuse their words in the midst of conflict. Occasionally, communication breaks down and turns ugly even in the best of relationships. All of us have been guilty to some extent of fighting unfairly and not trying to resolve differences as much as we are trying to manipulate, win, or at least “even the score.”

How Are Words Used To Control And Attack? Knowingly or unknowingly, all of us

who are married have used our words to control and hurt our mates. Although the ways we do this can vary in intensity from one relationship to the next, the following is a brief description of the most common tactics couples use to control and attack each other.

1. Guilt trips are an effective means of controlling people or punishing people. When spouses are able to make their partners feel guilty for disagreeing with them or challenging them, they gain power over their mates. The guilt-trip vocabulary can be as straightforward as “I hope you’re happy now” or “What took you so long?” Or it can be more subtle: “It’s always my fault.” For instance, one wife got this response from her husband whenever she pointed out one of his mistakes. He was experienced at making her feel guilty for mentioning anything negative about him.

2. Faultfinding puts spouses under a barrage of criticism. From how they take care of their things, to how they manage money, to how they look, to how they drive the car, spouses can pick apart and lecture their mates. Whether it’s occasional or ongoing, faultfinding allows spouses who are dishing it out to feel superior and makes their partners feel inferior.

3. Name-calling is applying a negative word or phrase to a spouse’s deficiency. Derogatory names like stupid, lazy, idiot, jerk, dumb, or cry baby are used to make a partner feel small and worthless. Spouses may also resort to character assassinations like “You’ve never been much of a wife” or “You’ll never amount to anything.”

4. Yelling occasionally occurs in many marriages. Shouting or blowing up and screaming statements like “What’s your problem!” or “Just shut up and leave me alone!” intimidates a partner. It allows the spouse who is yelling to feel strong and makes the other feel weak, defeated, and terrified of doing or saying anything that might provoke another attack.

5. Sarcasm is another method of control, and it is often a thinly veiled attack. Sarcastic responses such as “whatever” or “sure” (especially accompanied by rolled eyes) discounts and condemns a partner’s point of view. Sarcasm obviously doesn’t set the mood for honest discussion. Instead, it frustrates partners and sabotages the conversation in a way that leaves the offending spouse in charge and on top.

6. Blaming allows one spouse to be exonerated and imposes guilt on the other. When something goes wrong, it’s the other partner’s fault. For example, one wife asked her husband to make a phone call for her and then later scolded him for doing it when the phone call created a problem with another family member. One husband blew up at his wife but then blamed her for causing his outburst. Blame-shifting leaves the innocent partner feeling confused and punished.

7. Put-downs, whether subtle or overt, are also used by some spouses to gain power over their mates. In a very calm yet condescending tone, one husband would talk down to his wife by telling her not to worry about the finances because they were over her head. Other spouses may mock their partners in public for something they did or said. In a public display of power they might say, “Why did you wear that outfit?” or “That wasn’t too bright!” to make their spouses feel foolish and small.

Why Are Words Used To Control And Attack? In one way or another, most husbands and wives have resorted to at least some of the above verbal tactics. And the problem is not just about words. It’s about personal selfishness, anger, or insecurity, compelling us to use words for any of the following purposes:

1. To Get Our Own Way. There's a selfish streak in all of us. To some degree, we all struggle with wanting to get our own way. One of the things that made Jesus' life here on earth so remarkable is that He wasn't selfish. He always put the best interests of others and the purposes of God the Father before His own, even though it caused Him to suffer more than anyone else in history. As the people of Christ, we are called to follow His example of unselfishness wherever that may lead (Phil. 2:3-5). But all of us fall short. At a point of marital disagreement, even mature spouses can act childish and demand to have their own way. Controlling our mates through intimidation or guilt is an effective way to get what we selfishly want and to avoid personal loss.

2. To Get Even. Retaliation is a major reason many spouses turn to tactics such as name calling or sarcasm. Right or wrong, some spouses feel personally attacked or let down, so they seek to punish their mates. They forget or ignore that vengeance is God's business (Rom. 12:19). They react out of anger with the intention of "getting even." Other spouses simply take out personal frustrations on their partners. They're angry about certain circumstances or at other people, and they want someone—anyone—to suffer for the fact that things aren't going their way.

3. To Hide. Openness and personal responsibility are fundamental to a marriage. Without them there can be no maturing of the relationship. It may be difficult for us to admit, but sometimes we use words to hide and protect ourselves. Like the first married couple, Adam and Eve, we get scared and try to conceal our failures from our mates and from God (Gen. 3:7-13).

When confronted with the truth of our harmful behavior toward others, we don't want to own up. We're often too angry over being hurt ourselves. We're afraid that if we do own up, we will be attacked or abandoned. Like an accused criminal, we vigorously declare our innocence (Prov. 16:2). Following in the footsteps of Adam, we often become defensive and blame our spouses, and even God, for our self-centered behavior (Gen. 3:12). For example, rather than taking responsibility for how his anger had made it difficult for his wife to speak up in their relationship, one husband responded, "How can you say that about me after all I've done for you!"

To some degree, all of us have spoken manipulative and intimidating words to get our own way. All of us have used unkind words to "punish" our spouses. And we all have blamed our spouses to protect ourselves. When we see this in ourselves, we need to be more willing to own up to it and feel sorrow over the specific harm we do to our spouses and the problems we've created.

It is our ownership and brokenness that begin to repair the damage we've caused. Words of open and honest confession and remorse can begin to rebuild trust, and in time may lead to reconciliation and a return to intimacy.

Verbal Oppression In Marriage

While we know that verbal battles happen in every marriage, reasonable and fair-minded people realize that there is a line between normal marital conflict and severe verbal and emotional abuse. It doesn't take great wisdom to see that when a dominant spouse begins using words to habitually control and attack, a critical line has been crossed. The marriage has become a one-sided, verbally abusive relationship where love and respect have been replaced by self-centered power and control.

When the line between normal marital conflict and severe verbal abuse is increasingly crossed, the relationship becomes oppressive. Partners stand less and less on equal ground. One spouse doesn't have the freedom to say no or to express his or her views and opinions. The other has most, if not all, of the power, and almost everything must happen on the controlling spouse's terms—or else.

The Bible doesn't take any kind of selfish domination lightly. Seeing the tears of the oppressed and observing that power was on the side of their oppressors, the writer of Ecclesiastes concluded that it can seem better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed (Eccl. 4:1-2).

Oppression is a terrible experience in any context, but especially in marriage. It's certainly not the mutual love and respect that God intended between a husband and a wife (Eph. 5:21-28). Instead, it's more like a dictatorship, one spouse lording authority over the other. To reinforce control, spouses with the most power may try to isolate their mates from family and friends. Behind closed doors they may also use a pattern of physical, emotional, financial, and even sexual control.

Who Are The Abusive Oppressors? Experience and research tell us that husbands are usually the ones who are verbally controlling, but many wives are guilty as well. While husbands commit most of the physical abuse that occurs in marriage, both husbands and wives have the potential to dominate their spouses with their words.

Not all verbally abusive spouses look alike. Some are overtly intimidating and demanding—similar to the sort of person described in Psalm 10:7 whose “mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.” Others are not so obviously offensive and demanding, but are extremely manipulative. They are like both of Samson's wives who manipulated and pestered him with their words for days on end until they wore him down to the point that he finally gave them what they wanted (Jud. 14:16-17; 16:15-17).

How Do Spouses Use Words To Oppress? Spouses who regularly oppress and control their partners employ the same verbal tactics used by all spouses— they just use them more frequently and with greater intensity and malice. The names they use are generally more demeaning. The guilt trips are more subtle and confusing. The sarcasm is more biting, and the blaming is more intense. They also add a few tactics such as threatening, demanding, and invalidating.

Threatening. Threats are used to scare and intimidate their mates. They may threaten to divorce, quit a job, spread vicious rumors, take away the children, or even commit murder or suicide if they don't get what they want.

Demanding. Ordering their spouses around and speaking to them like servants is a more obvious way to control and oppress. They don't make a request like “Please?” or “Could you do this for me?” They make demands. They restrict and boss their partners around with statements like, “You're not doing that!” or “We're leaving now!”

Invalidating. Invalidation of thoughts or feelings can play havoc with a person's mind. Controlling spouses often do this by outrightly denying what they have just said or done. They distort reality in an effort to confuse their spouses and make themselves appear superior. Such mind-games cause their partners to second guess themselves. By negating what their partners think, they can make them doubt themselves. For instance, when a husband attempts to tell his wife that he feels disparaged by the way she lectures him, she may try to invalidate his point by

accusing him of being too sensitive or by totally denying that she “lectures.” An extremely controlling husband might say to his wife, “I just don’t know what’s wrong with you. Do you really think anyone is going to take you seriously?”

How Do Verbally Abused And Oppressed Spouses Respond? An abused spouse’s outward response is based on what is taking place inside. Inwardly, most feel extremely guilty for the problems in their relationship. Not only do their controlling spouses regularly imply that they are to blame, they have a tendency to take the hit for anything that goes wrong or to feel guilty for having opinions or desires that are contrary to or that upset their spouses.

An emotion they normally don’t feel or allow themselves to feel is anger. Being relentlessly manipulated, belittled, and bossed around is wrong. Such mistreatment should cause them to feel a righteous sense of anger. Not all anger is wrong (Eph. 4:26-27). But oppressed spouses often don’t even admit their own anger to themselves. If they let themselves feel their anger, they are afraid they might say or do something that would further enrage their mates. Many live in the constant terror of being abandoned by the one they need and love.

In addition to living with fear, verbally abused women often feel that it is their spiritual responsibility to be submissive even to abusive husbands. They fail to understand that the Bible does not give husbands the right to lord their authority over their wives. Nor does the Bible tell wives that they are never to question their husbands’ abuse of authority. Fearful submission does not honor the covenant of marriage. Nor does mindless submission honor the purpose for which the Scriptures tell husbands and wives to love and respect each other.

On the outside, many verbally abused spouses wilt in the face of verbal attacks. Some will comply with their spouse’s demands and others will apologize for upsetting them. One abused wife, for instance, would always withdraw in fear when her husband blew up at her. Eventually, she would apologize for asking him a question or making a statement that he didn’t agree with. He would then tell her that she should be grateful to have a husband like him who would forgive her for putting him through so much.

In most cases, verbally abused spouses don’t fully realize the oppression and control they are pinned beneath. It’s as though they have a sense that something isn’t right, but they can’t put their finger on it. Out of frustration, they often try to reason with their abusive spouses and attempt to explain what their abusive mates have misunderstood. They may even ask them to explain why they are so upset. But attempts to clarify are mostly useless.

Abusive spouses don’t want to be reasonable. They don’t want honest dialogue. They want to play mindgames by invalidating their spouses’ opinions or by exaggerating the truth. They pursue a strategy of verbal abuse because it works to control their mates.

Regrettably, verbally oppressed spouses may sometimes become like their partners and respond with physical violence. After years of constant manipulation, irrationality, and put-downs, a verbally cornered spouse may snap and lash out physically. But violence never resolves marital conflict. God hates violence (Mal. 2:16). In this case, however, the physical violence is not characteristic of the spouse’s reaction nor is a part of a larger system of control and oppression. The intent isn’t to reverse dominance roles. It’s usually a desperate, immature way to stop years of oppression and mistreatment.

The Damage Of Extreme Verbal Abuse

Verbally abusive words can hurt at any level. But we are left with damage that is more extensive when the abuse becomes extreme. You can't see the bruises, as you can with physical abuse, but the injury is there and is just as great. In fact, most extremely abused spouses say they would prefer physical abuse over another torrent of guilt-trips, putdowns, and angry words. The misery they experience is seen in the details of the mental, emotional, and physical harm they incur.

Mental Damage. The long-term effect of living with an irrational, belittling spouse is that those who are being abused feel as if they're going crazy. They feel as if they're going to explode inside because they know something is seriously wrong but their partners continue to deny it. Their partners insist that nothing is wrong, and that if there is a problem it's not with them.

One abused wife said that she would get so frustrated and confused that she felt like pulling the hair out of her head. She never knew what to expect. What wasn't a big deal one day to her husband would upset him the next. And no matter how hard she tried to explain herself, her husband wouldn't even consider her point of view. She knew what the truth was, but her husband was so clever and persuasive at making her think that everything was her fault or that he didn't say what he said, that she felt compelled to believe him. But she always suspected she was betraying her own sense of good judgment.

Spouses who are married to mates who regularly abuse them with their words also struggle with extreme self-doubt. They doubt their own feelings, judgments, abilities, and perceptions. When their point of view is constantly discounted, they begin to second-guess themselves. After being so disparaged and demeaned, they lack confidence in themselves and in their ability to stand up for what they believe.

Perhaps the worst damage caused by severe verbal abuse in marriage is a loss of selfhood. This is when a spouse begins to believe that he or she has no value or voice. No one can ever truly take away an individual's sense of being a person of unique value, but a verbally oppressive spouse can come very close. To have one's opinions, feelings, accomplishments, and dreams regularly mocked and discounted can lead a person into thinking that he or she is nothing as an individual. Such cruel mistreatment smothers the glory and honor God has given each of us as creatures made in His image (Ps. 8:4-5).

Emotional Damage. Extreme verbal abuse makes its victims feel small and powerless. They feel weak and helpless as individuals to change their circumstances. After living in a situation where nothing changes no matter what they do, they slowly give up. They begin to stop caring and start to lose heart.

Many of us who know someone who has been verbally abused notice this shift in the person's countenance. The person who used to be happy, outgoing, and full of energy and hope is now unhappy, withdrawn, lethargic, and depressed.

Spouses who experience extreme verbal abuse also feel the penetrating knife of betrayal. Before marriage, their partners led them to believe they were kind, thoughtful, reasonable, and flexible. Some put on quite an elaborate show of kindness and respect. Shortly after marriage, however, the dark side began to show itself. When marriage partners turn out to be completely different from what they pretended to be, feelings of betrayal can become

overwhelming.

The sense of betrayal and abandonment deepens for many because they also feel let down by their church. Many women who have been victimized by extreme verbal abuse haven't found their churches to be a place of help. Many church leaders don't believe the Scriptures give them a basis for considering verbal and emotional abuse as serious as physical and sexual abuse. Some believe the problem will go away if the "offended" partner goes home and tries to be more submissive and loving.

The Scriptures, however, teach that while words may seem insignificant, they can do great damage. Words can degrade. Words are like fire (Jas. 3:5-6). Words can be hellish in their destructive effect (v.6). Words can be a deadly poison (v.8). Words can cripple. Words can kill. The sinful use of words can put us in danger of eternal punishment (Mt. 5:22).

Sadly, the truthfulness of these Scriptures is borne out in the lives of many who have found that the pain of demeaning words can be worse and more lasting than a physical assault. Having their marriage partner call them ugly, stupid, or good-for-nothing is a worse betrayal of companionship than a slap in the face.

Physical Damage. Eventually, what affects the soul will take its toll on the body. It's not uncommon for spouses who have experienced extreme verbal abuse to suffer with a host of stress related symptoms such as migraine headaches, nervous twitches, or severe stomach aches. Victims also suffer from exhaustion, TMJ disorders, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Such physical afflictions can cause needless suffering and disrupt a person's capacity to serve and to enjoy life.

Responding To Abusive Words

Some might think that verbal abuse in marriage isn't really all that serious. But those who have been on the receiving end of it know how frustrating and devastating it can be.

The sort of control and unkindness that shows up in every marriage may not require the kind of serious intervention needed in more severe cases of verbal abuse, but it does deserve more of our attention as individuals and within the church.

Whether verbal offenses merely touch or completely cover the landscape of our marriages, we need to base our response to them on some central relationship principles. Before turning our attention more specifically toward some of the particulars of how to respond to verbal abuse in marriage, let's take a brief look at what it means to love a spouse who wounds us with words.

What Does It Mean To Love? Most of us find it difficult to love those who hurt us. To be sure, love is not simply making our spouses feel better. It is not merely appeasing our husbands or wives. It is not avoiding conflict just to get along. Put simply, to love is to seek the best interests of our spouses. This means at least two things: First, love means we care deeply for our spouses even though they have lost our trust. Second, love confronts and addresses sinful patterns in the lives of our partners, even if that upsets them or makes them uncomfortable.

Jesus, who loved perfectly, was at times confrontational. He aggressively confronted and chased the money lenders out of the temple who were cheating people with their inflated prices (Mt. 21:12-13). There were moments when He made sharp remarks to others (Mt. 23:13-36; Lk. 11:39-54).

Jesus, however, confronted not to get even with His enemies but to wake up those who didn't realize the damage they were doing. He confronted to give offenders the opportunity to acknowledge their sin, to repent, and to find the forgiveness of God. In the same way, husbands and wives should lovingly confront each other out of a desire to see their mates come to their senses and be reconciled to God and themselves.

What Can A Wounded Spouse Do? Whatever degree of verbal harm spouses are struggling with, their response needs to include a greater awareness of the problem, thorough self-examination, a carefully planned confrontation, and a willingness to give their spouses time to change. As they look and wait for a sincere change of heart and behavior, they should be open to developing a desire to forgive.

Recognize The Problem. Verbally assaulted spouses help themselves and their mates by learning to recognize how and when their partners are using words to control and attack them. They can't lovingly confront a problem they neither see nor understand.

One way for wounded spouses to better recognize the problem is to listen more to their own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. They need to give their own perspectives as much weight as they are giving their spouses.

If you are in an extremely verbally abusive relationship, you aren't as dumb or selfish or oversensitive or at fault as your spouse has led you to believe. Your opinions and perceptions are legitimate. So turn up the volume on your own thoughts and feelings. Allow yourself to hear what they are telling you. Awaken your deadened emotions and feel the anger you've been suppressing for so long. Feelings aren't reliable alone as a guide to our thinking, but like one gauge among many on the dash of a car, feelings are an indicator that something is wrong.

Keeping a journal of how and when your spouse verbally dominates or assaults you can also help you understand the patterns of control and manipulation you are up against. Please understand, however, that the purpose of such a journal is for your understanding, not revenge. Record-keeping should never become a list of wrongs that you later throw back in your spouse's face (1 Cor. 13:5).

As you keep this account, you will begin to notice patterns. These will allow you to predict how and when your spouse tries to control and punish you. Once you realize this, you are less likely to be caught off guard when it occurs. You will be better prepared to confront the problem when it happens again.

Another part of recognizing the problem is knowing when you need help. Addressing serious cases of verbal abuse often requires strong corrective measures. You may not be confident enough to do it alone. You may be facing financial or child-care issues that you don't have the resources to handle on your own. That is why it may be important for you to seek help from those who have the experience and the resources. At the very least, you may need to talk with a trustworthy friend or enlist the help of a pastor or Christian counselor who understands the dynamics of serious verbal abuse. In some severe cases, an abused wife may need to seek help from a women's shelter.

Conduct A Careful Self-examination. Without minimizing the pain you are experiencing as a result of your spouse's unjustified behavior, you need to take time to look within yourself. It is appropriate for you to be angry and concerned about your spouse's sin against you, but only after you've first looked to see if there is a "log" in your own eye. Jesus taught that we should focus on our own faults first before we attempt to correct someone else.

Then we will be in a better position to address the faults of others (Mt. 7:3-5). An important part of examining yourself is owning your response to the abuse. If you've been in an extremely verbally abusive relationship, you will find it especially difficult to take responsibility for your response because you've been through so much. You are, of course, in no way responsible for your spouse's verbal mistreatment. Despite your mate's attempts to saddle you with blame, you haven't in any way caused your spouse to be disrespectful, manipulative, or oppressive toward you. You may, however, need to accept responsibility for permitting your spouse to demean you and boss you around. Owning your response helps to keep powerlessness and bitterness from taking root in your heart.

Another crucial aspect of examining yourself is taking a thoughtful look at why you may have allowed your marriage partner to verbally mistreat and control you. Countless stories of extreme verbal abuse bear out the fact that a compliant, permissive response is partly due to a strong fear of abandonment, either emotional or physical. This fearful response is often rooted in a history of anxious and unsettled relationships where there was no assurance of acceptance and support.

Fearfulness often reveals a hesitancy on our part to entrust our well-being to God. Painful events in our lives may have caused us to doubt the heart of God. Does He care? Will He protect us? These questions eat away at our faith when there is reason to wonder if He will be there for us when we need Him. So it's a struggle to trust Him with what matters most. Although we may have doubts, God does hear our cries for help (Ps. 10:17-18). Gideon, who struggled with doubt in the midst of oppression, showed us by example that wrestling through our doubts in prayer may be a part of what convinces us that God is for us. We may not find satisfactory answers to all of our questions, but our honest struggle prepares us to see God in a way that restores an undeniable faith in Him, even though we still have doubts (Jud. 6:1-17).

If you are in an extremely abusive relationship, your fear of being left alone and your struggle to trust God make it difficult for you to respond in the right manner. If you continue to act out in fear of what your spouse might do, it will trap you in more self-protective responses that will only add to your trouble (Prov. 29:25). As you struggle with doubts, you can deal with these matters of fear and mistrust by honestly facing the truth that may be causing you to live so fearfully. You may discover a connection between your painful past and the present way you are interacting in your marriage. You may learn that you have been complying and trying to please your abusive mate out of fear. If this is true, you will need to carefully consider the effect that being controlled by fear has had on you and others. And you may need to recognize that you have tolerated abuse because you have been trying to save a relationship that has long since died.

While all of us find it painful to face our losses realistically and acknowledge the harm others have done to us, our honesty allows us to accept what we've lost and motivates us to turn to God to mend our wounded hearts (Ps. 147:3). At the same time, honestly facing how we've mishandled sinful treatment by others allows us to grieve over our own wrong responses and to know the thrill of seeing that our heavenly Father eagerly waits for us to return and put our trust in Him (Lk. 15:20-24). It is here that we can truly learn the meaning of Proverbs 29:25, which says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe." Even though we might have to endure harm from others, we can know that by contrast to other relationships, our relationship with God is absolutely safe and secure, no matter how much we fail Him. In the assurance of His forgiveness, we can find the courage and desire to respond properly to a verbally controlling spouse—less out of fear and more out of love (Lk. 7:47; 1 Jn. 4:18).

Confront The Verbal Offenses. The Scriptures teach us to try to live at peace with everyone “if it is possible, as far as it depends on you” (Rom. 12:18). You may, however, be in a marriage where your spouse has made it impossible to live in peace and harmony. Your mate is either blind to his or her offensive ways, or doesn’t care. In such a case, confronting a pattern of verbal offense is necessary.

There are two options for you to consider: You can confront at the moment your spouse verbally abuses you, or you can choose a time to discuss your concern at a less emotionally charged moment. In severe cases, though, it may not be safe to confront an abusive spouse alone. You may feel legitimately afraid of a physically violent reaction. If this is the case, it is best for you to confront your spouse in the presence of a pastor or a counselor.

Regardless of when you decide to confront, the confrontation involves naming the abuse, setting limits, and following through with consequences.

First, describe the verbal offense. This involves simply putting words to how you see your spouse trying to control, punish, or invalidate you. For instance, one wife said to her husband, “You may not be aware of it, but I’ve noticed that you try to intimidate me by yelling. And you are doing it right now.” Another husband said to his wife, “Honey, I want to have a conversation with you, but it seems to me that you are trying to manipulate me to get your own way.”

In severe cases, abusive spouses will deny what they do and will often attempt to back their partners down with more verbal intimidation. It’s important to expect such efforts to control and not to get sidetracked. Stick to describing how he or she talks to you, and not necessarily the content of what has been said. Don’t try to reason or explain at this point—because your mate really does not want to be reasonable. As kindly and firmly as possible, point out that even in denial your mate is still trying to control.

Second, set limits. Naming the abuse needs immediately to be followed by setting limits. While love covers a multitude of sins, it also knows when to set appropriate constraints and limits. Telling your mate what you will no longer accept is one way to set a limit. Setting constraints may involve saying to your spouse that criticizing what you do in a degrading way, calling you a derogatory name, bossing you around, or yelling at you is wrong, and that you are not going to ignore or accept it any longer.

Third, follow through with consequences. Setting limits means little without consequences. A consequence is something that you (not your spouse) will do if your limits are not recognized and honored. For example, one wife said to her husband, “Right now you’re being sarcastic and you’re belittling me. I’ve let you know that I’m not going to accept that kind of talk anymore. We need to resolve this issue, but if you will not give me the same respect you expect me to give you, I’m ending this conversation. When you can treat me with more respect, then we can talk again.”

Another spouse whose wife regularly yelled at him over the phone told his wife, “You are screaming at me, and I’ve asked you to stop. If you continue, I’m going to hang up the phone. When you can be more civil, I’ll be glad to talk.”

The consequences should fit the situation. The more serious the verbal offenses, the more serious the consequences. Options can range from leaving the room and ending a conversation to a temporary legal separation and the suspension of sexual relations. In severe cases, a more permanent separation is not out of the question if there is no significant

repentance and change in a reasonable length of time.

Divorce is an extreme consequence that has far reaching implications for all parties involved. There is an indication in Scripture that divorce would be allowed in an abusive marriage, but without the right of remarriage (1 Cor. 7:10-11; see RBC booklets [Divorce & Remarriage \[Q0806\]](#) and [When Violence Comes Home \[CB951\]](#)). Certainly if a verbally abusive situation reaches such an impasse, the offended party must obtain wise spiritual and personal guidance from a loving and understanding pastor or Christian counselor.

Allow Time For Change. Those who've been hurt by a pattern of verbal offense need to give their mates ample time to change their behavior. Just as it may have taken a long time to recognize the seriousness of the abuse, abusive spouses usually need time to understand how much damage they have done. In many cases, offenders are so self-centered that they have no clue about the destruction they are causing with their words. Many feel that as long as they haven't laid a hand on their mates, they haven't crossed the line into serious abuse. Often, they must be compelled to listen as their partners describe the pain they've suffered. Only then can they start to understand and express meaningful words of sorrow and repentance.

It's important that your abusive partner is not let off the hook prematurely. Because of habit, selfdeception, and selfcenteredness, verbally abusive mates will often need time to suffer and bear the weight of the harm they have caused over a period of time before their hearts will begin to soften and change. Don't put too much stock in quick apologies. Don't rescue your spouse from feeling the pain of his or her sin. Proverbs 19:19 says, "A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again." Give your spouse time to contemplate the harm he or she caused you, because that's what it takes for your spouse to begin to feel the need for genuine change (Ps. 51:17).

Look For A Real Change Of Heart. It's important that those who have been severely hurt by verbal abuse know what kind of repentance to look for. Tough love won't give in to a mate who tries to make a quick apology and then follows it with a demand for forgiveness. A person who has had an honest change of heart does not say, "I said I was sorry, and now you need to forgive and forget."

Truly repentant people don't focus on their desire for forgiveness. That's a continuation of selfcenteredness. Instead, they express a genuine willingness to bear and focus on the pain they've caused. They seek help in their effort to understand how they try to control and punish. They are willing to hear what their words have done to their mates. They don't try to blame their partner. They don't try to make an apologetic excuse like, "I'm sorry I hurt you so badly, but . . ." Genuine repentance contains no "buts"!

Truly repentant persons recognize and take responsibility for their unacceptable behavior. They are willing to own up to the fear and mistrust they have created for their spouses. They realize that it is wrong to expect the one they have hurt to act as if nothing has happened. Instead, they give their husband or wife time to work through issues of forgiveness and trust. Even if a wounded person is able to extend forgiveness quickly, it is important to understand that such forgiveness may not mean a quick restoration of the relationship. Restoration is a process, not an event.

Learn To Forgive As God Has Forgiveness You. Few subjects are more misunderstood than forgiveness. Yet few actions are more needed than that of an offended person saying, "I forgive you." The necessary things are so often the hardest things to do. Jesus said, "If your brother sins [against you], rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Lk. 17:3). Implied in this

simple statement is the need for words of rebuke, words of repentance, and words of forgiveness that truly express the love of God. God forgives those who honestly confess their sin and entrust themselves to His mercy. He does not promise to remove all natural consequences of the wrong. Instead, He releases the offender from the guilt and the offended from the anger that would otherwise make mutual love impossible. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies (Lk. 6:27-36), but He doesn't demand that we forget or ignore the consequences of oppressive wrongs. He teaches us to love others even though they may have harmed us, and to be willing to forgive those who have sincerely repented (17:3). Loving those who hurt us doesn't come easy. We all need time to get to the place where we want to show love to those who have hurt us so much. But to continue to withhold love is to become like the one who has harmed us. To harden our hearts and deny forgiveness to someone who has had a change of heart is to return evil for evil. We don't have the right to do this. The New Testament tells us that God alone has the right of vengeance (Rom. 12:19-21).

Releasing the right of vengeance to God is what gets the bitterness out of our hearts. Letting go of the debt that a repentant offender could never repay is showing love in a godly way. Canceling the unpayable debt of a repentant mate is what distinguishes us as a people who have been forgiven by God (Mt. 6:14-15).

If we do not have any desire to forgive our repentant husband or wife, we need to do some real soul-searching. Vindictiveness indicates that we are not experiencing the mercy and forgiveness of God for our own sins. A vengeful, hateful attitude toward others shows us that our own self-righteous hearts need to be broken by the countless wrongs that we too have committed against God and others.

Certainly, such an awareness of our own wrongs doesn't excuse the evil others have done against us. But it does remind us that we are all on common ground at the foot of the cross of Christ. It makes us aware that if we are not willing to love others as God loves us, we ourselves are in desperate need of the mercy and love of God in our lives. Let's be thankful that His offer of mercy is still available to us (Jn. 3:16-18).

Abigail and Leah

Living in a Difficult Marriage

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Introduction

It's not easy to be a Christian woman—especially today. We have wider possibilities than our mothers had. We are offered freedoms our mothers never knew. And we can make choices that were not options for women in other times.

Life is full of choices. We have to make them, but how do we make them well? We must turn to the Word of God for help in wise decision-making. There we can learn by precept and by example. In the pages that follow, we will look at two biblical women who had to wrestle with problems that are sometimes different from our own, yet sometimes surprisingly similar to what we face. And as we watch these real women and the choices they made, we will find principles to help clarify the answers we seek.

Chapter 1

Leah: Living With A Man Who Doesn't Love You

When we talk about marriage, it's good to go back to the very beginning where it all started:

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18).

Once that was done, the writer of Genesis tells us:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (v.24).

You remember the story. Adam was alone, and God said, "It is not good." To make Adam fully conscious of his aloneness, God brought a complete animal parade to pass in front of the only human being on earth to remind him that he had no counterpart in the universe. Adam needed someone to share life with him. He was created to be in a relationship. Alone, Adam was only half the story. So God created Eve and brought her to him. Then all the pieces were in place for a magnificent marriage.

The man and the woman had an ideal situation. They were created in the image of God and were placed in a garden where they had challenging work without fatigue and stress. But you know what happened next. It had to do with a command from God, a piece of fruit, and a choice. Out of that choice flowed alienation—alienation from God their Creator; alienation from nature, which would now master them, exhaust them, and eventually absorb them back into itself; alienation from one another as blame replaced trust and hierarchy replaced equality; and finally an internal alienation as each one became a walking civil war. They were torn between their hopes and fears, vacillating between their fundamental need for relationships and their resentment at having to pay the cost of those relationships. They were now flawed people living in a fallen world.

Within only six generations from Adam and Eve, the perfect relationship

between one man and one woman had given way to polygamy. Genesis 4:19 tells us that Lamech had married two women, Adah and Zillah. The one-flesh relationship— a oneness that is not only physical but mental, emotional, and spiritual— is no longer possible for a man who acquires wives the way he acquires cattle, sheep, or gold.

In Genesis 29, we meet two women—Leah and her sister Rachel—who are rival co-wives locked in a polygamous relationship. Rachel, the younger one, is the apple of her husband's eye. Leah is not loved. How does a woman live with a man who doesn't love her? Examining Leah's life can help answer that question.

We first meet Leah as a pawn in someone else's deception. Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and had fled from Canaan back to the land of his ancestors. He came to the household of his Uncle Laban, his mother's brother. Laban invited him to stay with him and work for him. Let's look at the story as it develops in Genesis 29:

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

Laban said, "It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her."

So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her. And Laban gave his servant girl Zilpah to his daughter as her maidservant.

When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"

Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."

And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. Laban gave his servant girl Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maidservant. Jacob lay with Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years (Gen. 29:16-30).

Your first sympathy probably goes to Jacob. After all, a bargain is a bargain. He bargained for Rachel, not Leah. His crafty uncle pulled a fast one and stuck him with Leah.

But Jacob had been pretty crafty himself. He had deceived his blind father Isaac and cheated his brother Esau. So he wasn't exactly without blame. But we still feel sorry for Jacob. After 7 years of labor, he went through all of the traditional feasting to celebrate his wedding to Rachel. He waited in the darkened tent for his bride to be delivered to him, saw only dimly the heavily veiled woman enter, and assumed she was Rachel. What a shock the next morning to discover that plain Leah had been substituted for gorgeous Rachel!

It's easy to get so caught up in feeling sorry for Jacob that we forget what it must have been like to be Leah the next morning. Some commentators speculate that Leah had also been in love with Jacob during those 7 years and that she was a willing accomplice to her father's scheme. Nothing in the text confirms that. Whether she went to Jacob's tent that night as a willing accomplice or as a dutiful daughter merely obeying her father, she could not have been thrilled the next morning when Jacob made a scene with his father-in-law Laban. If Leah had ever hoped for Jacob's love, if she had ever

dared think that she could compete with her beautiful younger sister, all illusions were dashed when Jacob hit the tent roof about the deception. She was unloved, undesired, and unsought. And one week later she was the displaced wife as Jacob took Rachel to himself.

I doubt that there are many, if any, women in America today who were married under the same circumstances as Leah. But deception of one sort or another has been part of many courtships. If you are married and you think back to your own wedding, did you get what you bargained for? Or did you feel cheated by your partner in some way? Life can seem bleak indeed when the most important relationship in our experience turns out to be marred at the outset by deception or disappointment. We live in a sinful world and build relationships with sinful people. We bring our own sinfulness to those relationships. No wonder deception and disappointment creep in.

In verse 31, this sad story of unloved Leah turns a corner:

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

God was not blind to Leah's plight. He saw the ache in her heart and did something about her situation. He enabled her to give Jacob a son. The sovereign God saw Leah's need and moved to meet it. And in the process, He was working out His plan for Jacob and Jacob's descendants, even in the way He would send Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Redeemer, into the world.

Part of Leah's handicap was that she was no candidate for Miss Mesopotamia and she had a sister who was. Rachel was beautiful. And when she first appears in Genesis 29:6-12, she dances off the page, full of vitality and energy. She simply had it all. It is no surprise that Jacob flipped when he saw her. No wonder the Bible tells us that working for her for 7 years "seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (v.20).

Then there's Leah. The only thing we know about her is that she had "weak eyes" (v.17). Commentators and translators have had a field day with the Hebrew word here translated "weak." We don't really know what Leah's eyes were like. Some say she was going blind and Laban wanted to get rid of her quickly before that happened. One Bible version translates the word "tender." The Living Bible paraphrase tells us that she had "lovely eyes." All of these are possibilities. Perhaps Leah had only one good feature—her beautiful eyes. Or perhaps her eyes were so disfiguring that everything else faded into insignificance. The important thing is that whatever she looked like, she grew up in the shadow of a beautiful sister.

Could God have created Leah as beautiful as Rachel? Certainly. So why didn't He? It would have saved her great grief. Why did God wait until Leah was the unloved wife of Jacob to do something nice for her? Isaiah the prophet reminds us that "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are [God's] ways higher than your ways and [His] thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9). When we look more closely at Leah, we see that if God had made her equally as beautiful as her sister Rachel, the chances are good that she would not have been pawned off on Jacob. If that had been the case, Jacob would never have had the particular sons through whom God worked for Israel and for a fallen world. God often works in our lives not by giving us a perfect situation but by showing His power and love in our very imperfect situations. He works for our ultimate good by allowing us to struggle in less than perfect relationships.

Leah was unloved. But God saw that and opened her womb. Not once, but at least seven times. Each time that Leah held a tiny new life in her arms and named the child, we get a glimpse into her mind, into her heart, into her needs.

In Genesis 29:32, cradling her firstborn son, Leah "named him Reuben, for

she said, ‘It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.’” Soon after, “She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, He gave me this one too.’ So she named him Simeon” (v.33).

As if two sons were not enough. “Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ So he was named Levi” (v.34).

Three sons. Is that enough? Apparently not, for verse 35 tells us, “She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘This time I will praise the Lord.’ So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.”

Four little boys all in a row. Can you see Leah outside her tent on a hot Mesopotamian summer day calling “Reuben! Simeon! Levi! Judah!”? Listen to the progression in Leah’s understanding and her faith as you hear those names.

Reuben—“Behold, a son!” Leah recognized that God had seen her misery, opened her womb, and given her a son. She interpreted that fact as God’s way of enabling her to gain her husband’s love. But did it work out that way? Apparently not. Probably less than a year later, Simeon was born.

Simeon—“hearing.” Leah was still unloved. Reuben’s birth had not caused Jacob to love her. He still had eyes only for Rachel. Now God had heard Leah’s sighs. He had seen her tears. He had understood her deep desire for the love of Jacob and had given her a second son. Surely this time Jacob would love her. But did he?

Again Leah gave birth to a son and called him **Levi**— “attached, joined.” She explained, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I

have borne him three sons.”

Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Leah hoped that each new little son would make a difference in the marriage, that somehow Jacob would begin to love her as he loved Rachel. She still hoped for equal if not first place in his heart. With the passage of time after the birth of each little boy, hope was deferred and then dashed to the ground. All of her efforts to win Jacob’s love—with God’s help—were fruitless. He still had eyes only for the beautiful but barren Rachel.

Many wives go to extraordinary lengths to win or to keep the love of husbands who do not respond to them in love. Just as often, as with Leah, that hope springing eternal becomes hope deferred or hope dashed to the ground.

It is tough to live in a relationship without deep, mutual, committed love. Everything in us cries out for it. After all, that was God’s original intent for marriage when He created the man and woman and brought them together in Eden.

Marriage in Eden was more than sex. It was a marriage of minds, goals, interests, and spirits. And it was a marriage of two bodies becoming one to symbolize all the oneness a man and a woman could experience in every other dimension of their lives together. It was a total unity that was possible only in Eden. In their perfection, Adam and Eve could have that relationship.

As a flawed woman married to a flawed man, I cannot have that total and unblemished union with my husband. My needs get in the way of his needs. His wishes collide with mine. It is easy to become disillusioned about a relationship that cannot be perfect. So we try and we long and we wish for something better. In today’s world, if we despair of achieving it with Mr. Wonderful #1, we may decide to try it with Mr. Wonderful #2 or Mr.

Wonderful #3.

In a day when we are surrounded with media telling us that romantic love is the basis of strong marriages, it's hard to hang on to the fact that a magnificent marriage can be built on something other than love. In the disappointment of feeling less loved than you'd like, is it possible to find resources for happiness in a less-than-perfect marriage? Look at Leah's attitude when her fourth son was born. She named him **Judah**, which means "praising." She explained that name by saying, "This time I will praise the Lord." For the first time in naming her sons, Leah turned from expressing her yearning for *Jacob's* love to accepting and basking in *God's* love.

Leah's focus had shifted from what she lacked to what she had. True, nothing had changed with Jacob. He was still starry-eyed over Rachel. Leah could not change him. But she could change herself. She could change her focus. She could recognize the hand of God in her life, giving her significance.

The most important step toward joy in a loveless marriage is to change our focus from what we do not have to what we do have. Leah had four sons in a day when sons were everything. She woke up to the richness of her situation and said, "This time I will praise the Lord."

Genesis 30 opens with the spotlight on Rachel:

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family" (vv.1-3).

Bilhah had a son by Jacob who legally became Rachel's child. We know this because it was Rachel who named the little boy. She called him **Dan**, saying, "God has vindicated me; He has listened to my plea and given me a son"

(v.6).

If it worked once, maybe it would work twice. So Rachel sent Bilhah to Jacob again. The maidservant bore another son and Rachel named the baby **Naphtali**, which means “wrestlings.” Rachel explained her choice of names by saying, “I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won” (v.8).

Had she? The score was actually four to two in Leah’s favor. But nervous because her sister could close in on her, Leah jumped into the same game and gave her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob also. When Zilpah gave birth to a son, Leah called him **Gad**, meaning “fortune.” Yes, her riches were increasing. The score was now five to two, still in Leah’s favor.

It had worked twice for Rachel. Perhaps it would work twice for Leah. So once again she sent Zilpah to sleep with Jacob. Zilpah became pregnant and bore a son. Leah named him **Asher**, which means “happy.” She exclaimed, “How happy I am! The women will call me happy” (v.13).

What a switch! The loved and favored Rachel was desolate. The miserable, unloved Leah exclaimed, “How happy I am!” The tables were turned. The woman who had it all at the beginning was eaten up with jealousy and frustration. The substitute wife, who wanted so desperately to know her husband’s love, now had learned to focus on what she had, not on what she lacked. She could say, “How happy I am!”

I would be happy if the story ended with Genesis 30:13. Leah sounded victorious over her loveless marriage. She praised God for what she had and didn’t focus on what she lacked. It would be nice to think that she stayed that way for the rest of her life. But our battles seldom stay won. In the day-to-day rivalry of Rachel and Leah, a rivalry that lasted a lifetime, Leah’s battle to live above her loveless marriage had to be fought again and again.

We gain insights into the relationship between the two sisters in the story that follows:

During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "[Jacob] can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. "You must sleep with me," she said. "I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he slept with her that night. God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son (30:14-17).

This incident demonstrates the daily tensions in Jacob's household. Little Reuben had found some mandrakes in the field. The mandrake is a plant that bears a yellow fruit the size of a plum and is shaped like a tomato. This fruit was called a love apple. People believed that mandrakes helped a woman become fertile.

Rachel's exclamation to Jacob at the beginning of Genesis 30, "Give me children, or I'll die!" revealed the intensity of her desire to bear children. So you can understand why, when she saw Reuben with love apples, she asked Leah to give some to her. But you can also understand Leah's answer: "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?"

The relationship between Leah and Rachel was still colored by rivalry. Rachel would do anything to get pregnant. Leah could not forget that Rachel held her husband's heart in her careless hands. So the bargaining began. In the end Rachel agreed to let Jacob sleep with Leah that night in exchange for the mandrakes. Ironically, it was the woman without the mandrakes who became pregnant. The woman who believed in the magical qualities of those little yellow love apples remained barren.

When Leah's fifth son was born, she called him **Issachar**, meaning "reward." She explained his name by saying, "God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband" (v.18). Leah saw Issachar's birth as a reward from God.

It appears that almost immediately Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son whom she named **Zebulun**, meaning "honor." Her explanation was, "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons" (v.20).

Note the ways in which Leah's understanding of life had grown. After her first son was born, she said, "Surely my husband will love me now." After the third son came along, she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me." Now at the birth of her sixth son, she has scaled down her expectations. She said simply, "This time my husband will treat me with honor." She was becoming more realistic about what would or would not happen in her marriage.

Contentment in a loveless marriage will never come as long as we cling to the ideal of romantic love and lose sight of the good gifts of God we have already received. Leah focused on Zebulun as "a precious gift" from God.

Many years had passed since that morning when Jacob awakened and discovered that the bride in his tent was Leah and not Rachel. During all those years Rachel wanted a child more than anything else in the world. After long years of waiting—with the score standing at nine (including daughter Dinah) for Leah and only two for Rachel by her maidservant—Rachel's cry for a child was heard by God and she became pregnant. Son Joseph was born, and Rachel's first request was, "May the Lord add to me another son" (v.24).

God heard her prayer, but with consequences she couldn't have anticipated.

By this time Jacob had worked for Laban for 20 years. One scoundrel was being fleeced by another scoundrel. So Jacob made the decision to return to Canaan with his large family of two wives, two concubines, ten sons and one daughter.

As the family journeyed west, the unthinkable happened. Rachel, nearing the end of the journey and pregnant with her second son, died in childbirth. What she wanted more than anything else in the world became the cause of her final separation from the man who loved her. The woman with every reason to be happy died giving birth to a son she named Ben-Oni, “son of my sorrow” (35:18).

It’s easy to look at a woman with breathtaking beauty and the undying love of her man and think that she must be the happiest of all women. But hear Rachel’s sorrow. Hear her complaint. Things are often not what they appear to be.

And what of Leah? God had sovereignly removed her rival from the family circle. Rachel was gone. Leah was now the number one wife. We do not know whether Jacob learned to love her any more than he had at the time of that first deception. We do not know how many more years they lived together. We know only that when Leah died, Jacob buried her in the ancestral burial ground, the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah were buried. He honored her in her death.

At the end of the book of Ruth, after Boaz had bested the nearer kinsman and had won Ruth as his bride, the elders of the city of Bethlehem prayed:

May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel (4:11).

Leah the unloved was Leah the foremother who helped build up the house

of Israel. Of the twelve sons of Jacob who became the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, six were born to Leah. Out of Leah's personal sadness came rich blessing for Israel. It was Leah who gave birth to Judah, from whom came Israel's greatest king, David, and from whom came the Lion of the tribe of Judah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Leah, the plain older sister of beautiful Rachel, lived in a very difficult situation and survived. Like her, we too are fallen people in a fallen world. We are people scarred by alienation from each other and from ourselves. Life seldom, if ever, comes to us in a way that is fully satisfying. Most of the time it comes with an edge of dissatisfaction— not quite enough love, not quite enough care, not quite enough honor, not quite enough esteem. Almost, perhaps, but never as much as we'd like.

Like Leah, we can focus on what we lack and be miserable. Or also like Leah, we can decide to focus on what we have and make up our minds that "this time we will praise the Lord."

How do you live with a husband who doesn't love you? You change your focus. In the process, you will not only end up exclaiming with Leah, "How happy I am!" but you will someday find that God has worked His miracle through your sadness, touching the world with blessing through you.

Chapter 2

Abigail: Living With A Difficult Husband

Have you ever walked down your street and looked at each house and

wondered about the way the people living in that house get along with each other? Or have you looked at a woman sitting ahead of you in church and thought, “Wow! No question about it, she’s got it all! Her handsome Christian husband is a leader in the church. And he treats her like a queen. Their obedient kids never seem to give them any trouble. They have enough money to do whatever they want to do and go where they want to go. I wonder what it would be like to be in such a perfect Christian family.”

Sometimes we look at others around us and allow ourselves to have a pity party, thinking how much better other people’s lives are than our own. That’s the problem of judging from the outside. What goes on behind the closed doors of a Christian home may be quite different from what should go on in a family. The “too perfect” family in the next pew may be anything but perfect.

A few years ago I spoke at a women’s retreat. The women were from a strict church where everyone knew exactly how to cross each “t” and dot each “i.” They filled their notebooks, appearing to write down virtually everything I said. But I wondered if any of them were real.

On Saturday evening, after my third talk, the answer came. Three women approached me after the service. Each one had essentially the same story to tell. Let me tell you about just one of them.

As she walked toward me, it was clear that she was terribly frightened. I could see the fear in her eyes and the nervousness in her twisting fingers. She appeared to be held together with little more than rubber bands. As I tried to put her at ease and probe for the cause of her distress, little by little she told me her story.

She had been married for 13 years to a man who was a seminary graduate and who had pastored three churches during their marriage. He had recently

left the ministry and was trying his hand at selling real estate. The couple had three school-age children. She worked fulltime as a psychiatric nurse and was bringing in the only regular paycheck at that time. I'll call this couple Jack and Jane.

Jack is an abuser. Yes, he has been a pastor. He is a Christian. He is a seminary graduate. But he is also an abuser. He beats his wife. Jane is a battered woman. She is intelligent and works in psychiatric nursing. But she is still a battered wife.

Jack has been beating Jane since the first year of their marriage. The beatings take many forms. They start when his rages burst out and he throws everything he can lay hands on at her. Then he pounces on her, pummeling her and pulling out her hair.

After this kind of beating, she knows he will return in the night and start in again. So she lies awake all night, "feeling the lion prowling around the house," not knowing how or when he will attack her again. The second attack may be another beating, or it may be a bucket of cold water dumped on her in the dark.

If Jack goes into a rage while they are driving in the car, she fears for the lives of the entire family. Once when she was pregnant, he reached across her, opened her car door and pushed her out into the street from the moving vehicle.

After these attacks Jack becomes very contrite. In public, especially in the church where he is looked up to as a strong leader, he hugs Jane and tells people to look at his beautiful wife. Outside the home he carefully cultivates the impression of being a loving, doting husband.

Jack's rages seem to be precipitated by a number of things. If he catches

Jane reading a book, he snatches it away, telling her that if she wants to learn anything, she must ask him and he will teach her. He rigidly holds his family to a daily schedule of memorizing Scripture. In fact, he devised a system that many families in their church use. In it he has a key verse for every chapter in the Bible and a complex memory system for learning these verses. Members of his family also must spend a certain amount of time each day listening to Christian tapes. Anytime a member of the family has not learned the verse perfectly or cannot answer all his questions about the tape, Jack gets very upset.

Several years ago Jane persuaded Jack to see a counselor with her. But the Christian counselor merely lectured her on her duty to be submissive.

As Jane talked to me, it was clear that she had been the brunt of Jack's rages for years. But she found the courage to speak to me only because she now feared for the safety of their three children. She had been taught so well by the church to be submissive that she thought she had no alternative but to stay in the home, take the abuse, and risk being killed as Jack's rages escalated. In fact, as is often true of battered women, Jane actually took the blame for Jack's abuse. He insisted that if she were different, he would not beat her. He did not see himself as an abuser.

Battered women are a fact of life in American society today—and a fact of life within our evangelical churches. One out of every eight women in our country is physically abused. One out of every four is sexually abused. In the United States a woman is beaten every 18 seconds. One-fourth of these are pregnant. In fact, the battering pattern often begins with a woman's first pregnancy.

Furthermore, nine out of every ten battering incidents are not reported to the police. Legal experts call wife-abuse the "silent crime," one of the most unreported or under-reported crimes in our country.

Many women are not physically battered but are still abused. A major source of depression, for instance, is low self-esteem that comes from being constantly put down by the people closest to us—those who should build us up.

I have a close friend whose husband hardly ever sits down at the dinner table without telling her what food she should have cooked and how the food she did cook should have been cooked. For more than 25 years my friend has endured this torrent of criticism at virtually every meal. No wonder her self-confidence is zero. There's nothing she can do to please him. He picks away at her day and night. He is an abuser and she is abused.

Abuse can be physical, verbal, or nonverbal. In whatever form it comes, many Christian women accept this abuse in the name of submission. They are convinced that as Christian women they have no alternative but to take the abuse as God's will for their lives.

A case study in handling an abusive man is found in 1 Samuel 25. There we meet a man named Nabal and his wife Abigail. Verse 3 describes Abigail as “an intelligent and beautiful woman” but Nabal as “surly and mean in his dealings.”

Nabal was a hard man to live with. The force of the Hebrew words translated “surly and mean” is that he was harsh and overbearing, a heavy-handed evildoer.

The servants in Nabal's household would certainly agree with God's description of this man. In verse 17 we overhear a servant talking to Abigail about his master and her husband: “He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him.”

Again, the Hebrew text is very strong. Nabal is “an evil man, a son of Belial,”

the worst possible statement of contempt that the servant could use. Nabal was a hard man, a difficult man, a severe man. He was impossible to reason with.

The servant was not alone in that opinion. Abigail describes her husband to David in verse 25: “May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name is Fool, and folly goes with him.”

So Nabal was a wicked, difficult man. God said so. The servant said so. Abigail agreed.

Abigail probably got into that unpleasant marriage through no choice of her own. In Abigail’s day marriages were arranged by the parents. Nabal was one of the wealthiest men in the region. Verse 2 tells us that he had 1,000 goats and 3,000 sheep. He was a man of importance and influence. To arrange a marriage with such a man was considered a good catch. The fact that Abigail might not be happy in such a marriage was irrelevant.

Unfortunately, many women today get into marriages every bit as miserable as Abigail’s. The handsome prince turns out to be a toad. The fine Christian leader turns out to be an abuser.

How did Abigail handle her situation, locked in a marriage to a wicked and evil man, one whom no one could talk to or reason with? Can we learn anything from her that can help us or help women we know who are trapped in such a situation?

At the very least we need to make the best of a bad situation. Better, we need to find a way to turn a bad situation into something good. When we first meet Abigail, we see a woman doing everything possible to limit the damage her husband has done. And Nabal had done real damage, so much so that the entire household was in danger of extermination. Let’s review

the story.

It opens during the time of year when Nabal's 3,000 sheep were being shorn. That's a lot of sheep, a lot of shearers, and a lot of work for everyone concerned.

Sheepshearing season in Nabal's day was also a festive time. It was customary for the sheep owner to provide a feast when the job was done. At that feast he would give gifts to everyone who had helped in any way during the year. This was a token of thanks to God and a gesture of goodwill to his neighbors. When David sent his young men to collect what was due to them for the protection they had provided Nabal's shepherds during the year, they had every reason to expect Nabal to be generous.

But instead, in verses 10 and 11, we see Nabal insulting David's men in two ways. First, he should have responded generously to them for the help they had given his shepherds. Second, oriental custom required him to be polite to them even if David had been a deadly enemy. Not only did wicked, surly, mean Nabal refuse to give anything when he should have given freely, but he also scorned David's character in front of his men.

David understood the insult well. His answer was essentially, "Okay, men, put on your swords. We're going to clean up on this guy and on every man and boy in his household." With 400 armed men, David set out to destroy Nabal's household. At the same time a wise servant ran to Abigail to report what had happened. Here's his summary:

David sent messengers from the desert to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us all the time we were herding our sheep near them. Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him (1 Sam. 25:14-17).

Abigail had a bad situation on her hands. Four hundred men were on their way to kill not only Nabal but most of the household. She had to act quickly to limit the damage her husband had done.

Knowing yourself, what would you have done in Abigail's place? Would you have run off to save yourself? Would you have organized the servants to fight David's men? Would you have tried to reason with Nabal? Would you have resigned yourself to being killed? Would you have panicked? Abigail took decisive, independent action:

Abigail lost no time. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins, and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. Then she told her servants, "Go on ahead; I'll follow you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. As she came riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, there were David and his men descending toward her, and she met them. David had just said, "It's been useless—all my watching over this fellow's property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground (vv.18-23).

Quick-thinking Abigail hurried to head off trouble at the pass. But what do you think of what Abigail did? Do you think she was correct in her actions? What was really happening as she scurried around to get all the bread baked, the raisins and figs packed, and the wineskins loaded on the donkeys?

First, she did exactly the opposite of what Nabal wanted done. He had turned David's men away, but she prepared large quantities of food for them. Second, she did this behind his back. The text points out that she did not tell her husband what she was doing.

Do her actions seem right to you? Look at David's evaluation of what Abigail

did:

David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands" (vv.32-33).

David saw Abigail's independent action, contrary to Nabal's wishes, as being from God. Abigail stands before us as a model of a wise woman in a difficult situation. She acted in the best interests of her household and of her husband. The first person to feel the edge of David's sword would have been Nabal. In going against Nabal's wishes, Abigail was saving his life. She had his best interests in mind.

Not every situation women face in bad marriages is a matter of life and death. In Abigail's case it was. In Jane's case it was getting there. A Christian woman's obligation to be a submissive wife ends where lives are at risk. A woman is wise who does what she can to limit the damage caused by a difficult man in the home.

Such a woman may have to take immediate steps to ensure safety for herself and her children. If the situation is physically dangerous, she must first get herself and her children out while she can. She must act in the best interests of everyone concerned. This includes her husband's best interest, but it also includes her own and that of any children involved.

It is important to know that a woman is not a failure as a wife and she is not disobedient to God if she takes active steps to preserve life in an abusive situation.

The second step that women must take is to work to turn bad situations into good ones. A person with cancer may undergo radiation treatment or chemotherapy to keep the cancer from spreading. That's a way of limiting the damage. But if the cancer is operable, the surgeon will also elect to

remove it so that the patient can return to full health. The goal is to do more than just limit the damage. We want to turn a bad situation into a good one.

Abigail successfully headed off David's army from slaughtering Nabal's household. But to keep from having to repeat the rescue operation in another situation, she had to do more than that.

When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king. He was in high spirits and very drunk. So she told him nothing until daybreak. Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone (vv.36-37).

It wasn't enough to avert one danger. Nabal had to be confronted with his way of handling life. He had to understand the consequences of his churlish behavior. One of the things we see in verse 36 is that Abigail chose the right time to talk to Nabal. Often when we confront a difficult person, we choose the wrong time and the wrong place. Abigail wisely waited until the banquet was over, the drunken stupor had passed, and Nabal was sober.

Even though Abigail chose her moment wisely, she took great risks in confronting Nabal. Recall that he was described as surly and mean (v.3). And the servant had said he was so wicked that no one could reason with him (v.17). Abigail had no assurance that Nabal would listen to her. She had no way of knowing whether he would become furious and harm her. But she knew that she had to confront Nabal even though it might not turn out well.

For Nabal, at least, it did not turn out well. The shock of his close brush with David's wrath put him into cardiac arrest. We don't know from the passage whether Nabal's attack was brought on by anger over Abigail's meddling in his affairs or if he was enraged that David had gotten the better of him. Perhaps it was sheer terror that struck him when he realized how close he had come to death. Whatever caused the stroke or heart attack, in 10 days'

time it proved to be fatal (v.38). Nabal died.

We also do not know from the biblical text how Abigail talked to Nabal on that fateful morning. We know only that she “told him all” that had happened. She took the next necessary step to turn a bad situation into a better one. She confronted him with the consequences of his actions.

In a difficult relationship, don’t simply try to limit the damage. Work to make a bad situation good by helping the difficult person see what he is doing to himself and to the important people in his life. Love sometimes has to be tough because it seeks what is best for everyone involved. A man who abuses his wife or is difficult to live with has his own set of problems. They keep him from being the joyful, fully-functioning person God designed him to be. We must care enough to confront—confront to redeem, not to destroy.

Many women locked in abusive marriages find confronting almost impossible to do. The reasons are many. Often such women have come to believe the husband’s reiterated statement that if they were different women, they would be treated differently. Or they have an unbiblical understanding of submission. Or their self-esteem has been destroyed and they have no inner strength to resist the abuse.

To take that next necessary step of confronting for change, an abused woman must be sure of her own value before God so that the difficult person does not beat her self-esteem down to nothing. Life with Nabal could not have been happy. Yet Abigail did not allow Nabal’s nastiness to make her bitter. This beautiful, intelligent woman was strong enough inside to withstand Nabal’s unreasonableness.

How does our story of Abigail end? David wasted no time once he heard the news of Nabal’s death. He proposed marriage to Abigail, and she became his

wife. She was a fitting companion for Israel's great and future king.

Abigail's story ended "happily ever after." But that is not the way Jane's story has ended. Nor is it the way the story ends for many other Christian women locked in a difficult marriage. Often we are not released from misery but must learn new ways to cope with misery and turn it into something good.

One day I received another letter from Jane. Up to that time we had exchanged letters through her work address at the hospital. But this was the first letter giving me her home address. I had sent Jane some literature about abusers and battering, including a "violence index." Here's what she wrote:

"In reviewing all the materials, I believe the most frightening part was taking the violence test and realizing our violence index was into the dangerous level. I had never seen it in black and white before, or had thought about the specific questions that were asked. It sobered me further . . .

"In June and July, Jack's behavior or attitude became more hateful and oppressive. More frequently he involved the children, sometimes blaming them for his outburst. He threw a glass at the kitchen sink with such force that the glass shattered all over the kitchen, the counters, the floor. Then Jack wanted Mickey, our 12-year-old, to pick it up. I refused to let Mickey clean up Jack's mess, so it stayed that way for 2 days. Sherry (age 11) had been away. She walked in and asked, 'Was this an accident, or did Dad get mad?' She was told the truth. Stanley (age 9) began getting hysterical every time Jack raised his voice, and that would make Jack more mad.

"In the middle of July, I involved another party, Chuck and Margaret. Without Jack knowing about it, I took an afternoon off and talked with them. Margaret and I had already been talking some. Chuck is an attorney in town and he is well respected by Jack in every way. They have been friends in our

church for years. As you would expect, Jack hit the roof when I told him, the same day, that I had gone. He started with the same accusations of betrayal all over again. I thank God for the courage to have spoken again.

“Chuck, Margaret, Jack, and I meet about once a week for 2 to 3 hours. The first session was the worst, but Alice, the last 6 weeks have been wonderful. Chuck confronts issues and Jack has not resisted the accountability. Through tears and pain and sorrow he has committed himself to me different from ever before. He has faced the issue as sin and as totally unacceptable. He is genuinely striving for a holy walk. The sessions are difficult because of the painful things we go over, but so productive. Once more I have hope.

“The children know we are going and are glad too. Even Sherry’s defensive spirit has improved in the last month. There is so much work to be done. Daily I still see reflections of the ‘down with women’ attitude, but I have a freedom to discuss it with him later or save it for our time with Chuck and Margaret. Jack has admitted to not giving me any freedom, being jealous of even phone conversations with other women. He doesn’t understand why, but he now sees it as abnormal.

“Alice, I think there is hope. Please continue to pray with me. I know the road ahead will not be without bumps, perhaps major ones. But my support has widened. Therefore, my base is stronger and so is Jack’s.

“Please continue to share with other women the need for openness and for friends, that life does not have to be endured but can be lived and even enjoyed. I look forward to see what God has tomorrow for me. Please feel free to share my life with others if it would help. And keep in touch. Love, Jane.”

Each time I read Jane’s letter, I remember the terrified woman who for 13 years had not said a word to anyone about all she endured with a difficult

man. I thank God that she found the courage to talk to me. I'm glad she found even greater courage to seek out a support system in her hometown. She now has hope. She had none a year ago. I thank God that Jane did what Abigail did. She first took steps to lessen the damage to herself and to her children. She opened up to a trusted friend, who became the beginning of a local support group for her. She gained the courage to refute Jack's unreasonable accusations and to counter his selfish demands. Little by little, she has forced him to take responsibility for his actions. Now in these weekly sessions with Jack, Chuck, and Margaret, she continues the confrontation that is healing her marriage.

Do you live with a difficult man? Do you have a friend caught in a punishing marriage? Take Abigail as a good role model. Work to make the best of a bad situation. Better, work to turn the bad into good. Let God work in you and through you by His power to redeem a bad relationship.

When A Spouse Is Unfaithful

Trina's day began like most normal days for an active mom of three. Getting the kids off to school by 7:45, a quick shower, and a cup of coffee while mapping out her strategy for attacking her day. She had to return some items to a department store, pick up a few groceries, stop at the dry cleaners, run home for lunch, and make it to her 1:15 dental appointment. Then she would sprint home and prepare supper before the stampede of after-school carnivores arrived. The errands took longer than expected—they usually do—and she really didn't have time to go home for lunch before her dental appointment. So Trina decided to stop in and surprise Mike at the office by taking him his favorite Chinese takeout—Mongolian beef. As she pulled into the office parking lot, she saw Mike leaving the building and heading for his car with his secretary, Vicki.

Trina felt her stomach tighten. Mike had told her that morning that he would be working through lunch because the Johnson project bids had to be in by 5:00. Trina watched as Mike and Vicki brushed against each other as they walked. They hardly took their eyes off each other! In fact, they seemed so engrossed with each other that they didn't seem to notice much else.

When they got to the car, Mike opened the door for Vicki—like he used to for Trina. She tossed her curly auburn hair over one shoulder, slid onto the leather seats, and drew her slender legs into the car. Mike's approving smile transported Trina back to their dating days. "That's the smile he used to give

me!” she thought. “That’s my husband!”

Trina stared in disbelief. “They’re lovers!” she silently screamed. “That’s how Mike and I were when we were dating.” She wanted to scream, cry, and throw up all at once. She felt powerless to stop the soap opera that was playing itself out before her eyes.

She followed them as they left the parking lot. Mike drove to Vicki’s apartment, and the two disappeared inside. Trina thought her heart would explode. Just a few minutes earlier, her life had been so good, so normal. Now, she felt like the victim of a hit and-run accident: dazed, bleeding, abandoned, and left to die—alone.

She almost passed out from the concussion to her heart and soul. “This can’t be happening to me!” she sobbed.

Many spouses, like Trina, are blindsided by the blow of betrayal that comes from discovering their mate’s affair. Even if we haven’t experienced it firsthand, all of us know someone close who has suffered from the painful wounds inflicted by an unfaithful spouse.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide understanding and hope for a spouse whose marriage has been shattered by an affair. We will describe varying levels of unfaithfulness, trace its roots, and walk through the healing process that is so necessary after unfaithfulness is discovered. Our desire is to help a betrayed partner think about how to respond to a situation that feels overwhelming and hopeless. We will explore how God Himself offers timeless answers and assurances that can help us deal with one of the most painful of human experiences. We will see that in spite of the pain, loss, and betrayal, there is hope. Life, even though it will be forever different after an affair, can be good again.

In the midst of devastation and heartache, God’s presence provides the compelling courage and sustaining strength needed to walk through the pain and madness of the dark valley that feels like death (Ps. 23:4).

What Is An Affair?

All affairs violate trust and involve unfaithfulness. They fall into two major categories: affairs involving physical contact and affairs involving emotional intimacy.

Physical Affairs. These consist of varying degrees of physical and sexual contact between a married person and someone other than his or her spouse. These affairs fall into two categories: overt sexual and covert physical contacts.

1. Sexual Contact. An affair can be defined as a sexual relationship with someone other than one’s spouse, which violates the marriage covenant. The unfaithfulness may involve sexual intercourse, whether in a “one-night stand” or as part of a long-term emotional entanglement. But complete sexual union is not necessary for it to be considered a sexual affair. An illicit relationship may also occur through any form of intimate physical contact intended to stimulate and enjoy sexual arousal with someone other than one’s spouse, even if it doesn’t result in intercourse.

2. Physical Contact. This affair involves an inappropriate display of physical touch or sexualized affection that breaches the healthy boundaries of a brother/sister relationship. Depending on the intent of the heart, this form of covert touching would include, but not be limited to, a lingering hug, a kiss on the cheek, a touch on the arm or leg, holding hands, or brushing against someone in playful ways that

indicate more than a casual interest or concern for the well-being of the other person. Because the level and kind of touch is not overtly sexual, and because the real betrayal is an unfaithful intent of the heart, these visible indicators are sometimes difficult to interpret.

Emotional Affairs. These also violate the exclusivity of the relational bond of marriage. When married people invest time, money, conversation, and emotional energy that should be reserved for their mates, they are guilty of breaking the union with their spouses that God intended (Gen. 2:24). This would include such things as sending flowers, letters, cards, or e-mails to a non spouse. Intimate dinners alone, conversations, and phone calls involving personal and emotionally sensitive content while under the guise of “friendship” are also included. In essence, any emotional attachment to someone else that is normally reserved for one’s spouse breaches the exclusivity of the marital bond.

Emotional affairs may be easier to detect than physical affairs because inappropriate interactions can be seen. But they can be more difficult to prove because hearts and motives are hidden.

Given the different categories of affairs, some may question whether or not an emotional affair is adulterous. Jesus made it clear, however, that adultery is as much a betrayal of the heart as of the body (Mt. 5:27-28). He taught that anyone who looks lustfully at another person is guilty of adultery in his or her heart, even if the act is not consummated with sexual behavior.

On the other hand, while not minimizing an emotional affair, Jesus said that when a spouse steps over the line and turns adulterous thoughts into a physical affair, the betrayal is so grievous that it gives the wounded spouse legitimate grounds for divorce (Mt. 5:31-32). Paul made it equally plain that sexual immorality is a unique kind of sin that carries with it severe consequences (1 Cor. 6:18). Although God’s original intent was for permanency in marriage, the hardheartedness and sexual betrayal of an unfaithful spouse moves the heart of a wise and loving God to allow an offended spouse the protection of a divorce (Mt. 19:8-9).

Thus, while there is a form of adultery of the heart that can devastate a marriage, the wound of sexual adultery is such a complete betrayal that God grants the faithful spouse the freedom to divorce because the exclusive “one flesh” covenant has been violated.

That being the case, why would so many who say they fear and love God risk losing so much for so little? Why would they ignore the ancient wisdom of Proverbs? “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? . . . a man [or woman] who commits adultery lacks judgment; whoever does so destroys himself” (Prov. 6:27,32).

How Unfaithful Spouses “Explain” Affairs

Most people who are caught up in an affair fail to give their spouses an honest or adequate answer for their behavior. Instead, they hide the motives of their hearts and look for ways to defend their actions. Many shift the blame by citing deficiencies in their spouse. Others hide and detach by saying, “This isn’t about you. You’re wonderful. This is about me.” Both responses leave wounded spouses either stunned by a barrage of blaming tactics or floundering alone with nothing to do because “this isn’t about them.” Many are left with lots of questions and few answers.

The rationalization of an unfaithful spouse is often, “If you only knew what I had to put up with at home, you’d understand why I had to look elsewhere. I was dying with her. No one should have to live

like that.”

While sex is involved in most affairs, many people report that they don’t have affairs merely for sex. Some do, of course; but many claim, “I just didn’t feel connected with my spouse anymore. I felt unappreciated, bored, unfulfilled, and discontent.” Many a wife has justified her affair by revealing to her husband, “You don’t make me happy anymore. You pay more attention to your job, sports, and TV than to me. You weren’t there for me when I needed you. You pushed me into his arms.”

No matter what the rationale, in the end many unfaithful spouses are seduced into believing the myth of the “greener grass.” Proverbs 6:32-33 reminds us that the person who commits adultery lacks judgment, destroys himself, and faces an avalanche of shame. Shifting the blame is the usual tactic for dealing with shame. But regardless of what has gone on in the relationship prior to the affair, no spouse is responsible for the unfaithful partner’s lack of judgment and choice to be unfaithful.

Because unfaithful spouses are unlikely to reveal what is really happening inside, every betrayed husband or wife is left with the nagging question “Why?” “What caused my spouse to cross the line and have an affair? Was it him/her? Or was it me?”

What Fuels An Affair?

Affairs are primarily matters of the heart. While external factors do tempt, entice, and entrap, in the end it is the heart that determines the path one chooses. The biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife illustrates this (Gen. 39). That’s why the writer of Proverbs warned his young apprentice in wisdom, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23).

But one cannot guard what one does not know. Most people don’t understand the underlying, deep desires of the heart that they are unwittingly trying to satisfy with physical or emotional pleasure. While much time and energy are consumed with the concerns of daily living, little or no time is spent on exploring and understanding the longings, hopes, and dreams of the heart.

The explosion of passion that erupts in an affair often feels bigger than life because it taps into the desires of the heart that have never really been examined or understood. That’s what happened with Mike. By not understanding the deep spiritual desires that could have helped him renew a healthy passion for his wife, he allowed himself to be enticed and captured by Vicki’s attention and affection.

To understand why anyone can be vulnerable to good, God-given longings gone astray, we must understand that in every heart is hunger, pain, and folly.

Hungry Hearts. We all long for something more than the relationships we have been given. Something deep inside yearns to be caught up in a romantic love affair of epic proportions. That’s why romance is the universal theme of every good story, including the story of the Bible. We’ve been built for a sacred romance with the Lover of our souls (Isa. 62:5; Eph. 5:25-32).

G. K. Chesterton remarked, “The man who knocks on the door of the brothel is looking for God.”¹ The danger, intrigue, mystery, and madness of an illicit affair promises to satisfy a hunger that in reality can be satisfied only in God. When this underlying spiritual longing is not understood, our unsatisfied hunger fuels the recklessness that can propel us into an affair, and the painful disappointments of our relationships seem to justify it.

A Craving For Romance. Romance is far more than the emotional fireworks and infatuation that

get a relationship started. Romance involves passionate pursuit. We crave to be pursued by someone who fully knows and delights in us. What we often fail to realize, however, is that the wonder of romance between a husband and wife is meant not only to deepen the enjoyment of one another, but also to arouse in the heart a deeper understanding of our Creator's love for us. A loving spouse can mirror the romantic pursuit of our loving God. Many spouses have enjoyed a taste of God's delight in them through the sparkle in the eye of their mate.

When we don't pursue God to meet our deepest longings, we choose others to substitute for Him. Often a spouse is "set up" by being expected to satisfy our deepest hunger. When a spouse falls short (as all will), our hunger for the divine romance can be reduced to a mere physical craving for sexual gratification that our hedonistic, self indulgent society endorses.

A Yearning For Connection. We all long to belong. God built us for connection with Himself and others. Jesus prayed that we would enjoy the oneness that He enjoyed with His Father (Jn. 17:21). Oneness is to be reflected in the physical and emotional intimacy in marriage (Gen. 2:24).

If we don't pay attention to our hearts, however, we will settle for the outward trappings of connection with our spouses without enjoying the inner oneness God intended. If we fail to cultivate an intimate relationship with God, our marriage will be reduced to a relationship of selfish convenience without meaningful connection. Eventually we will look for satisfaction of our hunger elsewhere.

Hurting Hearts. Our most significant pain often comes in the form of disappointment and betrayal in the context of our hunger for love, acceptance, and belonging. We all carry into our marriages emotional pain that may have come from past troubled relationships or from their failure to provide us with genuine love.

Our vision of marriage is often clouded with the unrealistic expectation that our spouse will finally satisfy our hunger for romance and connection. While a loving, faithful spouse can provide a delightful taste of genuine intimacy, no spouse can compensate for the other's lack of intimacy with God.

Mourning The Loss Of Romance. All spouses must face disappointment in their marriages. No marriage escapes because no spouse's love is flawless, nor can it satisfy our hunger for the divine romance. If we don't face disappointment and allow it to drive us back to God, we not only lose our romance with Him, we also sabotage a healthy delight in our marriage partner. Instead of pursuing our spouse, we blame him or her for our pain. Rather than mourning the loss of romance in our relationship with God and with our spouse, we subtly use our hurt to justify seeking emotional and physical comfort in the arms of another lover.

Aching From The Lack Of Connection. When we don't feel connected, we feel distant. Instead of oneness, we feel separate and alone in a relationship that feels hostile, not healing.

When we feel a lack of connection in marriage, disillusionment soon follows. We end up just going through the motions because "our heart isn't in it." We reduce our expectations and live by the "shoulds" but not from deep desire.

Even good marriages are disappointing, difficult, and demanding. They don't satisfy our deepest longings, nor are they as pain-free as we had hoped. Instead, they are complicated and require constant maintenance.

The allure of an affair appeals to the longing for a perfect relationship that satisfies our hunger, inflicts no pain, and makes no demands. The mournful lyric "It's sad to belong to someone else when the

right one comes along” is the theme song for many unfaithful spouses. The hope is that maybe the next one will satisfy the hunger for love and salve the hurts.

In reality, the pursuit of an affair to deal with one’s hungry and hurting heart is a foolish attempt to push one’s way back into Eden.

Foolish Hearts. The natural inclination of every human heart is toward foolishness. Proverbs 22:15 reminds us of our roots: “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child.” No one learns foolishness. It’s part of what we inherited from Adam and Eve. Instead of taking our hunger and hurt to God, we rebel and try handling it on our own in one of the following ways:

Giving Up On Romance. Rather than feel the gnawing ache of our hunger, we deny our need for romance and connection by calling it a foolish dream. Losing hope of ever having a deeper romance with our spouse indicates that we’ve abandoned our calling to love our spouse the way God does. It also indicates that we’ve abandoned our longing to be romanced by God. We become the “halfhearted creatures” that C. S. Lewis describes as “fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Selling Out To False Connection. The best counterfeit to true intimacy is the false intimacy that sexual indulgence provides. Forbidden sex gives an immediate and artificial sense of being “alive” when in reality it deadens the heart.

People who get involved in affairs are deceived by their sinful, foolish hearts and refuse to remember God. It is impossible to enjoy an affair and remain in close fellowship with Him. They must say in essence, “Get out of my life, God. I can’t enjoy this new relationship in the presence of Your holiness and righteousness.”

Every affair is a running away from God. But there’s a bizarre twist. By the very act of running from God and exchanging His truth for a lie, unfaithful mates are tormented by the lingering consequences of their sin (Isa. 50:10-11). They also forget that God is a jealous lover who will use even their foolishness to arouse their hunger for Him. God’s intent is to draw every heart back to His table, where He will satisfy them with a taste of His own presence (Dt. 8:3).

When an affair is finally exposed, both spouses must embark on a perilous journey. Trina’s journey began when she refused to suffer alone. She left Vicki’s apartment and called a trusted friend. They called their small-group leader from church. He contacted another elder, and the two men were waiting with Trina for Mike when he came home after work. The journey had begun.

The Healing Journey

In working through the chaos brought about by an affair, wounded people must travel through several stages in their healing journey.

STAGE 1: A Time For Suffering And Sorrow. No words adequately describe the trauma a person suffers when a spouse’s affair is exposed. Many report that it is the most dreadful thing they have ever faced—more excruciating than losing a parent, being diagnosed with cancer, or being fired. An affair inflicts a vicious wound to the heart of a faithful spouse. One man told me he would have rather taken a bullet and been paralyzed than to face his wife’s affair.

At the same time, the unfaithful spouse is also forced to deal with emotions that will in many ways shape the future of their relationship.

Wounded Spouses. “While I may look the same on the outside, inside I’m hemorrhaging and I can’t stop it.” Most betrayed spouses feel as if they are going crazy—especially during the initial stages of shock. Throughout the counseling process they invariably ask, “Am I going crazy?” My response is always the same: “No, you’re not going crazy. What you’re feeling is normal for the kind of experience you’re going through.” This reassurance doesn’t stop the emotional roller coaster that’s roaring through their world, but it does confirm that their feelings are normal.

There are at least four categories of emotions that wounded spouses experience:

They Feel Lost. Gone is the sense of being intact and whole. They feel as if they’ve lost their voice in the world. They feel fragmented, shattered, confused, and disoriented. They don’t know where they belong. It isn’t unusual for them to be driving somewhere and either forget where they were going or how to get there. Self-respect is shattered, and they commonly ask themselves, “Why didn’t I speak up earlier when I sensed something was wrong?”

They Feel Betrayed. Betrayal can strip the heart of any sense of constancy, security, and meaning. Feelings of being used, discarded, and rejected replace feelings of being chosen, special, and valued. Their ability to trust is undermined. Everyone, not just the unfaithful spouse, is now suspect. Even God’s goodness and protection are questioned.

They Feel Powerless. The statement “No matter how hard I try, I can’t fix it” indicates a loss of control. Anger grows out of a loss of control. They feel as if their life is slipping through their fingers. There is often a loss of control over their thoughts and actions. Obsessive thoughts and dreams of their spouse with a lover invade their days and nights. Compulsively driving by the lover’s apartment every 30 minutes to see if he or she is there isn’t unusual. They lose hope that life could ever be good again. Usually anger and depression aren’t far behind. Statements like “I give up,” “It will never be the same,” “I want to die,” “There’s nothing to live for anymore” are normal.

They Feel Ambivalent. A host of competing emotions all screaming for attention rips them apart. These competing emotions are common: shame and contempt, joy and sorrow, hurt and vengefulness, fear and relief. A wife will miss her husband and yet feel glad that he’s gone. She will fluctuate between wanting to hug him and wanting to beat him, wanting to forgive him and wanting to make him pay. Ambivalence results in one’s shutting down internally—causing an emotional numbness that paralyzes any productive movement toward healing.

Unfaithful Spouses. The emotional response of the ones who are unfaithful can be varied, depending on whether they feel guilty over the affair or justified in having it. If they feel justified and are upset about having been caught, they will be more belligerent. If they feel guilty and are willing to give up the affair and restore the marital relationship, their response will indicate brokenness and humility.

Janis Abrahms Spring provides a list of intense and contradictory feelings that fairly describes the ambivalence of the unfaithful spouse:

- Relief—“I’m tired of lying about all this and wondering when I’d be discovered.”
- Impatience—“I said I was sorry and gave her up; what more do you want from me?”
- Chronic Anxiety—“If I just keep busy I’ll be okay.”
- Justified Anger—“I’m doing what I want to do, and it feels right.”
- Absence Of Guilt—“I did what I did and that’s that.”

- Isolation—“No one’s there for me.”
- Hopelessness—“There’s no way this relationship will ever work.”
- Paralysis—“I feel torn. I don’t know what to do.”
- Self-disgust—“I’m such a fool. Why did I jeopardize all that I love?”

The unfaithful spouse may also experience guilt over hurting the children and grief over the loss of a lover.

After an affair is exposed, marital partners need to take personal responsibility for seeking help to wade through the quagmire of feelings and necessary decisions that must be made so they can make progress in their healing journey. It is virtually impossible for individuals to work through all these issues on their own. They need a counselor or pastor with training and experience to help them sort through and resolve these issues. They desperately need the emotional support and prayerful involvement of friends, family, and the church community if they are going to take on the task of rebuilding.

STAGE 2: A Time To Decide. After an affair, many couples quickly try to restore their broken relationship for a variety of reasons—some good, and some bad. Well-intentioned friends, family, and church leaders often unwittingly pressure a spouse to quickly reconcile with an unfaithful partner. This push for a quick decision is a mistake. A faithful spouse will probably feel chided or coerced into reconciling quickly, especially if the unfaithful spouse has not been required to take sufficient time to demonstrate sorrow and repentance that is trustworthy. Time is needed for both partners to sort through the issues and put words to the struggles within their own hearts. Both will question if restoration is even possible or worth it. A quick decision either way minimizes both the gravity of what has happened and the necessity of a process of confrontation, confession, repentance, and forgiveness, which may or may not lead to reconciliation in the marriage. Deciding if one should quit or recommit is a monumental decision that should never be made lightly.

If you are in this stage, seek wise counsel. Take all the time necessary to sort through the countless questions and ramifications of this life-altering decision. Don’t decide quickly in either direction. Be devoted to prayer (Col. 4:2) and solicit the prayers of others (1 Th. 5:25). Take your time and reflect on what God is doing in your own heart as well as where He appears to be leading in the relationship.

As a way of facilitating your journey, walking through some of the following questions may help you decide which path reflects more faith, hope, and love. The choice to divorce or rebuild after an affair will not be easy for either spouse. Important choices never are. But you can still honor God in your choice.

Can there be restoration if the affair is still going on? Absolutely not! It’s absurd to think that any genuine progress could be made in healing the wounds in a marriage if the weapon that inflicted the wound is still in the assailant’s hand. Restoring the exclusiveness of marriage demands a severing of all connection and communication with the affair partner. Divided loyalty is no loyalty at all.

How will you know if your unfaithful partner is genuinely attempting to rebuild the marriage? Unfortunately, nothing can provide the kind of reassurance that will allay the fears of a betrayed spouse. The decision to rebuild is risky. However, a deciding factor is the attitude of the unfaithful spouse. It would be foolish even to consider reconciliation if there is a demanding spirit that pushes for a quick

resolution or uses the deficiencies of the faithful spouse to justify the affair. An unfaithful husband or wife must accept the fact that he or she has lost any claim to a restored relationship.

An unfaithful spouse must be willing to go to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate by actions the genuineness of his or her intentions to rebuild the marriage. Consistency and diligence in the following areas are what will make or break a reconciliation. The offended spouse, counselor, and church community must all work together to hold the unfaithful spouse accountable in these areas. He or she must do the following:

1. Give up the affair by cutting off all contact and communication with the third party. This can be done either by a certified letter approved by the spouse or in a phone call monitored by the spouse and counselor. Gifts or mementos exchanged during the affair must be returned or destroyed.

2. Seek individual and marital counseling to identify the reasons for the affair and to expose the issues needing to be addressed in order to pave the way for reconciliation.

3. Move out of the home (if requested by the injured spouse) while, if necessary, still maintaining the financial provisions for the family. This move should in no way allow for re-contacting the affair partner, but it does provide a buffer zone for the wounded spouse to begin to heal.

4. Be patient with the slowness of forgiveness from the offended individual. There must be no demand to “just get over it and move on.”

5. Do whatever it takes to help the wounded spouse begin to trust again. This includes, but is not limited to, changing e-mail addresses, relocating, changing jobs if the affair happened at work, quitting a job that requires overnight travel, and relinquishing control of the finances.

6. Be accountable to several trusted individuals and couples who know the whole story and who have access to both partners.

7. Refuse to ask church leaders or others to help pressure the faithful spouse for quick forgiveness and restoration.

What if the unfaithful spouse becomes uncooperative? The faithful spouse should continue in personal and spiritual growth, but may need to take appropriate steps to separate from the spouse who is still emotionally dangerous. The commitment to love the unfaithful spouse is always required, even if that means loving him or her as an enemy (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27,35).

Does the Bible require the injured spouse to take back the unfaithful partner? This question is often asked after an unfaithful partner has made a public confession of a sexual affair and has asked for forgiveness, but the wounded spouse is reluctant to forgive or reconcile. The key is in the word require. The Bible does not require a spouse to restore the relationship after an affair, nor does it require a divorce. Although Jesus taught that divorce in the case of sexual adultery is permissible (Mt. 19:9), the decision to divorce or to reconcile is given exclusively to the wounded spouse. The unfaithful spouse, by reason of his or her unfaithfulness, has breached the marriage covenant and has forfeited all rights to the decision to divorce or reconcile.

If an offending spouse refuses to give up the illicit lover or becomes belligerent, physically threatening, abusive, or withholds financial support from the family, the most loving response to such ongoing cruelty and hardheartedness may be to divorce. This prevents the unfaithful spouse from continuing his or her active defiance of the marriage covenant and limits the opportunity for abuse.

Choosing to divorce is one of the most dreaded decisions a spouse will ever make, but in circumstances like these, divorce is not only permissible, but may also be advisable.

A wounded spouse should not be made to feel guilty for exercising the God-given option of a divorce. In that case, a wounded spouse still has the opportunity to demonstrate Christlikeness throughout the divorce proceedings. The terms of the divorce should be fair and firm, not vengeful. Revenge is something that God reserves for Himself (Rom. 12:17-21). (For a more thorough treatment of this issue, see RBC booklet *Divorce & Remarriage* Q0806.)

Can a marriage survive an affair? Ironically, some relationships not only survive but flourish after an affair. Why? All the pretense and denial that may have aided in the development of the affair have been stripped away. Both partners are now capable of viewing each other more honestly than they did prior to the affair.

This is not an endorsement for the foolish notion that “affairs are good for a marriage,” but it is a reflection of God’s redemptive plan to use things originally intended for evil to accomplish His good purposes in the hearts of His people (Gen. 50:20).

It is highly unlikely, however, that lasting change will take root and grow without the partners looking at their own individual contribution to the troubled relationship. This by no means implies that the faithful spouse is responsible for his or her mate’s choice to have an affair. Nor does it allow the betrayer to justify the affair on the grounds of his or her mate’s deficiencies. No one is ever responsible for the choices of another. But both partners must be willing to look at their individual and mutual histories, styles of relating, and contributions to the problems in their relationship.

While care must be taken not to minimize or excuse the unfaithful partner’s betrayal, it is likely that some tensions existed in the marriage before the affair. Dan Allender, in his book *The Healing Path*, notes, “No failure of a wife or husband ever causes or excuses an affair; nonetheless, the downward spiral that leads to an affair usually involves mutual failure.”⁴ The issue of mutual failure must be carefully defined and explored if there is to be mutual confession and forgiveness that produces a renewed oneness.

STAGE 3: A Time To Rebuild. Building a good marriage is always an uphill battle—even when there hasn’t been an affair. It requires hard work, sacrifice, humility, confession, forgiveness, understanding, and love. Couples who make the courageous choice to rebuild their relationship after an affair find that the core issues don’t change. But the intensity level that has been raised by the betrayal and distrust must now be addressed and overcome. Betrayal crushes the trust between a husband and wife. Without trust, a relationship can’t grow. Thus, the major work in healing a broken marriage is rebuilding trust and restoring friendship.

Rebuilding Trust Through Telling The Truth. Affairs thrive on secrecy. Deception is essential to the duplicity that makes an affair possible. The betrayed husband who has been fed a steady diet of deceit hungers for the truth from his wife. He will often say, “I don’t care how bad it is, just tell me the truth! I can take the truth. I just can’t deal with the lies anymore.”

While the power of an affair may be in its secrecy, the weakness of a marriage may be in its avoidance of issues.⁵ Truth-telling means no more pretending from either spouse. The assumption is that while the unfaithful spouse’s duplicity is more easily seen, both individuals have deceptive hearts (Jer. 17:9) that have played off each other in a bizarre dance of deception. One lied; the other looked the other way. One got angry and indignant; the other backed off. One withdrew; the other didn’t pursue.

One ignored; the other avoided. “Speaking the truth in love” to each other (Eph. 4:15) means admitting the dance and the part each took in it.

The purpose of truth-telling is to put the issues out on the table where they can be dealt with. It means coming clean—not just exposing each other, but admitting one’s own current feelings and attitudes. It involves asking and honestly answering questions in three categories:

The Affair. What happened? With whom? When did it begin? How long did it last? Is it over? This is a major test for the unfaithful spouse. He or she must be totally honest and tell the wounded spouse anything he or she wants to know about the extent and duration of the affair, but not all the sordid details. Sometimes the offended spouse believes that knowledge of the details will provide the control needed to prevent an affair from recurring. It won’t. Knowing the details may only inflame the wound, filling the mind with images that will make it even more difficult to overcome. This is where a seasoned counselor can help a couple get past new revelations about the affair and not get bogged down in details that serve no good purpose.

The Damage. The wounded spouse must honestly share how much pain the affair has caused. The unfaithful spouse should not be defensive or try to explain but truly listen to, absorb, and understand the other’s suffering.

The Relationship. Both spouses need to talk honestly about the way they relate to each other, how they struggle personally, and how that has affected their relationship in all areas. They need the help of wise counsel to make the connection between their past and current struggles. This involves seeing how their unique struggles reflect a failure to trust God, which weakens their relationship, hurts those they care about the most, and makes them vulnerable to a host of self-destructive choices—one of which is the affair.

Truth-telling opens the door to confession that is cleansing and grief that is healing.

Rebuilding Trust Through Confession. Confession must be specific. It isn’t enough to say “I’m sorry I had an affair. Will you forgive me?” The specific behaviors, attitudes, and responses that inflicted so much pain and suffering must be individually named, owned, and tied to the damage spoken of earlier. When a spouse confesses to God (Ps. 51) and to his or her mate the guilt over the individual wounds that have been inflicted, it paves the way for a deepening sorrow that leads to repentance and change (2 Cor. 7:10). Confession is necessary for the healing of body, soul, and relationships (Jas. 5:16). It also brings hope because God assures that “he who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

Confession must be mutual. Seldom is either spouse blameless. While not guilty of the affair, the offended spouse has had failures of love that need to be named and confessed to the unfaithful spouse and to God.

Should other affairs be confessed? There are always risks with this. Each situation must be evaluated individually. But given the human propensity toward deception, it would be a good idea to come clean all at once rather than risk future exposure that would undermine any progress made in rebuilding trust. Again, caution is needed so as to guard against unnecessary exposure of the sordid details.

Who needs to be told? Not everyone needs to know. Certainly those directly affected by the affair—one’s family. One’s pastor, small group, and some trusted friends need to know so they can help in the rebuilding process. If a parent needs to leave the home for a while, the children should be told in

general terms, but not in the specifics. While teenagers may already have figured it out, don't assume that they know. If there is evidence that they know, parents should tell them together and prepare them for the changes that may be ahead, but avoid revealing unnecessary details.

Rebuilding Trust Through Repentance. The best description of repentance comes from the lips of the king of Israel whose adulterous affair rocked the nation:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise (Ps. 51:17).

What are signs of a repentant heart? (See list on pages 20-21.) A humble attitude that is neither demanding nor defensive when questioned. An openness that replaces deceit. The willingness to be accountable for time, money, and whereabouts. Not blaming or making excuses for failures. Quietly accepting consequences.

A betrayer's humble repentance in word and deed will pave the way for the betrayed to again risk opening his or her heart and offering the sweet fruit of forgiveness that can lead to restoration and renewed joy.

Rebuilding Relationship Through Forgiveness. The sin is always before those who have had an affair (Ps. 51:3), but it is ever before their spouse as well. It created a debt that remains outstanding, and it demands a response.

The natural response would be revenge—to make the betrayer suffer. But God calls us to a radical standard of loving that advocates mercy, not revenge (Rom. 12:17-21). He calls us to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). This doesn't seem fair, especially when the wound has cut so deep. It seems as if it's minimizing our pain and letting the offender off the hook. But that's not what forgiveness is.

Jesus taught that forgiveness is the loving, voluntary cancellation of a debt (Lk. 7:36-48). It doesn't mean that the pain or the anger will miraculously vanish or that the consequences of sinful choices will evaporate. Once the betrayed sees signs of repentance (Lk. 17:3-4), forgiveness opens the heart to reconciliation that is based on mutual respect, mercy, gratefulness, and love. (See RBC booklet *When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* CB941.)

Rebuilding Relationship Through Reinitiating Physical Intimacy. After an affair is revealed, both spouses should get tested for AIDS and STDs. This is a humbling but necessary experience. In most cases, a minimum of 6 months abstinence from any sexual relations is necessary to protect the health of the faithful spouse. If the AIDS test is positive, the couple will have to grieve and accept the loss of certain forms of sexual intimacy so as not to endanger the non-infected partner.

The rule for reinitiating sexual intimacy after an affair is to go slow. Returning to the home after a time of separation doesn't automatically mean returning to the bedroom and sexual intimacy. A spouse whose mate has had an affair may want to try to satisfy all the mate's sexual needs for fear he or she may go looking elsewhere. The unfaithful partner will need to reassure the wounded spouse that he or she will not go looking and will be patient.

Trying to prevent a relapse by using sexual intimacy is foolish and is not a celebration of love the way God intended sex to be enjoyed. The couple will also need to have some extensive conversations about the fear, meaning, use, and expression of sexual intimacy in their relationship prior to reengaging in sexual relations.

Recovery Of The Heart

If an unguarded heart is what sets us up for an affair, the best defense against an affair is to guard our heart. This will free us to live wholeheartedly in a romance of epic proportions. The apostle Paul expressed this wholehearted living when he wrote:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:20-21).

To live wholeheartedly means to live redemptively. It is to enter each day courageously with eager anticipation for what God will do in and through us because of our confidence in being caught up in the most passionate love story of all time—the story of redemption.

But wholehearted living puts us in touch with our hurt in this world and our hunger for heaven. Paul described the inescapable tension of wholehearted living as inwardly groaning in a painful world we cannot escape while eagerly anticipating our eternal home which we cannot create (Rom. 8:23).

Oswald Chambers recognized that the only way to silence our demand for heaven now is to wholeheartedly embrace life with the full knowledge that “there is only one Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.” The psalmist stated it this way:

Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You (Ps. 73:25).

When our hearts are enraptured by the love of our God who would sacrifice all for us, then His request of us to love others the way He has loved us becomes a delight and not merely a duty. His perfect love casts out our fear of loving (1 Jn. 4:11,18) and opens our hearts to redemptive living, which can triumph over the most heart-deadening of betrayals—an affair.

Few things have more power to entice others to wholehearted living than the stories of God’s redemptive work in the lives of His people. Our stories of tragedy and triumph, suffering and celebration are small parts of God’s larger story. So sharing our stories is crucial to building a community of faith that remembers how God worked in the past, of hope that dreams of what He will yet do in the future, and of love that moves with confidence and courage to redeem the present in the face of evil (Eph. 5:16).

So share your stories.

Catching Your Breath

Grieving the Death of a Spouse

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Introduction

I used to sit in the little blue over-stuffed chair in the corner of our room watching him breathe. He was trying to live and trying to die at the same time.

Scientists say married couples’ breathing and heart rhythms begin to synchronize after a time. Others may not understand, but you and I know it’s true. When the final pause between the inhale and exhale wasn’t a pause any longer . . . when there weren’t any more breaths to come and the waiting was over . . . your heart stopped, and you couldn’t catch your breath. Me either. Even if you weren’t there; even if there were miles between you and your spouse . . . you felt it.

On a rainy afternoon in April, after the pauses had grown longer between each heaving effort to breathe, my husband of twenty-two years exhaled for the last time—and we said goodbye.

I’m holding my breath now, years later, as I write and remember, and I’m wondering what circumstances brought you here to this booklet, to this page. I can almost see you; it seems you are holding your breath too.

We’re both here for the same reason. Your spouse has taken their last breath and your

breathing is labored; but hold fast, believer. Though your spouse is not here any longer, and you feel their presence as profoundly as their absence, Scripture tells us that Jesus Himself experienced what it is to take a first breath, and He knows what it is to take His last. The omnipresent God, Maker of Heaven and Earth reigns in the transactions of life, breath, and death, and it was His passion that left His Spirit here to keep you breathing.

God's breath, the overflowing life of His Spirit will continue to course into yours. You will inhale and exhale again without catching your breath on the jagged edge of your pain. You will catch your breath, and you will live, because your God is the God of the living and the dead.

Chapter 1

Why It Hurts So Much

When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land. . . . And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mark 15:33; 37–38 NASB)

Some people describe it as a tearing; a physical tearing. Some say they can't breathe, and some say it feels like the bleeding won't stop. You know what they mean, because your loved one is gone too. The bed that sometimes seemed too small for the both of you on a bad day, but never snug enough on a good one, now feels as vast as the sea and bottomless as its deepest chasm.

Your spouse is not here, and your heart is an arid wasteland. You never understood before, when others tried to explain it, but now . . . now you do. There is a "darkness" over the land for you too.

The last breath Jesus took was his purposeful, willing surrender to the mutinous experience of death. But—though you feel it mocking your best attempts to breathe at this moment—*death did not win*. The love spilled out that dark day is the same love that sealed the New Covenant of **salvation** for you and me, even though the covenant bond between you and your spouse has been torn in two. Their death numbs your senses and inflames them all at the same time.

But the covenant love that cost everything truly regained what now seems forever lost, and grief's barren fields *will* bear sacred fruit, though all you may see now is a lifeless horizon. Here's why: marriage is temporal; the reality it symbolizes is *eternal*.

When you look into the mirror of your memory, what gazes back is the weight and glory of that which your marriage reflected. Your pain now is the temporal portion of "until death do us part," but the eternal reality is one of victory over death. The truth of it begins to shed light on the depth of your pain: death violates God's unalterable covenant. *But God violated death's ignorance in return*: "Unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives" (John 12:24 NLT).

Look back into the reflective mirror of your marriage. There, springing forth from what you thought was a lifeless horizon, is a plentiful harvest of new life, violating death's ignorance as well.

Marriage is a mutual submission to the invasive love of another. Invasive because it is bound by covenant, meaning an "exchange" must take place. And though it is a mystery, a sacrifice must be made too and blood is involved. No wonder it's called the marriage "altar."

The covenant of marriage is the sealing of a relationship—a co-mingling of

blood and hearts producing a supernatural oneness between the covenant partners. The two united into one depicts the very essence of this covenant (Genesis 2:24). This is so because God is the One who seals the covenant, meaning it cannot be breached without the most devastating ramifications and pain. You see, God is the glue that joins two separate beings and mysteriously merges the sinews of their love into one. Earthly marriage is the image-bearer of the covenant between Christ and His Bride, and death's narcissistic disregard has plundered that reflection.

The depth of this covenant bond is one of the reasons your loss hurts so much now; what was unassailably and immutably one has now been torn into two.

Your grief represents an ineffable pain and requires an extreme and sacred response, though the word grief cannot fully describe or contain it. In the same manner, Jesus' sacrifice for us represents an ineffable pain, requiring an extreme and sacred response as well, though words cannot describe or contain that either.

But death doesn't make the rules—God does.

The torn temple veil that evoked terror and was thought to be a sign of destruction, now speaks comfort to the grieving believer, because just like the torn veil of the temple, grief's gaping hole of poverty will be filled by His plenty.

His heart was torn so that your torn heart could be healed, and the same power that tore the veil, opened the tomb, and raised Jesus will also open the tomb that is your heart right now and resurrect what seems so final.⁽¹⁾

Our King faced off with death, and there was no competition. The Lamb's slain body was resurrected in death's face and shut its mouth forever.

Jesus knows what it is to have love torn away. He shared the communion cup of His own blood and made an exchange, so that whatever you and I suffer, He has suffered too—and come out victorious. He asked His Father to make us one with Him (John 17:21), and just like that day at your marriage altar, the bond was forged. But Jesus also rose from death’s shadow so you could rise too.

Even now, there is a song somewhere in the distance. It’s your song. You can’t hear the melody yet, but you know the words: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54–55). *That changes everything.*

Chapter 2

Unknowns

Grief asks many questions. It longs for what it does not possess anymore: your beloved. If they were still here, but you couldn’t find them, the search would be feverish until you held their warmth against your skin again. The same applies in your grief. You need their warmth against your skin, and you need answers; you need to know *why*. But *unknown* doesn’t feel like enough because, as you know, grief is no ordinary language and it cannot be satisfied with an ordinary answer.

Unknown doesn’t cut it ... *or maybe it does.*

The neurologist’s stoic announcement of my husband’s fatal diagnosis unceremoniously threw us into the unknown. It was blank, or maybe more like the static that used to show up at midnight after the T.V. shows were done for the day, way-back-when. It was the screaming non-sound of deep

loss. The unknown just stared back at me, and it seemed to have no manners. I wish I could have punched it in the face. The word played over and over in my mind, through the night and into the next day. There was nothing else, just... *unknowns*.

The news spread quickly, and the next evening, a car pulled into our driveway, then another car, and then another. They lined the street. I don't know how many friends came that night, but we squeezed them all into our little home. The sweetness of it is indelible. Weeping did endure that night, and joy was a long way off, but we worshipped God with our grief and asked for His healing. Our son Samuel and a friend took out their guitars and led us to the throne of grace. I remember watching our son Benjamin lift his hands as he sang for mercy. He was ten.

After all the "amens" were said, a heavy silence fell on the room, and I felt as though we were not done. The Lord was asking us to continue praying. The hour was late, and we were all exhausted, but we bowed low again. The voice of a dear friend said, "Susan, I think the Lord wanted us to pray again because there is something He wants to say. It's something He wants to say to you. He wants to tell you that He is there for you in the doorway of your *unknown*."

No one but the Lord had known that day about the word that had been taunting me. It seemed God had stopped His world for me, and spoke my world back into being. If God has a specialty, it's the unknown. He was telling me whenever something looked unknown, He would be there, waving His banner as a reminder of the intimate knowledge He possessed about me. From then on, the unknown would be known because *He* was in it. He was there, inhabiting whatever it was I didn't see, understand, or know.

The unknown became a place to meet God and experience His love. It was love in a word, changing me then, continuing to this day.

For you, my grieving friend, let the unknown be a time to rest your mind and body from their striving and find your repose in the arms of the one who inhabits the *unknown*. You see, “To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see” (Hebrews 11:1 GNT).

Chapter 3

Settled

Maybe the gospel writers used few words to describe the moment Jesus gave up His life because there aren’t enough words. What words would have sufficed? Three hours of otherworldly darkness escorted the King to His death. And when His time had come, He cried out with a scream so unusual, so transcendent and powerful, not only was the temple veil torn, but the Earth quaked and shuddered at the crime. The juncture at once declared history’s preeminent triumph, and unrivaled grief.

Whether there were dark hours leading up to your spouse’s last breath or not, you are familiar with the internal scream. Your world has quaked, and a seismic fault now runs through the foundation of your life. But amidst all the crumbling and dust and silt, the same God who created it all is the Rock of our salvation and can set us on a firm foundation.

I grew up in California, so I know what it is to live through an earthquake. I know what it is to feel small and helpless and unable to stop the ground from quaking and the walls from closing in. When we built our first home, it was important to begin with a foundation that would stand the test. Our friend Roland is a contractor, and we enlisted him for the task. Because the build began in the middle of winter, he had to pay special attention to the

condition of the soil before setting the foundation in place. To support a structure the soil must be settled, or the foundation will fail and the home would be compromised. If the solid ground is disturbed, great care must be taken to compact it again before building. Much depends on the magnitude of the disturbance and severity of weather patterns in the surrounding area. The greater the shifting of soil, the greater the time needed to level it and make it suitable for building.

The settling of grief under the foundation of your life has begun, and there is so much to consider. The seismic shift beneath you requires time to settle. Be patient; let it settle. The future security of what you build depends on the stability of the ground around your life. Rushing through this time will be detrimental.

Just like the intentional planning for a foundation, take intentional time to grieve. Do not bury the debris of your grief below the surface; it will degrade over time, and your house will shift and crack. Be patient; God will sift it for you. And while you wait, stay inside His love, where everything you need for healing is within reach.

Do not stand on the world's foundation, where the weather is inclement and seeks to draw you to compromise. Your physical health, relationships, emotions, and spiritual well-being must rest on the one, true foundation—Jesus Christ. He is the Balm of **Gilead** who makes the wounded whole. Do not look elsewhere to false comforts where temporary relief is the counterfeit goal.

Let grief settle and you will not sink under its weight. God will press the earth firmly around your roots, and you *will* stand . . . but give it time.

“ . . . he will restore, support and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation” (1 Peter 5:10b NLT).

Chapter 4

Dross

Our kids grew up deeply loved and loving deeply. It is their true heritage. For my son Ben, his love and life were still young when his Dad died, and as life has grown bigger, sometimes, so has his grief. Grief requires tender and consistent care with each stage of life, and when Ben became a young man, new losses sometimes reopened the old.

Such is the loyalty of grief.

Though Ben didn't get as many years with his Dad as Jennifer and Samuel, God's kindness (in hindsight) was expressed to him in a more subtle gift, because by the time Ben came along, Bob had gotten pretty comfortable being the Dad of a fragile, crying baby. He changed more diapers, cleaned up more barf, and many a night carried his baby boy up and down the hallway rhythmically singing, “Yaaah-yah . . . yaaaah-yah . . . yaaah-yah . . .” until Ben fell asleep—most of the time.

When Ben grew big enough to tackle the canyons and hills surrounding our home, the two of them would hike together and share the sights, sounds, smells, and conversation that make up the heavenly stuff of father-and-son memories. Above all, he remembers learning to play soccer, because it was his Dad who first taught him how. The world refers to it as the “Beautiful Game,” but for Ben, its beauty is really his boyhood connection to his Dad.

Passion for the game followed Ben through the years. His hopes to play

soccer in college were realized, but injuries and circumstances beyond his control prevented the culmination of dreams that had begun in our backyard so many years before. He wanted to play for his Dad. He wanted to be excellent and honor him and persevered through four years of some unbearable conditions and crises to do so, but it was not to be. The captain of the soccer team grieved the loss of his last year of college soccer and, with it, his Dad. His heart told him that letting go of soccer meant letting go of his Dad, and he couldn't see how doing such a thing was possible.

One night we sat together with worn spirits and bowed for comfort and direction. God spoke to us that night, and the vision He gave is one for the ages. A borderless room appeared to me, and it shone with gold. A large crucible sat in the middle of the room filled with liquid treasure. The One attending the gold's purification process was familiar; it was Jesus. He smiled and ceremoniously skimmed the dross off the top of the gold with His own hand and told me the gold was Ben's grief. Then He said, "He gets to keep it." What Jesus skimmed off the top was the part of Ben's grief that was serving no purpose anymore. The portion of grief that remained was Ben's to keep, but it was time to purify his treasure. The Lord assured us that He would take care of the task Himself; Ben wouldn't have to do it. He just needed to trust.

Refining metal with fire is one of the oldest methods known to humanity and is still in use today. Flames need to reach over 1,000 degrees Celsius for dross to rise to the top, but there is no loss in value to the remaining gold throughout the process, only increase in its worth and potential.

Dross is considered a contaminant and must be removed, or the value of the precious metal will be lost. To "refine" something literally means to free it and to improve it for the purpose of *excellence*. In Greek it translates "to be ignited." Fittingly, the symbol for gold (Au) comes from a Latin word meaning

“shining or glowing dawn,” because during the final stages of refining, the gold experiences what is called a “brightening.” This phenomenon occurs when the last impurities vanish, and the pure metal emits a bright flash of light.

The vision from that evening’s time of sorrow and prayer continues to teach. We don’t miss the dross at **all**.

It is made up of useless waste and keeps a broken heart from healing. Leaving it behind has never seemed painful, nor does it induce more grief, because the Master’s hand does the work of it and sees to its completion.

My persevering friend, the only comfort you may have right now are the tears on your face; and when you look forward, the seeming endlessness of it all appears to hold no hope for the future. Passions and dreams may have ended in your backyard too, and memories may haunt instead of heal. But the compassionate flame of your Refiner will not leave you with riches that cannot be used. His love will not allow waste to tarnish your worth or potential. The treasure of your grief will remain to accomplish its purpose—but what is useless, what will not produce anything of value, what will contaminate your future, must be entrusted to the refining hand of Jesus.

You cannot separate the dross yourself; it is too difficult. But that’s okay. Everything is difficult right now, so one less thing to handle is a respite, a kind of healing in itself. The refining will continue throughout the life of your grief, but when it has been tried, you will come forth as gold.

Ben wanted to play soccer to honor his Dad because he wanted to be excellent for him. In God’s providence, to be refined and live without the dross of grief means to be free, to be improved, and to be excellent. It looks like Ben’s dream did come true. No wonder Jesus was smiling.

“But He knows the way that I take [and He pays attention to it.]. When He has tried me, I will come forth as [refined] gold [pure and luminous]” (Job 23:10 AMP).

Chapter 5

Remembering

One evening, near the end, I was lying next to Bob as he rested in bed. He turned and held me tightly with his gaze and said, “Remember, always remember, I love you all so much.” I gave him my word. The moment would be impossible to forget, as is his life. On his gravestone are the words, “We’ll remember.”

Theologian Victor Shepherd says to remember “is to bring up a past event into the present so that what happened back then continues to happen right now. What unfolded back then, altering forever those whom it touched, continues to be operative now, altering those who ‘remember’ it now.”

Think back to the marriage altar we noted before, where a covenant was made through sacrificial love. There is another kind of altar, equally as sacred, but one that contradicts the well-meaning intentions of your loved ones who misunderstand and want you to “move on” and “have more faith.” It is the *altar of remembrance* and marks God’s faithfulness and unrivaled power that stops at nothing to make a way for His people.

This altar reminds us of when Jesus refused to save Himself so that He could save us from the unrelenting darkness. It invites us to trust when the path is covered in shadow and fear. This altar reminds us of when He brought us through the impossible and steadies us in the midst of present chaos and

future unknowns. It tells others our story and leads the lost and weary home. This altar reminds us of His promise to always be with us. This altar has boundless possibilities and power to heal and transform our pain.

This altar *alters us forever; as it should.*

Grief must move and be expressed to be healthy, but we never simply “move on.” Life is too sacred for that. No matter what anyone may tell you, dear friend, *remembering* is an expression of faith when surrendered to God as an act of worship.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4 NASB). Mourning is the intense experience and expression of grief. To get to the comfort, we mourn. It is here, at the altar of remembrance, the blessing awaits, and spiritual muscle is formed in faith and pain. This altar gives permission to grieve and remember. Your loss is worthy of the effort by far, and—though it’s hard to imagine—the comfort you receive will surpass the grievous night you inhabit now.

Think of this: when the Israelites crossed the Jordan, the very rocks under their feet became their altar of remembrance. The path through the unthinkable became their glory and signified a new beginning in a new land with a new sense of purpose, and it will be so for you.

Treasured friend, your altar must be built of stones from the middle of your Jordan too. Intentional remembering is sacred and is literally made up of the rugged path you have walked, just like Jesus. But the path He walked must become the cornerstone of your altar and your grief for you to stand.

The privilege and gift of remembering didn’t stop in the Old Testament. Our Christ called for the continuing, intentional practice of it when He instituted communion—far more than a one-time token act we perform before “just

moving on.” The quiet hours in the Upper Room marked the transformation of Passover, acknowledged as the central memorial of deliverance to the Jewish people. Jesus breathed new life into it with His own. He “fulfilled” its meaning, or . . . *filled it full*, and told us to continually drink Him in until we are reunited—and filled-full with the meaning of remembering.

There was a time when our daughter Jennifer was wrought with the inconsolable thought that her Dad would be forgotten by others, though he was profoundly loved by all who knew him. The pain of it waned through the years but continued to secretly pierce this Daddy’s girl as life carried on, and she wondered if people had forgotten. We added many stones to her altar of remembrance over time, including a walk down the aisle without her Dad, and the birth of two sweet girls. When a third was on the way, and a boy was the forecast, God gave them the name “Zechariah” before they ever knew its meaning: ***Yahweh remembers.***

Dear grieving friend, you are free to remember your loved one, because God remembered you on the supreme altar of remembrance, and He asks us all to remember Him in return. He gets it.

Be intentional about it, face into it when others want to look away, honor both God and your beloved, and always remember...He loves you so much.

Chapter 6

Restoration

It's the middle of spring as I write, but it may not be spring for you, no matter what time of year it is. There is a certain chill that tarries with grief, despite the season. But there are other truths that accompany the ever-changing climate of grief, each as certain as the dawn and the shifting of the sun and rotation of the Earth. It is your God who changes the seasons, and it is He who can *restore* in the middle of your winter.

By His might alone are the heavens formed and sustained, and the clouds are the dust of His feet. The God to whom even death must bow satisfies the Earth with the fruit of His works, and He can satisfy the thirst of your barrenness too.

He *restores* all things—He will restore you. Even now, the process has begun. The Vine supplies what is needed, and your pain will bear good fruit when the Vinedresser lays His sure and gentle shears to the task of pruning. But do you dare to let Him? Is it safe? Let's consider: *Cutting* in order to *restore* might seem an odd combination, but God's ways are higher and so are the results.

Listen to the famous words from the Gospel of John:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. . . . Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever

abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:1– 2; 4–5 ESV).

You see, for the Vinedresser it’s personal, because His Son is the Vine, and you are the branches. His purpose is multifaceted, but *restoration* is the primary goal. The task is carried out in love and incisions are made.

Pruning of grapevines is always done in the winter while the vine is dormant. The enterprise aims at selectively thinning any competing shoots or branches that show signs of disease or that may infect the surrounding branches. Left to their own, grapevines grow too dense with insufficient amounts of “fruiting wood.” Circulation becomes stymied, and the vine cannot breathe.

You know the feeling.

The vinedresser focuses on increasing fruiting wood, but does not allow for too much fruit at the wrong time, which would cause the vine to lack the energy and nutrients needed to grow and fully ripen.

A secondary goal is to train the branches to grow on a structure conducive to harvesting and which conforms to the trellis on which it grows, thereby establishing its future. *Restoration pruning* focuses on *re-establishing* a vine, particularly after a storm to assure its recovery and strong springtime growth. The vinedresser is tender and strong at the same time; confident and decisive, and he knows the character and tendencies of each “member” of his vineyard. It is so with you and with your grief.

You see, *restoration* gives back more than has been taken. This is the victory! Like the man from the synagogue in Mark 3, we stretch out our withered, grieving existence, and Jesus *restores* us. It is the nature of God’s abundance. His *restorative* grace exceeds and runs over the boundaries of death because

His love cannot be contained. This is the “more” of **Ephesians 3:20** and it cannot be measured.

But first . . . there is pruning. No need to cower. Listen: His pruning is His embrace, and all that is required is your consent. This is the meaning of “abide” in John 15. To be pruned is to rest.

Some remnants, common to life and grief, have names you are familiar with, and they have stolen from you; but thus far you have not been able to remove their hold on your own. This is because the Vinedresser has been waiting to do it for you, to *restore* you. I will give some of them a name, but you must be the one to present them to the Vinedresser for pruning.

Whether your finger is pointing at yourself or at someone else, these must undergo pruning: resentment, anger, unforgiveness, bitterness, blame, regret, unwise or hurtful relationships, worldly vices, and false comforters. You may immediately know when you read the words if their presence has afflicted your mind and heart. They are bitter to the taste, and defile your grief, the memory of your loved one, and your future. Yet you have made a counterfeit peace with them; maybe even embraced them as friends. If you hold them near, they will taunt you and dishonor the one you have lost. They will turn on you and your grief and demand that someone pay for your loss.

But that’s the point—Someone did.

My friend, the overflowing grace of each season is yours, and the promise of the Vinedresser to *restore* you is sure—even if life feels permanently dormant now. The sacred fruit of your grief will thrive, and your roots will continue to grow deep and steady you. Because for the Vinedresser, don’t forget, it’s personal.

Chapter 7

The "Good" in Goodbye

No one knew, but I climbed in under the blanket on the side of the bed where Bob had taken his last breath and covered myself up so that the fabric of what had touched him last was touching me.

Certain goodbyes mark time forever, not because they ease the transition into the next thing, but because they feel like a perpetual film glitch.

Our word “goodbye” literally comes from “God be with you.” Other cultures have their own goodbye rituals. In Russia, they don’t clean the room right away where their guest stayed after their departure. In Turkey, after a gathering of family or friends, they throw a bucket of water on the road behind the guests’ car as they leave, symbolizing a river where the current escorts loved ones away on a smooth journey and back with a smooth return. After completing the study of the Torah, Jewish people recite a type of goodbye that says, “We will return to you,” because goodbye is never final in God’s story.

For most of us, saying goodbye seldom feels good, but when we put God into the picture . . . when we insert His inscrutable name into the goodbye and dare to believe . . . perspective changes. The truth is, Sin is the cause of all our goodbyes. It is the separator.

God hates Sin because it separates Him from His Beloved. You and I know the intensity of that kind of separation. But God’s hate for Sin and the separation it imparts, derails death. God’s solution is borne on the wings of compassion and conquers grief’s accompanying hopelessness. God knows

what it feels like to be severed from His Loved One, and did the unthinkable to get us back and put us back together. “For the Son of man came to seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10 ASV). No goodbye can separate us from the hope and promise of tomorrow.

Still, we wonder “Why?” It is all still so unbearable, and our limited human nature leans into the microphone and asks the question, “If God is good . . . ?” We want someone to step up and give the explanation; as if an explanation would be enough. That’s why Jesus gives more—*much more*—than an answer, because a simple answer to life’s biggest “why” wouldn’t be enough. And, my friend, would it matter? Your loved one would not return even if you knew the answer. That’s why God gives more than an answer—because we *need* more than an answer! He gives much more than our questions ask.

Jesus’s disciples asked the question too. They couldn’t accept or understand why He had to leave them; why He had to say goodbye. In John 16:7 (KJV), Jesus told them, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”

The painful act of our Savior’s goodbye turns out to be the very means by which Satan and death are thwarted forever. Now we live not only with the one true God beside us, but *in* us. This is the victory over “goodbye.”

God not only reweaves what Satan incompetently tatted for evil into good, but evil’s attempts backfire, and in God’s hands produce a glorious harvest from what Satan left for dead. Because Jesus said goodbye, even in the midst of life’s worst pain, we are empowered to live in the *more*. What a gift!

I slid out from under the blanket of the past; you will too. God will do more than heal your broken heart. Learn to live in the more. It is the good in your

goodbye.

Epilogue

Epilogue: The Commission

My friend, our visit has been too short, but you understand now there can be good in “goodbye.” Your grief will continue to teach and minister as you abide and uncover your treasure. You’ve already begun to discover the miracle of the horizon, and I’m honored to have walked across the river with you to begin building your altar.

And now, this to send you off: In Luke 9, the disciples, beyond exhaustion, begged Jesus to send the crowds away to find provision elsewhere. But Jesus knew the paradox of giving out of brokenness, though the disciples reasoned that they were in a “desolate place” and did not have anything left to give.

You and I know the feeling.

Instead, Jesus said, “*You feed them.*” Imagine. Imagine Jesus saying that to you . . . right now in your desolate place. You think, *I’ve got nothing left. Nothing.* But what if your *burden* is your plenty? You’ve got an abundance of that! Remember, the provision that day came from the hand of Jesus, and Jesus kept providing—as He will for you. What comprised that day’s leftovers were broken pieces “filling-full” God’s promise to always be with them and in them.

But it would take a miracle, you say. Yes. Exactly.

Paul said of the churches in Macedonia, *“that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality”* (2 Corinthians 8:2 NASB). Believer, the fragments of life you think are good for nothing, are really food for giving. Your Master will surprise you and lovingly blend them with His healing joy, and grief will become your abundant wealth and overflow to others. Death does not have the last word after all, because death . . . has been swallowed up in victory!

Hold fast, my friend. I’m praying you through. Look Up. God is nigh.

“The people who walk in darkness will see a bright light. The light will shine on those who live in the land of death’s shadow” (Isaiah 9:2 GWT).

When Violence Comes Home

by Tim Jackson and Jeff Olson

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The woman speaking on the phone was noticeably upset. Her voice shaking uncontrollably, Cindy explained that her husband Ron, who had been drinking the previous night, tracked her down with a loaded gun and threatened to kill her.

Cindy was terrified. Yet this was not the first time Ron had been abusive to her. On numerous occasions throughout their 4 troubled years of marriage, he had physically battered and verbally humiliated her.

Unfortunately, marriages like Ron and Cindy’s are not rare—even within the church. Although some may think that the problem of spouse abuse is not widespread in the church, it is alarmingly prevalent. Consider, for example, Bill and Karen’s marriage. On the surface, they seemed to be a “normal” Christian couple. Bill had a successful career. Together they owned a modest house, had two beautiful children, and attended church regularly. But for several years they shared an ugly secret: Bill

was relentlessly abusive.

Shortly after the honeymoon, the verbal assaults began. Bill pointed out every mistake Karen made. She didn't cook "his" meals right. She didn't keep "his" house clean. She wasn't sexually responsive enough. Any time she did do something well, he would take the credit, informing her that it was only because he pushed her that she succeeded. Karen felt worthless and inferior.

It didn't take long before Bill started shoving her around. Less than 2 years into their marriage, Bill was slapping Karen on an almost weekly basis. He watched her like a hawk and berated her with harsh criticism. Even on their better days, Karen felt betrayed, trapped, and frightened that the physical abuse would return and escalate. This is not what she expected marriage to be, and it seemed as if there was nothing she could do about it.

How should endangered women like Cindy and Karen respond? What about their role as Christian wives? Does following a Christlike path mean they should continue to be submissive to their abusive husbands? Can they seek protection? Is there a loving way to hold Bill and Ron responsible for their behavior?

Women like Karen and Cindy often feel alone, without hope, and without options. Many blame themselves for their husbands' anger or violence. Often they are confused about what is really happening not only to them but inside them as well. Because their husbands seem to have everyone else intimidated or fooled with their persuasive charm, these women wonder at times if they are losing their minds.

If this describes you, you are not alone. Many other women have also experienced the predictable cycle and damages of spouse abuse that will be described in the first half of this booklet.

Coming to terms with what has been happening to you may be frightening. The road ahead will not be easy. But there is hope. There is a dawn beyond the darkness. While many problems will never be solved this side of heaven, there is much that can be done. Many have learned that there is help available from God and from the people He can bring into your life.

You don't need to waste the pain of your abuse on further denial and passive tolerance of your husband's illegal and ungodly behavior. There is help for those who learn to respond in a Christlike and biblical way when violence comes home.

Describing Marital Abuse

How Is Spouse Abuse Defined? Marital abuse is the misuse of power and control. It's an attempt to coerce and control one's spouse through a combination of physical and non-physical means. Specific physical examples include slapping, scratching, biting, kicking, shoving, choking, hitting, sexual assault, stabbing, and shooting. A constant barrage of name-calling, guilt trips, put-downs, criticism, and threats are examples of non-physical attempts to intimidate and control. Abusive spouses may also dominate by limiting their mate's behavior and friendships, giving the silent treatment, imposing strict financial restraints, or breaking objects that their mates treasured.

There are many degrees of conflict in marriage. All marital relationships experience at least subtle forms of controlling behavior. Yet at some point, reasonable and fair-minded people recognize that when controlling behavior becomes excessive, it goes beyond what is normal marital conflict and

requires intervention. Marital relationships are not above the law. There are criminal statutes against willful endangerment. Many states are developing specific domestic violence legislation to assist in stopping the assault and battery that threatens a growing number of homes.

While it's true that some wives pose a real threat of endangerment to their husbands, the majority of incidents involve men abusing their wives. Therefore, this booklet will focus on wife abuse while recognizing that the concepts can be applied to a situation that is reversed.

How Widespread Is Wife Abuse? Research shows that battering is the leading cause of injury to women in the United States—more than “rapes, muggings, and traffic accidents combined” (Ann Jones, *Next Time, She'll Be Dead*, p.87, Beacon Press, 1994). The Bureau Of Justice's National Crime Survey reports that a woman is battered in her home every 15 seconds (The Battered Woman's Survival Guide, p.4).

Spouse abuse has no economic, educational, racial, or religious boundaries. It occurs in families from all walks of life. Abused women are homemakers, doctors, teachers, daycare workers, nurses, secretaries, and bankers. They are married to businessmen and janitors, factory workers and accountants, lawyers and even church leaders.

What Is The Cycle Of Abuse? An abusive relationship typically follows a cycle that is marked by three well recognized phases (The Battered Woman, Lenore E. Walker, 1980). Although there are some variations from this cycle, many abusive relationships will repeat this cycle over and over.

The tension building phase is a period of time when a wife either avoids her husband or frantically works to keep her husband's world running smoothly. She does this to prevent triggering another abusive explosion. In this way, she holds some “limited control” in the relationship.

Sometimes there are minor skirmishes, but the wife suppresses her anger by either blaming herself (“I should have kept quiet about the credit-card bill”) or something in the man's environment (“He must have had a tough day at work”) or reasoning that it could have been worse. Each time a small abusive incident occurs, tension in the relationship increases. A nagging sense of helplessness begins to overwhelm her. Eventually the tension simmers to a boil, bringing on the next phase. Ordinarily, this first phase lasts for long periods of time.

The acute battering or abusive phase is earmarked by increased severity of abuse. Unlike the minor abusive incidents that occurred in the first phase, the incidents in this phase are far more caustic. This phase is usually triggered by some particular event or set of circumstances, though rarely the same and often unpredictable. Like a violent storm that strikes on a clear, sunny day, the physical attack or verbal assault seems to come out of nowhere. It could be a meal that is unsatisfactory or a refusal to have sex that sets off a husband. Normally, this phase lasts from 2 to 24 hours (The Battered Woman, p.60).

Initially, a wife is in a state of shock and disbelief. It's difficult for her to come to grips with what has happened to her. If she's been through the abusive cycle several times, she's likely to experience a mixture of relief and rage— relief that the inevitable assault is over, and rage over her husband's empty promises to stop.

She may be faced with the need for medical treatment. She might report her husband to the authorities or inform family members of the abuse. Typically, however, she remains silent and doesn't expose her husband. Within her is an increasing sense of helplessness and feelings of self-hatred for not

doing something to prevent the abuse.

The calm-and-penance phase is a time when the abuser appears to be stricken with grief over his cruel and insensitive actions. He works very hard to make up for what he's done with apparent acts of kindness, promising never to abuse again. Usually, a wife welcomes this phase and enjoys the special attention given to her. Because she desperately wants to believe that her husband is sincere, she tends to overrate the genuineness of his remorse. During this time she may drop criminal charges or shrink away from pursuing legal separation or divorce. She will frequently come up with "reasonable" explanations as to why her husband mistreated her. This phase may last a day or a few months. Eventually, however, the tensions will slowly begin to mount and the cycle will repeat.

Sometimes the calm-and-penance phase is substituted with a sudden return-to-normal phase. In this phase, there is often a significant period of silence. A wife may be hoping that her husband will apologize. But what usually happens is that her husband eventually begins to act as if nothing ever happened. The abusive incident is not mentioned and no apology is offered. Life just somehow goes back to "normal." But because their problems are not exposed and worked through, the tension escalates, leading to another abusive episode.

The Wounds Of Spouse Abuse

Whether subtle or blatant, emotional or physical, spouse abuse pierces the body and soul of a woman. While there are varying degrees of damage, all forms of abuse inflict painful wounds.

Visible Wounds. Countless wives have sought medical attention for the physical trauma they have received at the hands of an enraged, out-of-control husband. These include bruises, scrapes, scratches, cuts, internal injuries, and broken bones. Others have quietly endured the pain of a bloodied nose or a sprained neck or shoulder.

Invisible Wounds. Many women claim that the wounds that go unseen hurt the most. These involve the sting of betrayal, feelings of powerlessness, a loss of freedom, and a suppression of dignity. While there is much overlap among the four, it's helpful to consider each one separately.

The Sting Of Betrayal. An abused spouse is disillusioned. The marriage relationship is a far cry from what she expected it to be. One abused wife tearfully recalled her dream of being happily married to a man who truly loved and cherished her. Though there may have been a few occasions before their marriage when her husband's anger was explosive and way out of proportion, she never dreamed it would be directed toward her to such an extreme.

In the early stages of their relationship, the husband often smothers his wife with kindness. His apparent love and concern for her is what she finds so attractive. Hidden under his cloak of charm and gentleness, however, is a scheme to possess and control her. Eventually her dreams are shattered as she realizes that she's married to an insecure, possessive, and controlling man. She feels betrayed, and the sting of betrayal deepens as her husband repeatedly breaks his promise to stop the abuse. As a result, abused wives often find it difficult to trust people—even individuals who could help.

Feelings Of Powerlessness. A husband's superior physical strength and intimidating threats, or cultural and religious expectations, or economic restrictions leave an abused wife with the feeling that

she is unable to stop the abuse. Her sense of powerlessness intensifies as she begins to recognize that she can't prevent or end the damage and pain the abuse has caused her and her children.

Over time, an abused wife begins to believe that the abuse is somehow her fault. She doubts herself as a wife, homemaker, mother, and lover. Although she may excel at a job with many important responsibilities, she does not feel competent in her home. After an abusive incident, one woman said, "If only I wouldn't have asked him to look at the car when it was acting up. Then maybe he wouldn't have slammed me against the wall."

Loss Of Freedom. An abusive marriage is earmarked by limited freedom on the part of a wife. Her husband may limit her social life, tell her whom she can be friends with, or take away the checkbook. In extreme cases, a wife must get "permission" before doing anything out of her normal daily routine. In an attempt to control his wife and keep the abuse silent, the husband often makes all of her major decisions. In any event, a wife begins to feel that she has no life of her own. She feels as though she has no voice to speak; and if she did speak, no one would pay any attention.

Suppression Of Dignity. None of us can ever fully lose our dignity, though there are times we may feel as if we have. An abusive husband regularly suppresses his wife's dignity. He may constantly tell her that she can't think for herself or treat her like an inanimate object that is used and discarded like an empty pop can. He frequently mocks and discounts her feelings, thoughts, or desires. As a result, she often feels as if she has "ceased to exist as a person." This sometimes leads to a "hollow" appearance in which she seems emotionally and intellectually barren.

Myths Of Wife Abuse

There are several myths surrounding the issue of wife abuse. Let's look at four of them:

MYTH #1: Some Men Can't Help Themselves. Some believe there are men who don't have the ability to cope with frustration. They say these men have no choice but to abuse. In responding to this claim, James and Phyllis Alsdurf state, "If frustrating situations offered only one option, abusers would be equally violent on the job, driving in traffic, or interacting with friends; but that is simply not true. The majority of abusers direct their violence specifically and purposely toward their wives" (*Battered Into Submission*, p.68)

Others blame alcohol and drug abuse for a batterer's violent behavior. It's true that addictive behavior complicates and inflames many abusive marriages. But the solution to the violence is not as simple as eliminating the alcohol and drugs. Not every abuser drinks or does drugs. And not every alcoholic or drug addict is an abuser. And not every abuser who quits drinking quits abusing his spouse. The failure to hold abusers responsible for their abuse, no matter what other factors may be influencing them, only adds fuel to a fire already burning out of control.

MYTH #2: Abused Women Are Themselves To Blame. Some believe that wife abuse would not occur if it were not for women who drive their husbands over the edge. They point out that some women "bait" their husbands with a frigid attitude or constant nagging. They maintain that some women actually "buy" the attention and sympathy of others by provoking their husbands to violence.

While there may be occasions when this kind of “baiting” exists, it’s never an excuse for abuse. It’s a well known fact that battered women generally keep the abuse private (Battered Into Submission, p.74). That’s why wife battering is commonly referred to as the “silent crime.” Battered women normally don’t seek sympathy from others. They keep it to themselves because of the shame they feel and because they’re afraid of what might happen if they report their husbands’ behavior.

Some wives admit to provoking their husbands’ rage, not because they like being abused but because they have been through the cycle enough times to know that after the storm their husbands are inclined to be remorseful, kind, and gentle. Additionally, “getting the abuse over with” eases the tension of not knowing when the next abusive storm will strike. For many abused wives, living with the overwhelming fear of not knowing when the abuse will erupt again is worse than the abusive incident itself.

In some marriages, the wife is more verbal than her husband. She can outmaneuver him in an argument, give him reason to feel weak and incompetent, and sometimes provoke him to anger. When he finally blows up, her moral superiority and low opinion of him appear to be confirmed. He feels even lower about himself, while she, at considerable cost to herself, appears to be vindicated.

Again, while such relationships exist, they do not prove that a woman is to blame for her husband’s abusive reaction. He and he alone is fully responsible for the way he responds.

MYTH #3: The Bible Teaches That An Abused Woman Must Be Willing To Follow Christ’s Example Of Suffering And Endure Her Husband’s Abuse.

This may be the most serious of all myths. Many well-intentioned pastors and counselors have sent wives back into dangerous homes after quoting the apostle Peter’s words:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.... Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives (1 Pet. 2:21; 3:1-2).

Many battered wives have remained in abusive marriages because they’ve been taught that the suffering example of Christ requires that they stay and take a beating from their husbands. But neither the broader nor the immediate context of the Bible requires that a wife endure her husband’s abuse.

God is portrayed throughout the Bible as an advocate who “upholds the cause of the oppressed” (Ps. 146:7). He has always asked people of strength to come to the assistance of those who are weak and oppressed:

Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isa. 1:16-17).

It would be inconsistent with the rest of Scripture if Peter were endorsing any behavior that would have encouraged the oppression of wives by abusive husbands.

Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that Peter was referring to an abusive marriage in 1 Peter 3:1-6. He clearly described a marriage of a believing wife and an unbelieving husband (v.2). To import abuse into this text is not justifiable by the evidence from the text itself. Peter encouraged wives to influence their husbands not by lecturing them into the kingdom but rather by loving them well.

While there may have been verbal resistance and accusations from an unbelieving husband that would have produced emotional pain for a believing wife (see 3:9,16), there is no evidence that Peter

was referring to the kind of abusive and violent marriage described throughout this booklet.

Peter's focus throughout this passage was not on how to endure abuse, but on how to live good lives that cannot be dismissed or ignored by unbelievers (2:12). He applied the principle of godly living to citizens under pagan governments (2:13-17), slaves under pagan masters (2:18-25), and wives with pagan husbands (3:1-6).

Some have been distracted with Peter's encouragement to slaves to suffer as Christ suffered (2:21) as somehow also applying to wives in abusive marriages. Peter never endorsed slavery nor spousal abuse. In a first-century Roman culture in which slavery was legal (a slavery that was quite different from the 19th-century slavery of the Americas), Peter encouraged Christian slaves to be the best slaves possible in order to win the respect of their unbelieving masters. He taught wives to be such radiant women that their actions would capture their husbands' attention and draw them to Christ. The call to godly living was not based on the response they would get from their unbelieving masters or husbands, but on God's commendation (2:20; 3:4).

Fortunately, in our day, we have laws against domestic violence. By enduring abuse in secret, a battered wife is hiding criminal behavior within her own home that God says needs to be exposed and punished. In fact, a wife is encouraged to risk suffering emotional pain by loving her husband enough to expose the abuse. In spite of fearing how he might respond, she needs to act in a way that seeks his highest good. That's what it means to "do what is right" (3:6).

MYTH #4: When The Bible Requires A Wife To Submit To Her Husband "In Everything," That Includes Abuse. Many Christian wives suffer in relationships with abusive husbands because they honestly desire to honor God's calling to "submit to their husbands in everything" (Eph. 5:24). Some have mistakenly taught them, however, that "everything" includes abuse and betrayal. The Bible gives no indication that abusive relationships are being addressed in Ephesians 5. In fact, the opposite is true.

Because God knew that the battle within the home would be for control (Gen. 3:16) and that husbands would tend to grab the power and rule harshly over their wives (Col. 3:19), He qualified the context for wifely submission. The Bible states that it is "as the church submits to Christ" that a wife is to submit to her husband "in everything" (Eph. 5:24). What's implied is not only how wives are to submit, but the type of leadership that they and the church are to submit to. Christ's leadership is the model for husbands. His leadership was loving and sacrificial. Christ would never demand the church to submit to an abuse of power. Neither would He advocate a wife submitting to a husband's abuse of power. Abuse is a destructive distortion of leadership that calls for a radically different response from a spiritually healthy woman.

A wife has good reason to follow a husband who loves, leads, and sacrifices as Jesus did for the church (Eph. 5:23,25,28-29). However, when a husband violates his call to love by a pattern of oppressive control and violence as described earlier in this booklet, a wife must take strong steps to protect herself and her children from his abusive stranglehold.

When a woman finds herself in a marriage with a man who abuses his power and authority, she can still respond in a way that shows love and respect to her husband— even though she doesn't submit to his abuse. Before discussing what that kind of response might look like, let's consider why and how a wife tends to respond to a husband who misuses his position of authority to dominate her.

A Wife's Response To Abuse

Why Does An Abused Wife Respond The Way She Does? There are many issues stirring inside the wounded heart of an abused woman. Besides the pain and confusion, there is also fear, anger, and disappointment. At any given moment, one or more of these can influence an abused wife's response to her abuse.

The Fear Within. A woman in an abusive situation is often terrified. Without question, she has much to fear. She is legitimately afraid of losing everything she holds dear— her husband, her children, her financial support, her house, her family reputation, and her physical and emotional well-being— just to name a few.

Abused women readily identify with the fear David expressed in Psalm 55 over being deeply betrayed by a close friend:

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm." . . . If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords (Ps. 55:4-8,12-13,20-21).

But while there is much to be afraid of, there is a distinct difference (though often difficult to see) between being afraid and being controlled by fear. An abused woman who is controlled by her fear has lost all confidence that she can make any kind of difference in her life. She feels powerless to stop the endless cycle of abuse. She has learned to tolerate abuse and lives with the constant terror that she is helpless and that her situation is hopeless. In essence, she is paralyzed by fear.

Jill spoke of how she repeatedly turned down the invitations of family and friends to attend social gatherings that she really wanted to attend. She was afraid that if she left Sam alone, she might make him angry. She lived her life striving for his approval by doing all she could to avoid his angry disapproval and possible rejection. But what Jill eventually discovered was that she could never do enough for him no matter how hard she tried. Something was always wrong or at least deficient with what she did. She felt as though she never measured up to his demands. And for that failure she came to believe that she deserved Sam's abuse.

In many cases, an abused woman's greatest fear is that her husband may abandon her. She mistakenly believes that without his acceptance and presence in her life she can't survive. Her heart flinches at the thought of being left alone. She doesn't necessarily want him out of her life, she just wants him to stop hurting her. If he does end up rejecting her, what will that say about her? What will others think? What about the children? What about the economic hardship? How will they make it on their own?

The Anger Within. Although she may not always be aware of it, anger is usually present in the heart of an abused wife. Is it wrong for her to be angry about being abused? Absolutely not! God Himself hates marital violence (Mal. 2:16). He wants us to be angry about the things that anger Him (Prov. 6:16-19; Eph. 4:26). Part of sharing His goodness is to develop a holy hatred and intolerance for sin in

ourselves and in others (Rom. 12:9).

The problem, however, is not that an abused wife is angry over her husband's mistreatment, but that her anger may turn into a bitterness that seeks to return evil for evil. Unresolved, vindictive anger may gradually turn her into a hard woman with an attitude that will eventually distance her from others as well.

The Disappointment Within. An abused wife is also motivated by intense disappointment. Her heart legitimately longs for more of her husband's loving involvement. She wants the abuse to stop and the romance to begin. Yet there is rarely any hope that it will ever happen. Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." As her disappointment becomes unbearable, she tends to blame herself for the abuse and may even doubt her worthiness to be loved. Self-blame seems to make her disappointment easier to bear. She has the illusion of control because she can try to fix whatever she thinks she did wrong to cause the abuse. Self-doubt, on the other hand, begins to deaden the part of her heart that wants her marriage to improve. Believing that she doesn't deserve to be loved is a subtle way of protecting herself from getting crushed again.

An abused woman can deaden her heart so much that she gives up her will to fight for change. Slowly, she stops trying to "fix" her marriage and resigns herself to the way things are. Whether she stays busy trying to become what she thinks her husband wants or gives way to despair, she forfeits the opportunity to respond in a way that her husband needs. Instead of being convinced that her husband needs confrontation, she feels unable to seek the intervention required for her out-of-control spouse.

How Does An Abused Wife Respond To Her Husband? Most typical responses can be categorized as either passive or vindictive. In many instances, fear and disappointment prompt a passive response, and anger arouses a vindictive response. An abused wife is capable of either response, though a passive response is far more common.

A Passive Response. This is the response that tolerates the abuse. It occurs in all three phases of the abusive cycle (p.5). A passive response pursues peace at any cost and flees from any kind of confrontation. It excuses or minimizes the abuse with statements like, "He had a tough day at work," or "At least it wasn't as bad as the last time."

Many would view a woman responding this way as a passive "doormat" for her husband to trample. While she may be angry over the way he's abusing her, she cowers at the thought of doing anything that might incur her husband's anger. She labors to appease her husband and become what he wants. She "walks on eggshells," careful not to arouse the sleeping giant lest she or her children bear the brunt of his violent rage.

Some would interpret this woman's passive response as a way of showing love to her troubled husband. But is she? Is she helping her husband by shouldering the blame and not confronting his sin? Or is she protecting herself? Focusing on her own self-protection is understandable. But facing the possibility of physical risk isn't the greatest danger. Worse would be the prolonged loss of her own freedom and dignity. Worse would be following a path of self-protection that allows grievous sin to continue and her own love to grow cold and weak.

A Vindictive Response. Occasionally, an abused wife will lash out at her husband. Although she's still frightened about many things, there are occasions when she's been pushed far enough that her anger gets the best of her. Instead of passively enduring the abuse out of fear, she finally lashes back and

makes her husband pay.

An abused wife may try to get even with a sarcastic or demeaning comment. She may even try to physically strike back. Quite often, however, an abused wife's revenge is more passive aggressive. She may let the house go, or make her husband late for church or social engagements, or fail to give him an important phone message. These are subtle ways of getting even and controlling him for a change.

A woman's desire for revenge is not necessarily wrong, but taking revenge is. God says that revenge is His business (Rom. 12:19). Instead, God calls a wife to consider responding differently to her abusive husband. This response centers around the goal of showing love and respect without backing away from the gravity of a situation and the need a wife may have to escape to a place of safety.

A battered wife may feel helpless and cornered with few if any options. As powerless as she might feel, in time she can discover there is more within her heart than just fear and anger. She can find that she has the freedom and power within her to respond in love to a man who is acting as her enemy.

A Loving Response. During one of the most well-known public speeches of His ministry, Jesus made this unlikely statement: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk. 6:27). Some may argue that if an abused wife were to apply Jesus' words to her situation, it would only encourage her husband to be more abusive. Although following Jesus' counsel may cost her many things, loving and doing good is in no way meant to help an abusive husband indulge in the childish lust for power and control that Jesus clearly condemned (Mk. 10:42-43). Nor does a loving response have anything to do with letting him off the hook for his cruelty. Instead, a loving response refuses to tolerate the abuse and does whatever is reasonable to help her husband understand the harm he's causing to others and himself.

A battered wife can begin to live out Jesus' call to love by confronting the abusive patterns in the marriage. While "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8), it doesn't cover over all sin. Confronting her husband's habitual and grievous sin is often the best way to show him love. Although it's never a wife's job to change her husband, confronting the abuse is often the only way to give him the opportunity to acknowledge his sin, repent, and find the forgiveness of God.

While no description can fully capture what it means for an abused wife to lovingly confront her husband, initially confronting the abuse involves at least seeking help from others, careful timing, exposing the abuse, and giving consequences.

1. Seeking Help From Others. For at least two reasons, an abused wife shouldn't try to confront abuse in her marriage without help. First, confrontation is a long and difficult process. Second, a husband may respond to any confrontation with physical intimidation and violence. Consequently, she needs to enlist help from those who will support her and help ensure her safety. One woman, for example, had two male friends present when she first confronted her husband. She also arranged for a place for her and her children to stay while her husband contemplated what they discussed.

2. Careful Timing. There is no "good" time to confront abuse, but some moments are better than others. Generally speaking, the best time for a wife to confront an abusive husband is when he is somewhat calm.

Most battered women should not try to confront an abusive husband in the heat of an abusive episode because she is usually alone and unprotected. When a husband is physically and emotionally out of control, the best thing for a wife to do is to lay low and, when she can, call for help or go somewhere where she and her children are safe. One woman, for example, stayed reasonably calm when her

husband picked up their toddler by the hair and threatened to break his neck. She knew he was capable of doing anything, so she didn't want to get him any angrier. Once her child was out of harm's way, she called the police and then went to stay with her parents.

3. Exposing The Abuse. Instead of hiding the abuse, a wife needs to carefully make plans to expose the terrible things her husband has been doing to her behind closed doors (Eph. 5:11-13). In many cases, exposing an abusive husband involves letting others know who not only can assist and protect her but also help her husband.

A wife can expose her husband by simply reporting him to the police or telling the truth about how she really got her bruises. Other situations may require a woman to have more savvy. One woman wisely used a voice-activated tape recorder to capture the barrage of verbal and physical abuse that no one in her church believed she was enduring in her home. Her husband had convinced people in the church that she was the problem. But when the evidence was heard, the truth became abundantly clear and the process of church discipline began (Mt. 18:15-20).

4. Giving Consequences. Along with exposing the abuse, an abused wife can confront her husband by giving him consequences for his abusive behavior—not to punish, but to bring a self-deceived man to his senses. A consequence is something a wife decides to do instead of something she tries to make her husband do. And in this situation, it should be strong enough to shake up his world.

One woman told her husband she would press charges against him the next time he hit her. When he did, she used the Godgiven provisions of human government (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14) to lovingly but firmly bring an out-of-control husband to his senses. Being arrested and going through the criminal justice system helped him begin to see the severity of what he was doing to her and their children.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee of how a husband will respond to a wife who exposes the evil of his abuse and gives him consequences. Even Jesus, whose love was perfect, at times aroused hostility from those He loved (Mk. 3:1-6). All too often, the abuser has so hardened his heart that he is unwilling to admit his sin and accept any responsibility for harm caused to others. In such cases, marital separation may be the only "severe mercy" that can be offered to him. Even so, a wife whose desire is to love her husband will not stop praying for him.

No matter what the outcome, there's a better way for a wife to respond to her husband's abuse. This higher path isn't easier. It doesn't offer a guarantee of immediate outcome. In some ways, it might even increase the risk of loss. There's no way to play it safe and still address the abuse with love. Nor is there ever a time to take revenge. Succumbing to a passive or vindictive response will only leave a battered wife trapped in a vicious cycle of fear and anger.

No wife will perfectly love her abusive husband. Fear will continue to entice her back to passivity. The desire to return evil for evil will at times seem irresistible. But if an abused wife is a follower of Christ, these are not the deepest desires of her heart. Since the Spirit of Christ is in her heart, there will be a greater desire to love her husband, not because she's afraid of losing him but because she wants what is best for him.

As the wife grows in her relationship with the One who showed her amazing love by dying for her sins, she can know more of the power and desire to extend the same kind of love to her abusive husband. And though her husband may never admit his sin—remaining abusive and continuing to put all the blame on her—she can more fully discover, in her pain, that it is God she wants and needs the most.

Is Reconciliation Possible?

Whenever there has been long-term abuse in a marriage relationship, reconciliation is difficult. If it occurs, it will not happen quickly. Restoration is not an event, it is a process—one that is slow and arduous. Many times it will be three steps forward and two steps back. There are no simple methods to follow or guarantees of success. Reconciliation must not be misunderstood as encouraging a woman to return to the abusive cycle. Paul used the word reconciliation to denote the cessation of hostility in a relationship (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Eph. 2:11-18). The death of Christ was the cost of bringing reconciliation between sinful, rebellious people and a holy God.

Reconciliation in an abusive marriage is a cessation of hostility on the part of the abuser against the victim. It means that he must do whatever it takes to ensure that there is not a return to the destructive patterns of the past.

Rebuilding a relationship marred by abuse must eventually cross over the bridge of forgiveness. For many abuse victims, the idea of forgiving their abuser seems like betrayal because it feels as if they are letting him off the hook for what he's done. The pattern of forgiveness spoken of in Luke 17:3-4, however, makes it clear that forgiveness is a process that also lovingly holds the abuser accountable for his actions. (For a more thorough explanation of the process of forgiveness, see *When Forgiveness Seems Impossible* CB941.)

What if an abusive husband is not willing to go through the process of reconciliation? Then a wife must continue to follow a path of spiritual counsel and legal action that may eventually involve divorce. While God hates a divorce that is selfish and exploitive (Mal. 2:16a), God equally hates any form of violence that invades and threatens the security of a home (Mal. 2:16b). Even God recognizes that there are some things worse than divorce.

God Himself divorced the northern tribes of Israel (Jer. 3:8). He took such action only after enduring their prolonged spiritual unfaithfulness, which He compared to sexual unfaithfulness.

Old Testament divorce laws provide another glimpse of God's heart toward these matters (Dt. 24:1-4). Jesus said that Moses permitted divorce because of hardened hearts (Mt. 19:8). Jesus did not disagree with Moses' allowance of divorce on the basis on hard-heartedness. Neither did Jesus give us reason to think hard hearts were only an Old Testament problem. What we know from Jesus and Moses is that hard hearts exist today and are not open to reason and grace. In the case of domestic violence, hard hearts call for "damage control" and the protection of victims.

A wife who is in physical danger needs to separate from her husband. Eventually, divorce may be necessary for a wife who is married to a severely abusive husband—even if he is not guilty of sexual immorality (Mt. 19:1-12). However, she must carefully consider the name and reputation of Christ and follow the biblical procedures for confronting a sinning brother before taking such strong action (Mt. 18:15-17).

It is not as well known, but nonetheless true, that the New Testament allows a woman to walk away from her marriage for unspecified reasons, but without the opportunity for remarriage. Paul wrote, "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Cor. 7:10-11). People who have wrestled with what the Bible has to say about

marital abuse agree that the kind of hard-hearted attitude and grievous behavior often associated with spouse abuse are what can bring a wife to this unfortunate, but sometimes necessary decision. (For a complete explanation of the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage, see Divorce And Remarriage Q0806.)

How Can The Church Respond To Spouse Abuse?

When an abused woman finally reaches out for help, the place she most often turns to is her church. In far too many cases, however, the church has been ill-prepared and even hesitant to get involved in such messy situations. Unfortunately, many women become disillusioned and don't seek help from the church.

God indicted the religious leadership of Ezekiel's day because, He told them, "You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally" (Ezek. 34:4). The call of God's people is to minister to those who are hurting and in desperate need of assistance as well as those who have lost their way. The following are a few basic suggestions for churches that want to take this call seriously.

1. Be Prepared To Get Involved. Plan ahead. Don't be caught off guard. If a church is truly committed to ministering to families in today's cultural chaos and to be a light in a dark world, then it must be prepared to provide the needed support structure. This will enable a woman to lovingly hold her husband accountable without the perpetual threat of physical harm and financial ruin. Consult with professionals in your area to find out how to implement intervention with an abuser and how to provide protection for a victim and her children. Also, seek liability insurance to protect the church from litigation. It's a small price to pay for the added potential risk in dealing with these situations.

2. Maintain FollowThrough. Be persistent. It's easy to get discouraged when working with individuals who come from abusive homes. Progress is usually slow and seems nonexistent at times. Expect the unexpected. It can be draining work, so don't allow only a few people to carry the load. Don't become "weary in doing good" (Gal. 6:9). An extensive prayer ministry is needed to support this front-line, hand-to-hand combat.

3. Establish A Referral Network For Helping Both Victims And Abusers. This includes housing, food, clothing, medical services, legal advice, protective services, professional counseling, and employment services. Don't be afraid to recommend the help of other reputable agencies. The church should be the focal point for coordinating the overall ministry efforts to help this wounded person become a healthier member of the body of Christ. But the church should not be expected to do everything all by itself.

4. Hold The Abuser Accountable. Remember, the church is responsible to minister truth and mercy to both the abuser and the victim. The church's goal needs to be restoration. If there has been a separation due to physical violence, regular accountability must be maintained. If charges have been pressed and the abuser is incarcerated, he should not be abandoned. He needs to know that while the church sides with God in hating his sin, they (like God) desire his restoration.

What If You Are An Abused Spouse?

If after reading this booklet you recognize that you are living in an abusive marriage, there are some important steps that you need to consider:

1. Admit That You Are The Victim Of Spouse Abuse. You didn't ask for this. Don't take responsibility for the abuse. Don't pretend it will get better if you just ignore the problem or work harder to pacify your husband.

2. Get To A Place Of Safety. If you are in a situation of immediate danger, go to a friend or family member's house where you can safely call for help. Notify the authorities as soon as possible in the event of an attack. In most states, mandatory arrest laws have recently been passed to help ensure the safety of the victim of domestic violence. If you don't have anywhere you can go, call a local shelter for abused women in your area.

3. Break The Silence. If you have been terrorized by an abusive spouse, tell someone you trust about the abuse. By all means, refuse to keep it quiet any longer. Tell your pastor, an elder, or a church leader. Talk to a counselor. Call a local domestic violence hotline in your area. Don't stop talking about it until someone begins to listen to you and takes your situation seriously.

Above all, when you feel as if there is no one else to turn to, you have the invitation of the One who suffered and died for you. It is Jesus who said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28).

When We Love Too Much

Escaping The Control Of Codependency

by Jeff Olson

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Jimmy Piersall was like most red-blooded American boys growing up in the 1930s. He loved to play America's favorite pastime. From as early as Jimmy can remember, his father taught him to play baseball. In his book *Fear Strikes Out*, Jimmy recounts, "One of my earliest memories . . . was standing in the yard behind the house, catching a rubber ball and lobbing it back to my dad. I learned how to catch and throw a ball before I learned the alphabet."

According to Jimmy, he loved playing catch with his dad. It was fun—until it started to become an obsession. Jimmy's father, a strict man with a violent temper, put enormous pressure on his son to become a major league baseball player. As early as the first grade, his dad said to him, "I don't want you thinking about fun. When you grow up, I want you to become a slugger like Jimmy Foxx. That is where the money is." He drilled into Jimmy's young head, "You must learn baseball backwards and forwards. The more you know, the better you'll be." Jimmy later recounted, "I could tell what a batter should do in any given situation before I could write my name."

According to Jimmy's autobiography, one of his biggest concerns was "whether or not I'd ever be big enough or good enough to play major league baseball. My father put the idea in my head, but it became the one burning ambition of my life. I was just as anxious to make it as he was to see me do it."

Jimmy's father often warned him about avoiding injuries that could hurt his performance. On one occasion he said, "Remember, son, you grip a bat with all 10 fingers. If anything is wrong with one of them, it can ruin you." When Jimmy was 17, he broke his arm in a pickup game of touch football. His dad sobbed like a baby and said, "After all I tried to do to keep you for baseball, look what you did to yourself. Now everything's gone."

Jimmy's life was full of pressure and worry. Along with worrying about becoming a professional baseball player and pleasing his father, he had other concerns too. He worried about his mother's happiness and making enough money to take care of his parents, his wife, and his baby. His worries eventually became obsessions that took over his life. He became extremely suspicious of anyone who didn't understand his obsessions, and began to alienate anyone who got in his way.

Jimmy made it to the major leagues in 1952. And he was successful. But the obsessions shaped by his father's expectations drove him over the edge. In June of 1952, he suffered such a severe breakdown that 7 months disappeared from his memory.

Jimmy Piersall's story is an example of a problem that is more common than most people realize. The term codependence didn't exist back then, but today many would see part of Jimmy's problem as an overreliance on his father's approval. He was driven by an unhealthy and impossible goal of trying to control anything that would cause him to fall short of his father's expectations.

Codependency, in whatever form it takes, is a tortured and often misunderstood way to live. People who struggle with this problem live in a personal prison of stress and anxiety that monopolizes their thoughts and feelings. While they are aware of their misery, they often don't see the underlying problem that is at the root of their trouble.

While most people with codependency don't end up in a severe state of collapse, many can identify with some or all of the following statements:

- I worry too much about a person or problem.
- I feel as if I must stay on top of everything.
- I feel responsible when others are angry or sad.
- I minimize or cover for what others do wrong.
- It seems as though I'm always apologizing for something.
- I have difficulty disagreeing with others.
- I tip-toe around those I'm afraid of.
- I'll do anything to keep the peace.
- I tend to cling to others.

- I want others to take care of me.
- I tend to offer unrequested help.
- I try to fix people's problems.
- I often feel used by those I try to help or please.

If you identify with any of the above statements, please read on. Even though it may be difficult, what you are about to read is written with the confidence that there is a better way to live.

The Problem Of Codependency

We can't change a problem we don't understand. We need to be able to recognize what codependency is, what it looks like, where it comes from, and what effect it has on ourselves and others. The term codependency is professional language that surfaced sometime in the late 1970s. It was used to describe a problem that developed in family members of chemically addicted people. Professionals who were trying to help people stop using drugs and alcohol noticed something unusual. As addicted persons overcame their problem, their families often began to fall apart. It was as if some family members needed the addict's problem so they could continue taking care of and rescuing the out-of-control person. While they previously resented the addict for having a problem, they later resented him for getting better.

Codependency became a way of describing those persons who resisted giving up their caretaker role as much as the chemically addicted person resisted staying clean. It was as if their whole identity and purpose in life were wrapped up in both adjusting to and trying to manage the addict's problem.

Professionals no longer limit the term codependency to the family members of someone with a chemical addiction. They now apply the term to a much broader group of people. Today, the term codependency is used for those who struggle with overreliance and control issues—even if they are not in a relationship with an unhealthy person.

Codependency Defined

Let's attempt to define the problem in a way that lays the foundation for understanding some important spiritual implications. Codependency is overdependence on others. This problem is difficult to see, however, because the overreliant persons are not just being controlled by others. The irony is that they are also attempting to control the very ones who are controlling them.

The focus of a codependent person's life may include a wide range of people—a spouse, an ex-spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a parent, a teenage son or daughter, a friend, or a family. These other persons may be weak, timid, and unsure, or they may be overconfident, selfrighteous, and overbearing. Some codependent people are in a relationship with others who have a serious drinking or gambling problem. Some are in a relationship with a spouse who is having an adulterous affair. Still others are living with someone with an unpredictable temper.

As suggested earlier, some codependent people may be depending too much on those whose behavior is neither inappropriate nor out of control. For instance, one wife tried to keep her husband home because she was threatened by his interest in any activity that didn't include her. His interests

were neither out of line nor out of balance. The problem was that his wife was overdependent and so insecure that she felt she had to keep him to herself.

Codependency is a matter of degree. To some extent, we are all controlled by the actions and opinions of others. In some ways, we all try to control others. Controlling and being controlled by others, however, characterizes those who are codependent. They latch on to the people they try to save, take care of, appease, or intimidate because they rely too much on them.

What Does Codependency Look Like?

Codependent people have countless ways of trying to manage others and their problems.

The Caretaker. This is not the caregiver who is needed by a seriously incapacitated person. Neither is the caretaker someone who helps those who are in need (1 Th. 5:14). If a friend is sick and you run an errand or watch her kids, that is not caretaking. Caretakers try to do for others what they could and should do for themselves. Caretakers over anticipate what others need so that they can help. They try to be the hero, eager to fix problems. They feel responsible to change other people's moods. They offer family members unwanted advice or remind them of something they need to do. They monitor their spouse's consumption of food or alcohol. They seem to want problems to solve so that they can feel needed and in control.

The Rescuer. This is not the courageous person who takes personal risks to help people in dire need. Rather, it is the one who bails others out of the consequences of poor choices. Rescuers enable rather than confront problems that others create. They cover for others' glaring mistakes. For example, a rescuer will work an extra job rather than confront a family member who consistently wastes money on drugs and gambling that is needed to pay bills. They'll do homework for intelligent but unmotivated teenagers. They'll screen unwanted phone calls for family members. They'll hide a spouse's sexual or gambling addiction. They "protect" and "defend" others by making excuses for their inappropriate behavior. They clean up messes that their irresponsible adult children create. They control by picking up the pieces and minimizing the seriousness of a problem.

The Pleaser. This is not the one who is trying to be considerate of the real needs and feelings of others. Instead, pleasers try to do or be what they think others want them to do or be. They are preoccupied with making others happy and not disappointing them. Pleasers readily agree with others so they will avoid confrontation. They are overly accommodating and compliant. They have a different face for every crowd. They strive to live up to the standards of others, even those that are unrealistic. They control others by doing or saying almost anything for anyone, anytime.

The Helpless Victim. Everyone has weaknesses, but those who play the role of the helpless victim choose to be weak unnecessarily. They don't just want to be helped, they want to be taken care of. Unlike the caretaker, they need others to take care of them. They send the subtle yet loud message, "I'm too weak to handle life. I need your involvement and cooperation if I'm going to make it." They manipulate others to feel sorry for them. They pressure family and friends to understand and excuse their inability to handle life. Wanting others to be around them all the time, they absorb attention like a dry sponge. They control others through weakness.

The Intimidator. Families and churches need strong leaders, but they don't need leaders who intimidate and lord it over others (1 Pet. 5:3). That, however, is what intimidators do. They get things done—their way. Many are pushy, even without raising their voices. They leave the impression that they know it all. They use knowledge to control. They can be cordial and friendly, as long as others agree with them. But when crossed, they turn mean. Some intimidators even go so far as to verbally and physically abuse those who dare to disagree with them. Behind the tough exterior, however, is an insecure heart that is terrified of losing control and being abandoned by the very people they intimidate.

What Drives A Codependent Person?

Although the faces of codependency differ, the driving motivations are similar. A careful examination of codependent people reveals that fear, misplaced trust, and poor examples drive them to control and be controlled by people.

Driven By Fear. All of us are afraid of something. But codependent people are gripped with an inordinate amount of insecurity. Much of the way they think and relate is motivated by a fear of disapproval, rejection, or anger. They often have a nagging dread that something terrible is going to happen if they don't stay in control.

King Saul, Israel's first king, was driven by fear. After being confronted by the prophet Samuel for allowing his soldiers to disobey God's orders, Saul finally admitted, "I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them" (1 Sam. 15:24).

Codependent people are controlled by a similar fear. Some worry about what others might do or think if they fail. Others worry about what they might lose if they aren't needed. For example, one mother continued to cover up her adult son's irresponsible behavior because she was afraid that others would view her as a bad parent. Another woman who described herself as a "smother mother" was afraid her children might not love her if they didn't need her to manage their lives. One man was so afraid of his wife's anger that he wouldn't risk confronting her about her out-of-control spending problem.

Driven By Misplaced Trust. All of us need and depend on other people. It's appropriate for family members to want each other's love and acceptance. Friends rely on friends. But people with codependency need and depend on others too much. Something vital is missing inside them, which they rely on others to fill.

Leah, Rachel's older sister and Jacob's first wife, was a woman who seemed to need her husband's love too much. From the start of a marriage that was arranged in deception, Jacob let it be known that he loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen. 29:30). Being second in Jacob's eyes broke Leah's heart. She apparently thought, however, that if she gave Jacob children, he would finally love her. After giving birth to the first of six sons, she made a statement uttered by many codependent wives, "Surely my husband will love me now" (v.32). Later, after her third son was born she stated, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (v.34). Her desire for Jacob's love was legitimate, but it seems to have become the focus and consuming goal of her life.

Codependent people make others so important that their ultimate joy and fulfillment in life

hinges on others' love, approval, and presence. They believe they will not be happy unless others accept them, pay more attention to them, need them more, or become what they want. One woman, for example, was so desperate for her dysfunctional family to become close that she ran herself ragged trying to make them want to spend time together. Another woman knocked herself out trying to please her critical mother and gain her acceptance.

Driven By Example. The sins of one generation are passed on to the next generation by parental example. For instance, the Bible tells the sad story of how all the kings of Israel who rejected the house of David followed the sinful example of their forefathers (1 Ki. 22:52-53).

Many codependent people grew up in homes where they saw a mother or father obsessively please or take care of others. They may have grown up with one parent who had a destructive addiction while the other parent made excuses or pretended the problem didn't exist. Others may have had parents who handled their insecurities by acting helpless or by intimidation. Nearly everyday, they saw codependent patterns of relating, which slowly rubbed off.

Codependency is a learned behavior. But there comes a time when we all must take responsibility for the way we've chosen to handle life. Children have no control over the kind of example their parents provide, but they are responsible for either following that example or rejecting it.

What's Wrong With Codependency?

There's a lot wrong with codependency! It doesn't work. It creates more problems. It's a violation of love. And it's a sign of an unrecognized problem.

It Doesn't Work. No matter how skillful people are in their codependent strategies, they cannot completely control anything or anyone. Life continues to be unsafe and disappointing. Friends and loved ones may comply temporarily, but eventually they resist and resent being controlled. When codependent people increase their efforts, they become even more controlled by the person or problem they are trying to change. It's a vicious and exhausting cycle.

It Creates More Problems. Deep inside, codependent people know that despite all of their efforts, life is getting worse, not better. The following are some of the major problems codependency creates:

Resentment. It's often a well-kept secret that resentment simmers in the hearts of those who can appear kind and accommodating. They may act agreeable and compliant but they end up resenting those they try to take care of, rescue, and appease. For example, one wife complained, "After all I've done to make my husband happy, he still cheats on me." A father admitted, "I've done so much for my son. I've bailed him out of so many tight spots. But he still won't have anything to do with me unless he needs something."

Martha, who may or may not have been overly dependent on people, is a New Testament example of a person who was resentful because no one seemed to notice or appreciate her sacrificial efforts. Her sister Mary was getting all of Jesus' attention, even though Martha was the one who opened up her home and was doing all of the work (Lk. 10:38-42).

People with codependency identify with Martha's resentment. Family members don't appreciate

their sacrifices. Friends don't listen to their advice or give them approval and attention. People don't understand their needs or weaknesses. They feel used, angry, and misunderstood.

Even though they're resentful, codependent people remain afraid and overdependent, so they keep doing or asking for more and more—only to get the same disappointing results. And the resentment that builds may eventually lead to complaining (sometimes a lot), withdrawing, exploding, or expressing resentment in subtle ways. Many conceal their resentment for years, even from themselves. It took one wife 8 years, for example, before she woke up and realized how angry she was for allowing her husband to force his will on her. Others hide their frustrations for only short periods of time, sometimes striking out regularly at innocent family members and friends.

Stress. Worrying about what others think or need and trying to be everything for everyone generates unhealthy levels of stress. A child, for instance, who takes on the impossible job of keeping a family happy and together will pay a great price. Pleasing others leads to a never-ending search to figure out what people want. Stress builds because what seems to please one day rarely works the next.

Depression And Addiction. Some who can no longer deny that their efforts to change people and protect themselves don't work begin to ask themselves, "What's the point?" and just give up. Others, who can no longer tolerate or protect themselves from the pain of life, resort to alcohol, sexual adventure, shopping, television, or staying busy to escape. But they always end up being enslaved by whatever they use to escape and control the pain of life.

Health Complications. Many medical professionals believe that when people hold problems inside, pretend that all is fine, or obsessively worry they put themselves at risk for a variety of health problems, some of which are life threatening.

It's Unloving. Loving others means caring about them and working toward their best interest. No matter how you cut it, rescuing others from their own irresponsible behavior is not in their best interest (Prov. 19:19). It enables them to continue living carelessly and sinfully. The same is true of caretaking. It is unloving because it doesn't allow others to take responsibility for themselves. It keeps them from growing up. It's also unloving to manipulate and strong-arm people into doing what you demand.

Eli, the high priest of Israel during the time of the judges, illustrates this form of unloving behavior. His two sons kept for themselves the choice meats from the animals used for sacrifices. They also were sexually involved with the women who served at the tabernacle. Eli knew about their sin, but he refused to confront them. God had this to say about Eli: "His sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them" (1 Sam. 3:13). If Eli had shown tough love and removed his sons from their positions of leadership, he may have gotten their attention and turned their lives around. Instead, he failed to love them and did nothing.

It's A Sign Of An Unrecognized Problem. Codependency stems from a problem that is often unseen and buried deep in the human heart. Although faced with the enormous difficulties of life, codependent people add to their pain an even greater problem—a determination to manage life apart from God. Instead of wanting and trusting in God, they are committed to managing life and protecting themselves through their own codependent means.

Though it often goes unnoticed, many codependent people take matters into their own hands because they've given up on God. They may trust Him for eternal life, but they doubt His ability to

handle daily fears and disappointments. Many don't trust God because they believe He's failed to protect and provide for them in the past. They believe their pain and disappointment justifies handling life on their own.

The Path To A Better Way

Codependency is a path that many of us have followed. At one time or another, most of us have been in relationships in which we've needed others too much and trusted in our codependent strategies more than God.

Learning to trust God instead of codependency is like jumping from a sinking ship during a raging storm. God is calling us to abandon ship and to trust Him to rescue us. But we don't hear His voice. Either we are too preoccupied with patching up the leaks and keeping our ship afloat or we're waiting for better options to come along. Some of us have even gone below deck, resigning ourselves to the fact that we are going down with the ship.

And even if we do hear His call, we hesitate. Our crippled vessel may be taking on water faster than the Titanic, but we resist jumping. The wind is fierce and the waves are high. And who knows what lurks beneath the water's surface? God says He's there for us, but we have our doubts. Trusting Him seems to make as much sense as swimming with hungry sharks. We would rather take our chances and wait for someone else to come along who seems more reliable. In the meantime, our sinking ship and our efforts to fix it seem safer, so we remain on board.

The good news is that God is patient and persistent. Although we continue to doubt Him and rely on our codependent strategies, He continues to call us to trust Him. The rest of this booklet will describe a path that leads to something greater than codependency. The path to a better way of living looks different for everyone, but at the core it involves (1) admitting the truth and (2) struggling through the process that is needed to entrust ourselves more completely to the One who made us for Himself.

Admitting The Truth. God longs for us to have a confidence in Him that goes beyond trusting Him for salvation. But the process requires a level of honesty about life and ourselves that most of us avoid. We pretend that life isn't that bad. Even worse, we pretend that we trust in God when we really trust more in others and in our codependent ways.

None of us will find a better way by pretending life is better than it is or that we are what we should be. Only when we honestly admit the truth—about (1) our hurt and disappointment, (2) the style and goal of our codependency, (3) the failure of codependency, (4) the hurt we've caused ourselves and others, and (5) our commitment to live independently of God—will the Spirit of truth help us discover a better way.

1. Admitting the truth about our hurt and disappointment. Pain is a part of everyday life. But emotional pain in life can be so deep that it subtly lures us away from God into selfprotection and an idolatrous way of life. This level of pain is experienced by those who grew up in a rigid, angry home where there was little if any love. It is known by those who were arbitrarily subjected to abuse at the hands of neglectful parents, angry school teachers, mean neighbors, or abusive babysitters. It is familiar to those who were abandoned or who lost a close family member or friend. If you've been deeply wounded, and all of us have, facing your hurt and the effect it has had on you may seem to make as

much sense as pouring salt into an open wound. You would rather forget the cutting remarks of a critical parent or what it felt like to be left by someone you love. You may even blame yourself for what others did to you. If you deny the deep pain of life, however, you may end up being controlled by it. And if you never face your pain long enough to see it from heaven's perspective, you leave yourself wide open to believing Satan's lie that God is not good and can't be trusted.

2. Admitting the truth about the style and goal of our codependency. This requires that we take the time to ask God to help us identify and acknowledge the specific ways we relate when we are afraid and overdependent (Ps. 139:23-24). Honesty requires us to admit that the goals behind pleasing or rescuing or caretaking are not as innocent as we may think (Prov. 16:2).

Some may be misled into thinking that the Bible actually encourages codependency. For instance, Jesus exhorted us to go the extra mile (Mt. 5:41). And the apostle Paul said that we should look out for the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). The difference, however, between what the Bible says and what a codependent person does is the goal. An honest look inside the heart reveals that the goal of pleasing or taking care of others, for example, may not be as selfless as it looks.

We need to make the difficult admission that the main goal behind constantly adjusting our life to others, while at the same time trying to control them, is self-protection. We may have experienced such devastating pain and loss that we commit ourselves to never getting hurt again. For example, many of us guard ourselves by not asking for much and not upsetting others. If we just take care of people, give them what they want, or gloss over their problems, we believe they won't get angry or leave. Others of us protect ourselves by controlling what people think and do. We imagine that people won't abandon us as long as they are under our subtle or overt control.

Another goal of codependency is to get what we believe we can't live without—approval and attention. We may be hooked on approval and attention like an addict is hooked on a drug. Consequently, we need to admit that we often please or act weak to get our next "fix."

Many people with codependency are so controlled by a painful past that they are unknowingly driven to repair it. They mistakenly believe that if they can restage the pain from their early relationships, they can fix what went wrong. They wistfully believe that this time they can make the angry person love them or the alcoholic stop drinking. One woman, for example, grew up taking care of a father who fell apart in the face of anything unpleasant. She married a man just like her father, thinking that she could change him and get what she never received from her dad. Instead, she ended up having to be the strong one and coddling her husband's feelings just as she did with her father.

3. Admitting the truth about the failure of codependency. Our codependency may seem to make us happy and safe, but it doesn't work. It doesn't truly keep us safe. It doesn't assure lasting approval and attention. And it doesn't fix our past. Living codependently is like trying to hold water in a container that is cracked and full of holes (Jer. 2:13).

4. Admitting the truth about the hurt we've caused ourselves and others. Although others have deeply hurt us, it's vital to admit that the harm our codependent strategies bring on ourselves often exceeds the harm that's been done to us.

Pleasing and taking care of others opens us up to greater struggles with stress, depression, and guilt. Allowing our fears to control us puts us at risk for a variety of health problems. Pleasing others and acting helpless or self-sufficient causes more stress, dishonesty, and tension in relationships.

One of the hardest things to admit is that we often set ourselves up to suffer with resentment.

For example, we may resent others for not knowing our needs, yet we don't tell them what we need. Sometimes we tell others to go ahead with their plans, but we resent it when they do.

Without realizing it, codependent people can also hurt others. They can be so focused on avoiding further harm to themselves that they overlook how they hurt people. Those who are too quick to rescue others deprive them of the consequences that are often necessary for change to occur. By doing too much for others, they prevent them from growing. Many rob others of the chance to help by keeping their needs to themselves. Some strike fear in the hearts of others with their intimidation.

5. *Admitting the truth about our real problem— a commitment to live independently of God.*

The most serious threat to our well-being isn't our painful past. It isn't our fears and insecurities. It isn't that a spouse, friend, or parent won't change and become who we want. Nor is it that we don't pray or read the Bible enough. If we are to break the pattern of codependency, we need to honestly admit that our real problem is our tendency to manage our world without God. In our understandable desire to live without pain and struggle, we protect ourselves and rely on someone other than Him for our fulfillment and happiness.

Codependency is not just the result of fear, neediness, and a lack of good examples—dynamics that were set in motion during early relationships. It occurs when we replace God and wage our own personal crusade to take control of our lives.

The way out of codependency, therefore, must include an admission of our real problem. Finding the better way requires more than admitting our pain and how we've hurt ourselves and others by our codependent strategies. It also requires us to see how we have tried to handle life apart from our God. These are painful admissions, but they invite us to struggle through a process that leads to a better way.

Struggling Through The Process. Giving up our dependencies and efforts to control isn't easy. It doesn't happen overnight. We aren't naturally inclined to be honest with ourselves long enough for the kind of struggle that is necessary to break loose from a way of life and view of God that is lodged firmly in our hearts.

We must allow time for a new understanding to take root in us. As we prayerfully question and think through our despair, doubt, and disappointment, we will slowly begin to understand God's way of thinking. While much of our struggle will be alone with God, it's important to include a few close friends, a wise pastor, or an insightful counselor. The process is always more beneficial when caring people are involved (Gal. 6:2).

Struggling With Our Despair. God sometimes gets our attention by allowing "severe mercies" into our lives. One of those mercies is the temporary despair that sets in when our codependent strategies fail. When we can no longer deny that our system of managing life is breaking down and making things worse, we gradually lose hope in our old ways. As the night falls on our codependency, we may feel confused and helpless. But the good news is that struggling with the torment we've brought about by relating to others out of fear and over dependency is making room for a deeper hope.

God actually wants us to enter the darkness and anguish of self-imposed despair. That is why He expressed the following words of disappointment in His children who went out of their way to find other gods: "You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, 'It is hopeless.' You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint" (Isa. 57:10). In other words, when their search for more idols turned up empty, God wanted them to admit, "It's hopeless." He wanted them to face despair and give

up their foolish chase. Instead, they strengthened themselves and pressed on with their search for more idols.

Despair can be our teacher. If we pay attention, despair will expose what we are living for more than anything else. It will help us see what we work so hard to get and believe we can't live without—the approval and acceptance of others. In other words, self imposed despair reveals our idolatry.

Struggling with despair also has the potential to stop idolatry in its tracks. Facing the reality of despair can make us so restless inside that we will want to cut loose our idols. The pain of despair can cause us to lose confidence in ourselves to manage life and weaken our stubborn grip on life. The torment of despair can be so intense that we may seriously consider a different path that involves more than simply rearranging our circumstances so that we feel better. In the throes of despair, we can begin to see that there is more to life than codependent efforts to assure the respect and attention of others.

The pain of despair can increase our willingness to hope in what God wants us to hope for—the growth of our own character and a stronger sense of His calling in our lives. There may or may not be much hope for our circumstances to get better or for a relationship to improve. Because we can't assure that others will deal with their own sin, they may still get angry and leave. Those we care about may go on making self-destructive choices. Relationships may still tragically end. Families may still grow further apart. Although our heartache continues, we can begin to embrace a deeper hope that God is at work in us (Phil. 1:6) and is calling us to live for a purpose that is greater than ourselves (2 Cor. 5:15). We may not understand it all, but we can grow in the hope that He is changing us in ways that can draw others to Himself.

Surrendering to the hope that we can become more like Jesus Christ gives us more reason to give up our false gods rather than give up on life.

While we can't bear the sins of others as Jesus did, we can learn to follow His example. Jesus didn't live to protect Himself. He wasn't controlled by the approval of others. Neither did He try to take control of the lives of those He loved. Instead, He entrusted Himself to His Father in heaven—even to the point of death. As we reflect on the way He trusted His Father, and as we focus on the outcome of His way of life, we can begin to find light in our own darkness. The apostle Paul's strange exhortation to "rejoice in our sufferings" begins to make sense. Suffering with the pain of despair, while turning our eyes to the Father in heaven, ultimately leads us to a hope that "does not disappoint us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

Struggling With Our Doubt. Though it often goes unnoticed, everyone with codependency has serious doubt about God deep in their hearts. We doubt His love and goodness because we've been hurt so much. Whether we believe He caused our hurt or merely allowed it, the fact that He could have prevented it leaves us in a battle to trust Him.

Many of us see doubt as an enemy. We try to silence its whispers by pretending it doesn't exist. We fail to realize that while doubt can be an enemy of faith, it also can have a positive side. There is another way to view doubt that allows us to see it as an ally of faith. If we struggle with it honestly, doubt can prompt us to search for God by asking the hard questions surrounding our hurt and disappointment. Questions like: "Where were You?" or "Why didn't You protect me?" or "Why have You allowed so much pain and hurt in my life?"

Consider, for example, a difficult period in the life of Gideon. Judges 6:1-5 explains the context for Gideon's struggle with doubt. The Israelites were going through a time of enormous oppression at the hands of the Midianites because of their own idolatry. For 7 long years, the Midianites ruthlessly

swarmed over Israel's land during the harvest season like an army of locusts. They ruined and stole most of the crops and killed their livestock. They crushed Israel's spirit and left the people of God in a state of poverty and hunger.

When the angel of the Lord came to Gideon at the beginning of the harvest season and said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior" (v.12), Gideon's response was, basically, "Yeah, right." Listen to his doubt and struggle as he spoke: "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian" (v.13).

God didn't reprimand Gideon for asking questions. Nor did God explain the issue of Israel's idolatry as being the cause of their oppression. God allowed Gideon to struggle and search by letting him ask honest questions from his heart. Asking God hard questions about difficult circumstances prepared Gideon to see God in a new way, and his faith began to increase.

In his search, Gideon came to believe that God was working in ways he could not see. Gideon's doubts and fears didn't completely go away. That's why he tore down his father's altar to Baal under the cover of darkness (v.27) and put out the fleeces before agreeing to lead Israel into war against the Midianites (vv.36-40). But he couldn't ignore a fresh wave of confidence that God was up to something big. Even though he still struggled with doubt, he stepped out in faith against the enemy.

As we honestly face our own doubts, God will show His ability to work in difficult circumstances. He may not show Himself to us as often as we'd like, but He does it more than we realize. Honest struggle with doubt sets the stage for encounters with God that can increase our confidence in Him. The Lord promises that He will reward those who search for Him (Heb. 11:6). How? When? Where? He doesn't tell us. That's part of the mystery of God. Nonetheless, we are to keep searching for Him by struggling with the tough questions of life without succumbing to bitterness or settling for simple or pat answers.

Eventually, a truth that is deeper than our painful disappointments can begin to fill our hearts. We can begin to surrender to the perspective that God can use anything to bring about His good purposes. Our faith can expand as our hearts discover God's presence in our lives. We discover that although God allows certain tragedies to occur, He can take what was intended for harm and use it for good. That is the inspiring message of the troubling Old Testament story of Joseph. He was hated, betrayed, and sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Yet God used the harm done to Joseph to bring about a greater good (Gen. 50:20).

Struggling With Our Disappointment. As we work patiently through our doubt and despair, a question still remains— what are we to do with disappointment? The good news is that wrestling with the disappointment of life and the disappointment of our sin presents yet another opportunity to redirect our hearts to God.

The Disappointments Of Life. It's no secret that our lives often fall short of our expectations. Some of us have lost so much. Early relationships weren't what we wanted, and our present relationships aren't much better. Yet most of us would rather keep busy and pretend these disappointments don't exist. Some try to escape the pain through a variety of addictions.

Honestly struggling with disappointment, however, is a better way. God can use these disappointments to help us discover how much we want Him—the One for whom our hopes and desires were made.

We won't realize how much we want God unless we are honest about our disappointments. Only by facing them can we cooperate with God's Spirit. Only by facing life will we discover that God occasionally leads His children into the wilderness of loss. There He lovingly lets us become so hungry and aware of our emptiness that we start to want Him more than anyone or anything (Dt. 8:2-3).

If we stay in our disappointment long enough, we can eventually make another discovery— that God cares for us far more than we ever realized. We may not sense His involvement as much as we would like. There will still be times when we won't feel His loving arms around us. But His seeming lack of care actually makes us want Him more. And as we slowly realize that our desire for Him is our deepest longing, we put ourselves in a better place to recognize Him when He makes His presence known.

Disappointment doesn't go away until heaven. But struggling with the inconsolable ache of life can reveal, little by little, a desire for God that will begin to fill our hearts. That's what Asaph discovered while struggling with disappointment. He wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You" (Ps. 73:25). Surrendering to our desire for God frees us to resist the urge to control or escape pain.

The Disappointments Of Our Own Wrongs. Struggling with the disappointment of our sin doesn't mean that we just try to stop making wrong choices. If that's all we do, we become self-reliant moralists. Struggling with our moral and spiritual faults means that we acknowledge our helpless condition.

It's frightening to admit that we've wanted to rely on others more than God. We feel vulnerable when we realize that we've pushed God away and harmed others with our codependent strategies. Yet, this is where we can encounter the amazing kindness of God (Rom. 2:4).

It is at this very point of helplessness, however, that we must be aware of another common mistake. Once we admit our many failures, we can get so caught up in beating ourselves up that we don't accept God's forgiveness. Our preoccupation with self-contempt may feel like godly sorrow, but it can actually be an attempt to stay in control, escape our helpless condition, and atone for our own wrongs. Contempt turned inward can be a refusal to humble ourselves before God, who is waiting to lift us up (Jas. 4:10).

Instead of hating ourselves, it is far better to remain at the mercy of the only One who can atone for our sin. There is only One who bore the full punishment of our sin. Jesus is the One who was raised from the grave after 3 days to show that by His sacrificial death He paid our moral debt in full. By dying in our place, He carried out the most amazing mission of forgiveness and rescue ever executed.

Only by throwing ourselves on the mercy of God can we be in a position to accept His forgiveness. Only by the immeasurable price Christ paid can we know that this is not a cheap forgiveness. The agony experienced by our Savior on the cross shows how much God hates the sin that has brought such pain and darkness into His world. Yes, He hates our sin. But His desire to forgive us is even stronger.

This amazing desire is also the point of the New Testament story of a wayward son. It was "the prodigal" who did the unthinkable. He left home and squandered his inheritance (Lk. 15:12-13). Yet it was the father who longed for his son's return. When the son finally came home, helpless and broke, his father celebrated his return (vv.20-24).

The story of the prodigal son illustrates God's forgiving heart. He doesn't shame and condemn us when we return. Instead, He is waiting to forgive and to celebrate our homecoming! He doesn't want to punish us for rebelling against Him, because Jesus took our punishment during that awful, unforgettable day on a hill outside of Jerusalem. Because of God's amazing grace, codependent people can honestly

embrace their strong disappointment in the ways they've mishandled life. As we surrender the disappointment of our own sinfulness to the wonderful, life-changing truth of God's forgiveness, we can begin to thankfully worship and abandon ourselves to a better life that is possible because of God's mercy.

Living The Better Way

We will never be totally free from codependent tendencies until we see Christ face to face. Those of us, however, who begin to admit our misplaced trust can also begin to discover something that is better than our doubt, despair, and disappointment. In the process we can start to become people who find a better way—living for God and others, and living with God and others. As our faith, hope, desire, and appreciation for God grows, we will learn to enjoy Him more than anyone or anything else. To our delight and surprise, we will also find an increased capacity to enjoy the people in our lives. But we will do so with a new freedom. We will increasingly see everything other than God as being secondary pleasures that are made to be enjoyed but not depended upon.

It is when we pant for God like a deer pants for water (Ps. 42:1), especially in the throes of loss and heartache, that we discover there is more to live for than the pursuit of good times.

In a path that is better than codependency, we can also open ourselves to receiving and giving love. We can start to take down our walls of self-protection and let people in. Rather than just doing things for others, we can allow others to do things for us. Instead of clinging to others out of overdependence, we can let them go without reluctance. And we can learn to give to others for their sake. Instead of trying to make others change for our good, we can learn what it means to invite them to change for their good. Instead of always being in charge, we can learn to be flexible and considerate of others' thoughts and opinions. Instead of rescuing others, we can allow them to take responsibility for their choices. Instead of always adapting ourselves to what pleases others, we can express our needs and stand against what is destructive.

If we detach from unhealthy dependencies and relate differently to others, some will not like these changes in us. We will have taken back the power they've had over us. Some will attack us with words or try to make us feel guilty. This is not, however, a time to fall back to our old codependent ways. Instead, this is a time to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). (See *When Words Hurt* CB011 for more discussion on how to lovingly confront.) It will be a time for us to show our new conviction that God alone is worthy of our deepest hope and confidence (Ps. 56:4).

