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what happened to our dream?

Julie sat in the outer area of the principal's office, waiting to meet with him. Her son was in trouble—again. This time it was serious. She had texted her husband, Tom, who worked not far from the school. He had written back, “Sorry, big meeting, can't leave.” Now she was fuming. Typical Tom, never there when his family needed him. It was a pattern—and Julie was seriously beginning to wonder if she could put up with it much longer.

This couple embodies the reality I speak of in *Desperate Marriages*: the “stone wall” a husband and wife can build between them. Each stone represents an event in the past where one of them failed the other.¹

Then there's Mike. He had always loved sharing life with Jen, boasting to others that his wife was his “best friend.” But now they had a couple of kids, and it seemed Jen threw herself into mothering and didn't have much left for him. Feeling lonely and abandoned, Mike started spending more time at the local sports bar with his buddies. Then he and Jen would argue. And slowly, the stone wall was going up between them.

Some couples can't stop bickering. Everything, it seems,

sparks conflict. They become exhausted to the point of feeling physically ill. They aren't even sure they like each other anymore. Maybe, they reason, they'd be better off apart.

"My father was a very angry man," one woman recalls. "He and Mom fought a lot—he would yell and Mom would react defensively or just shut down. Our household was pretty turbulent, although there were many moments of peace. Would we have been better off if they had split up? Hard to say, and in those days divorce was uncommon. But conflict definitely takes its toll."

A Little Death

If your marriage is marked by more days of conflict than companionship, you might be wondering, "Where did it all go? What happened to the dream of lifelong love and commitment?"

If you are separated, it may feel like a little death. Every day your spouse's absence reminds you of what you have lost. If you are physically together but emotionally estranged, that, too, can feel like something is dying—a dream, a hope. We speak of the "valley of the shadow of death." But a shadow is not to be equated with death itself. Your marriage crisis, separated or not, may be the valley of restoration, and the pain you feel may be the labor pains that will give rebirth to your marriage.

On the other hand, separation may be the beginning of the end. The fruit of your separation will be determined by what you and your spouse say and do in the next few weeks and months.

In a very real sense, a marriage in crisis calls for intensive care, much like that given to one in grave physical danger. The condition of your marriage is "critical." Things can go either way

at any moment. Proper medication is essential, which is the purpose of this book. Surgery may be required. That will call for the services of a counselor or pastor. What you do in the next few weeks will determine the quality of your life for years to come. Be assured, God is concerned about the outcome. You can count on Him for supernatural help.

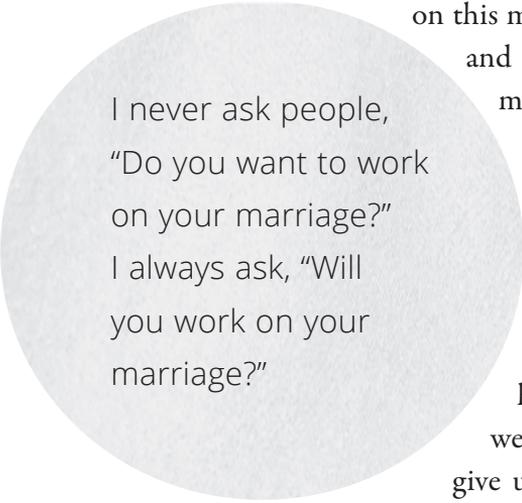
This is not the time to capitulate. The battle for marital unity is not over until the death certificate is signed. The dreams and hopes you shared when you got married are still worth fighting for. You married each other because you were in love (or thought you were at the time). You dreamed of the perfect marriage in which each made the other supremely happy. What happened to that dream? What went wrong? What can you do to correct it?

The dream can live again. But not without work—work that will demand listening, understanding, discipline, and change—work that can result in the joy of a dream come true.

I know some of you are saying, “It sounds good, but it won’t work. We’ve tried before. Besides, I don’t think my spouse will even try again.”

Perhaps you are right, but do not assume that the hostile attitude of your spouse will remain forever. One of the gifts of God to all men and women is the gift of choice. We can change, and that change can be for the better. Your spouse may be saying, “I’m through. It is finished. I don’t want to talk about it!” Two weeks or two months from now, however, your mate may be willing to talk. Much depends on what you do in the meantime, and much depends on his or her response to the Spirit of God.

Others of you are saying, “I’m not sure that I want to work



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on this marriage. I’ve tried. I’ve given and given. It won’t work, and I may as well get out now!” I am deeply sympathetic with those feelings. I know that when we have tried again and again without success, we may lose our desire to try once more. We see no hope, so we conclude that we have no alternative but to give up. Our emotions no longer encourage us to work on the marriage.

That is why I never ask people, “Do you want to work on your marriage?” I always ask, “Will you work on your marriage?” At the point of crisis, we have lost much of our “want to.” We must remember our values, our commitments, and our dreams, and we must choose to do what must be done to be true to them.

Where shall we go for help? For those who are Christians, there is one stable source to which we turn when we need guidance. That source is the Bible. Non-Christians may or may not turn to the Bible, but the Christian is drawn by the Spirit of God to the Scriptures. In the Bible, we find not only what we ought to do, but also the encouragement to do it. Even the non-Christian who sincerely seeks help in the Bible can find meaning in Paul’s statement, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13 *ESV*). When we come to Christ, we find the outside help we need to do what our own resources are inadequate to accomplish.

Wrong Way!

When we turn to the Bible for guidance on marriage, we see two road signs: one marked Wrong Way, the other Detour. On the sign marked Wrong Way appears the word *divorce*. On the sign marked Detour appear the words *marital unity*. Let us explore the meaning and direction of those two signs.

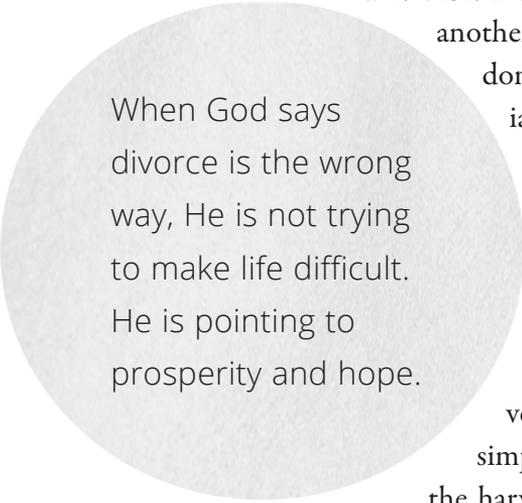
According to the Old and New Testaments, divorce always represents the wrong way. In the beginning, when God told Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28 *ESV*), He never gave the slightest hint that the marital relationship was to be anything but lifelong. The first mention of divorce in the Bible is found in the writings of Moses.² Moses permitted divorce, but it was never condoned or encouraged by God. Jesus later explained to the Pharisees that Moses had permitted divorce only because of their “hardness of heart” (Matthew 19:8 *ESV*) but that from the beginning divorce was not God’s plan. Jesus affirmed that God’s intention was monogamous, lifelong marital relationships. When God instituted marriage, divorce was not an option. God did not create divorce any more than He created polygamy. Those were human innovations. In God’s sight, those innovations are always clearly wrong.

On the other hand, the sign marked Detour—Marital Unity indicates that you have not lost sight of the goal, nor are you off the road. Rather, you are taking the circuitous route of separation because the bridge of your togetherness has collapsed. Marital discord has weakened the marriage bridge, and the path to restored harmony in your marriage is no longer a short, straight route.

The detour sign may bring an immediate feeling of distress, but behind distress lies hope. There are at least signs to point you back to the main route—toward renewed marital unity. If you will follow carefully, the chances of finding your way are good.

Right now, you are standing at a fork in the road of your life. You must choose which path you will follow in the next months. We have seen that God never encourages divorce, but He still allows humankind the freedom to choose either route. In the course of human history, man has made many unwise decisions. God has not immediately destroyed humans for their wrong. Had God chosen that recourse, man would have been extinct thousands of years ago. God has allowed us genuine freedom—including freedom to curse God and walk our own way.

The Bible indicates that, to one degree or another, we have all used that freedom to our own undoing (Isaiah 53:6).



When God says divorce is the wrong way, He is not trying to make life difficult. He is pointing to prosperity and hope.

The principle of human freedom God grants us is stated in Galatians 6:7: “Don’t be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant.” God has simply allowed humanity to reap the harvest from the seed we plant, hoping that humans will learn to plant good seed: “Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will

reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:8 NIV).

God’s plans for His people are good. God never instituted anything designed to make us miserable. “For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). When God says divorce is the wrong way, He is not trying to make life difficult. He is pointing the way to prosperity and hope.

“But we don’t have prosperity and hope,” you say. That may be true, but past failure need not dictate the future. The lack of fulfillment you have experienced probably came from one of three sources: lack of an intimate relationship with God, lack of an intimate relationship with your mate, or lack of an intimate understanding and acceptance of yourself. The first and last of those can be corrected without the aid of your spouse. The second, of course, will require the cooperation of both husband and wife. Radical change in all three areas is highly possible. Thus, the potential for the rebirth of your marriage is assured.

In later chapters I will offer ways of initiating change in each of the above areas. But first, I want to state clearly that the biblical ideal for a couple in crisis calls for reconciliation. You may not feel like reconciling. You may see no hope for reunion. The process may frighten you, but may I challenge you to follow the example of God Himself?

Reconciliation and Repentance

Throughout the Bible, God is pictured as having a love relationship with His people—in the Old Testament with Israel and in the New Testament with the church. On many occasions God

has found Himself separated from His people, not of His choosing but of theirs. In a sense, the entire Bible is a record of God's attempts to be reconciled to His people. The book of Hosea gives the most graphic picture of the process.

Gomer, Hosea's wife, was unfaithful time and time again, but God said, "Go and love your wife again . . . This will illustrate that the Lord still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods" (Hosea 3:1). In spite of Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness to God, He said, "But then I will win her back once again, I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there" (2:14).

In the New Testament we hear Jesus express the pain of separation when He says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37–38 ESV).

In the book of Jeremiah, God recalls Israel's devotion in the wilderness and how He protected Israel from her enemies during those days. But then came the coldness, the separation. "Does a young woman forget her jewelry? Does a bride hide her wedding dress? Yet for years on end my people have forgotten me (2:32).

The remainder of the book is a plea for reconciliation: "O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again, for I am merciful," God entreats His people (3:12).

But God invites His children to "come home" while also correcting their sinful behavior, commanding them to "throw away your detestable idols and stray away no more"

(4:1). There can be no reconciliation without repentance. In the marital relationship there must be mutual repentance, for almost always the failure has involved both parties.

I do not wish to minimize the hurt, pain, frustration, anger, resentment, loneliness, and disappointment you may feel. Nor do I take lightly your past efforts at marital adjustment. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to call you to accept the challenge to fight for your marriage—and if you are separated, to use this time to grow and learn.

Sometimes separation brings a sense of emotional peace to the individual. That peace is mistakenly interpreted as an indication that separation and divorce must be right. One husband said, “This is the first week of peace I have had in years.” Such peace is the result of removing yourself from the scene of the battle. Naturally you have peace; you have left the conflict! Retreat, however, is never the road to victory. You must come from that retreat with renewed determination to defeat the enemy of your marriage.

As the pastor in the introduction wisely understood, separation removes you from some of the constant pressure of conflict. It allows time for you to examine biblical principles for building a meaningful marriage. It permits self-examination in which emotions can be separated from behavior. It may stimulate a depth of openness in your communication that was not present before. In short, it places you in an arena where you can develop a new understanding of yourself and your spouse. Separation is not necessarily the beginning of the end. It may be only the beginning.

And if you are not separated but considering it, wondering

one more try

what future your relationship might have, you, too, are at the beginning of a long, challenging, yet potentially deeply rewarding journey. Or, as Gary Smalley has said, “Choose to receive this trial as an invitation to grow in humility and love.”³

Let’s get started.

GROWTH ASSIGNMENTS

1. Whether you are separated or in marital crisis, read the next chapter with an open mind. Examine your attitudes and actions.