



The Difficult Marriage

“When it seems one is in and one is out-to-lunch.”

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Scriptures are printed verbatim with references noted but highlights and underlines are added. Quotes and all primary sources are footnoted.

A. Introduction

For the record, *the institution of marriage* is in trouble today. Read the latest statistics and the numbers will not encourage you. In fact, larger numbers of people are postponing marriage or avoiding it altogether until much later in life now. The number of single people in our country today has never been higher. Chances are, *you* are in a troubled marriage that unfortunately is more and more typical of marriages today. In fact, it may seem that *your* marriage is the poster child for “The Difficult Marriage.”

The focus of this PASTOR’S GUIDE is not just marriages that are in trouble. It focuses specifically on the person who feels they are the only one wanting and working to make “it” better. Some call it “a one-sided marriage.” Some call it “the ‘I’m alone’ in this marriage”, marriage. What ever label, it is a difficult place to be.

B. Marriage Today

- Only 5% of marriages are “easy”—these are very rare and the clear majority of them took lots of work to get to “easy”.
- Almost 50% of all new marriages end in divorce within seven years.
- 70% of marriages have at least one mate that would describe their marriage as “dissatisfying”, “unfulfilling”, or “disappointing”.
- 25% of marriages have at least one partner, who after seven years of marriage, say they “would not marry the same person *if* they had it to do over again”.

Here is the point. Marriage is a tough business. Is it worthy of our most valiant effort? Yes! Is it an institution created by God? Yes! Does God have a plan? Yes! Are you truly all alone in your situation? NO! Is there help for you? Yes, there is!

C. Why Is Marriage So Hard Today?

While most marriages fail or fail to thrive because of *selfish independence* (i.e. this is “the greatest problem in marriage”), there are many factors that make marriage so difficult today. Here are a few:

Parental Issues/Kids Sexual problems/expectations Financial problems Anger/fighting Sin
Lack of relationship skills Affairs In-laws (Out-laws) Busy schedules Today’s media
Emotional problems “The Past” Harsh disagreements Poor communications Addictions
Stress Guilt “Wounded Hearts” Pornography Alcohol Blended families Legal issues
Medical crises Cultural Misunderstandings **The big one: The spiritual attack on the family today!**

D. There Is A Battle For Your Marriage

Two important verses to help you keep an important perspective regarding your marriage:

1 Peter 5:8, NASB95 - ⁸ *Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Ephesians 6:12, NASB95 - ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, [it is] against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

There is an enemy that stands against your marriage. It is probably not your mate. The battle you fight is most certainly a spiritual battle. In fact, it may be *entirely* a spiritual one. It would behoove us to enroll in a course on spiritual warfare. Many scholars and experts believe it may be “the primary battlefield” in our country today. More on that later...

E. Some Practical Advice from God’s Word

1. We need to understand this: “We married a ‘fallen person’ ”.

Romans 3:23, NASB95 - ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,...*

James 3:2, NASB95 - ² *For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, ...*

If you leave this person and interview 500 other candidates, have psychological tests done, spend five years dating them to make sure, have them interviewed by 25 counselors, and went on a 40 day fast, you would still marry a ‘fallen person’. This new person, just like the old, would stumble, regularly make mistakes, have bad days, disappoint you, get angry, make charges to the credit card without your permission, ignore your needs on a regular basis, etc. By accepting the negative as inevitable, we truly develop an appreciation for and have an opportunity to highlight the need for God’s grace.

Just a thought, your mate married a “fallen person” also.

2. We need to understand this: “We live in a ‘fallen world’ ”.

Romans 5:12-14, The Message - ¹² *You know the story of how Adam landed us in the dilemma we’re in—first sin, then death, and no one exempt from either sin or death.¹³ That sin disturbed relations with God in everything and everyone, but the extent of the disturbance was not clear until God spelled it out in detail to Moses. So death, this huge abyss separating us from God, dominated the landscape from Adam to Moses.¹⁴ Even those who didn’t sin precisely as Adam did by disobeying a specific command of God still had to experience this termination of life, this separation from God. But Adam, who got us into this, also points ahead to the One who will get us out of it.*

We live in a fallen world that will not be fair, will not make sense, offers us no assurances, and will not become *good* this side of Heaven. Most people look to this world to find purpose and meaning in life. Some look to this world for a career, a degree, a possession, even a relationship to find happiness and fulfillment. If you “get what you want” from this world, I assure you that in time, it will not satisfy. The fulfillment you seek is found only in God—not in a person and not in things.

A reminder: No marriage is “easy”. Marriage is difficult by nature. It is important for each of us to accept this reality that marriage is inherently difficult. Our expectations must envelop this. As a rule, the knights in shining armor in novels do not exist in real life. Can marriage be rewarding? Yes! Can they be soul-forming! Yes! Can marriage be good? Yes! Is marriage easy? Seldom.

3. Accept the call from God to “right thinking”.

Philippians 4:8, NIV - ⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

I don't remember who said it, but “we've got to avoid ‘stink'n think'n’ ”. If you obsess over your spouse's weaknesses and shortcomings, it won't make them go away. I believe it makes things worse. One Christian counselor, Leslie Vernick warns, “Regularly thinking negatively about your mate increases your dissatisfaction with him/her and your marriage.” The “call of God” can be a powerful source of motivation. Ponder this—God has called you to make a daily spiritual choice of focusing on qualities for which you can and should feel thankful. Hold on to the good, let go of the bad. *No more stink'n think'n—It hurts you and doesn't help them at all!*

4. Accept the biblical call to “love” and “respect.”

Ephesians 5:33, NIV - ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

1 Peter 3:7, NIV - ⁷ Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

A recent study indicated that the biggest need for a man is respect and the biggest need for a wife is love. This study cost seven million dollars and all that time the Scriptures had it right there before us. Notice, there are no *qualifiers* here. It does *not* say “love the *perfect* wife” or “respect a *perfect* husband.” It does *not* say, “respect the *godly* husband” or “love the *godly* wife.” The biblical command to “love” and “respect” comes with the position, not the person.

5. Ask God to guard and reform your heart through prayer.

James 5:16, NLT - ¹⁶ ... pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Philippians 4:6, The Message - ⁶ Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns.

Remember, our battle is a spiritual battle. Praying is not *worrying* about something night after night. Praying is not *dwelling* upon something day after day. Praying is finding a time, every single day, when you kneel before your heavenly Father and ask God to rescue you, your mate, and your marriage. Notice the qualifiers. First, there is the “earnestness” of the prayer. Prayer is work so don't give up over time. Second, there is the “righteousness” of the one who prays. Holiness is also work. Be holy! Is our own personal holiness really important in this process? Yes! Will our prayers be answered overnight? Not necessarily. Will they make a difference in time? Absolutely!

6. In the most difficult of marriages, set healthy boundaries.

Romans 12:19, NASB95 - ¹⁹ *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*

Ephesians 4:26, NASB95 - ²⁶ *Be angry, and yet do not sin ...*

Romans 12:18, NASB95 - ¹⁸ *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*

It might be good advice, depending on just how dysfunctional your marriage is, to consider reading a good book, enrolling in a good course, or seek good counsel in setting some important “boundaries.” If a mate has become chronically abusive (emotionally or physically) or is asking you to “sin”, I believe you have biblical grounds to consider some difficult alternatives. These may include, but are not limited to, saying *no*, leaving, separating, setting up a different bank account, “snooping”, calling the police, setting up an intervention, and in some cases, even divorce. I want these extreme measures to be rare and considered in only the most difficult of circumstances. If yours is truly a chronically, difficult marriage, these measures may be a biblical response to your situation that need intense consideration.

7. Develop good, encouraging resources for this **stormy season** in your life.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV - ¹⁶ *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Psalms 119:130, NIV - ¹³⁰ *The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.*

Proverbs 15:22, NASB95 - ²² *Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed.*

2 Corinthians 1:3-4, The Living Bible - ³ *What a wonderful God we have—he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of every mercy, and the one who so wonderfully comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does he do this? So that when others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us.*

You will not fight this “storm” by yourself and succeed—most likely. You will need good support, loving and praying friends, encouragement, resources, information, and healing. You need to strongly consider adding the following to your good health checklist:

- Find every Scripture you can regarding your exact situation.
- Develop an “encouragement team” of a few trusted, praying, confidential friends to bless and support you—you need this! Don’t be an island!
- Find and read as many articles and books as you can about your exact situation—gain insight!
- Talk to your pastor and/or find a good Christian counselor (and just for you, if that’s your only option) to help you understand how to cope with your exact situation.
- Consider joining a support group or develop one for your situation.
- Maintain good healthy habits like eating well, getting regular exercise, and maintaining good sleep patterns. **THESE ARE ESSENTIAL!**
- Set a time every day and/or every night to kneel and pray fervently about your exact situation.

F. Quotes

Against the tidal wave of data stands the writer of the book of Proverbs. Cutting through all the complexity, he suggests that there are two essential components in the formation of strong families: solid

marriages and effective parenting practices. We can make it more complicated than that if we want to. But, when all is said and done, if we focus on these two requirements we can transform the confusion, hopelessness and frustration that mark many families into a focused energy for positive change.

It would be great if *solid* always meant “easy and happy,” but sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes *solid* means “solidly committed, solidly persevering, and/or solidly striving for the goal.”

The only kind of marriage the writer of Proverbs understands is a lifelong marriage. When you get married, stay married. Make compromises. Get help. Work it out. Fast, pray, try and try again. Do whatever you have to do to stay together. Make the most out of your marriage. There is no other way. Solid marriages are the key to strong families.

- Bill Hybles ¹

Love is a decision, not a feeling. Are you tired of your *feelings of love* going up and down like a roller coaster? [Here is an insight] on how to develop a love that remains consistently strong from season to season, year to year. Contrary to popular belief, love is actually a reflection of how much we “honor” another person—for at its core, *genuine love is a decision*, not a feeling. [Our goal in marriage] is to see how the *decision to love* can best be put into action—resulting then in the *feeling of love*.

- Gary Smalley ²

Sometimes, it is so hard to ‘just get started’ when it comes to *loving your mate*. We want to wait until we have the energy or ‘the feeling of love’, or just flat *feel like it*. I forgot the name of the counseling professor who said wisely, “**It is easier to act your way into feeling, than to feel your way into acting.**” Develop a ‘plan of attack’ and start—do something. Generally, the *feelings of love* will come.

- Joe K. Taylor

G. Selected Articles to Offer Hope and Advice

A Shelter from Winter Winds

When marriage moves into a cold season, there's still hope for spring.
by Gary D. Chapman

It's discouraging," Marc said of his 24-year marriage. "We disagree on everything. We're both bull-headed, which has created conflicts and a coldness about our relationship." His wife, Marsha, chimed in, "Over the years we've both piled on the resentment. There's been more effort on my part than his. He's so critical. We hardly spend time together and we rarely touch or affirm each other."

While some people enjoy winter sports such as snowmobiling and skiing, no couple enjoys a winter marriage. Winter marriages, such as Marc and Marsha's, are characterized by coldness, harshness, and bitterness. The dreams of spring are covered with layers of ice, and the weather forecast calls for more freezing rain.

What brings a couple to the winter season? In a word: rigidity—the unwillingness to consider the other person's perspective and to work toward a meaningful solution. All couples face difficulties and have differences. Couples who fail to negotiate these differences will find the marriage growing cold. When one or both spouses insist on "my way or not at all," they move toward winter.

In winter, attitudes turn negative. Sarah and Will have been married 19 years. She told me, "I tried to work on our marriage, but it seemed as if he interpreted everything I suggested as nagging. Nothing worked, so I shut down. I don't care about his needs at this point. I'm waiting for him to put some energy into our marriage."

¹ Bill Hybles, *Making Life Work*, pp. 135, 136 & 137.

² Gary Smalley, *Love is a Decision*, p. 8.

"It makes me feel like we're never going to make it. It just keeps getting worse," Will said. "We fight 24/7. I can't go on like this, and I don't know what else to do." In winter we perceive the problems as too big and our positions as too entrenched. We think that disagreements have gone on too long and can never be resolved. We blame our spouse for the decline in our relationship.

Winter's thaw

Most couples experience winter from time to time. It may last a month or 30 years. It may begin three months after the wedding or hit in the mid-life years. If your marriage is in winter, it may appear beyond hope. But don't give up. Just as most people wouldn't lie down in the snow and wait to die, there's no reason to accept passively the coldness of a wintry marriage. There is a way out, and it begins with a change of attitude.

A winter marriage often makes couples desperate enough to break out of their silent suffering and seek the help of a counselor, pastor, or trusted friend. Those who seek help find it.

Thawing the ice of a winter relationship requires the courage to admit one's own failures in the past, first to God and then to one's spouse. Apologizing and asking forgiveness is the first step.

The second step is choosing a positive attitude. Ask God to help you turn from seeing the worst in your marriage to seeing the potential. Instead of believing your situation is hopeless, believe in the power of God to change you and to touch your spouse's heart. When you ask him to let you be an agent for helping your spouse become all God has designed him or her to be, you begin to move out of winter.

The third step is to speak your spouse's love language. Find out what makes your spouse feel loved (your biggest clue is what he or she has complained about through the years). Ask God to help you love your spouse. The Bible says, "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

The fourth step is to maximize your differences. Differences were never meant to be divisive. Ask God to show you how your differences can be an asset to your relationship. When this happens, you'll know spring is near.

Working through winter may not be "fun" or "exciting," like sledding down a steep hill or a ski trip to Vail. But when couples persevere and take positive steps to improve their marriage, they emerge stronger, more committed, and better able to work through their differences. By extending peace, even in the midst of pain and alienation, countless couples have discovered deep healing and even deeper intimacy. When two people choose to love again, the melting ice of winter will water the seeds of spring.

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The List That Saved My Marriage

What an inventory of my husband's shortcomings taught me

By Becky Zerbe

The day had come. I'd lasted as long as I could in my marriage. Once my husband, Bill, left for work, I packed a bag for myself and our 14-month-old son and left our home. It was the only year in our married life when we lived in the same town as my parents. Obviously the convenience of being able to run to Mom and Dad made my decision to leave Bill easier.

With a tear-stained, angry face, I walked into Mom's kitchen. She held the baby while I sobbed my declaration of independence. A washcloth and cup of coffee later, Mom told me she and Dad would help me. I was comforted to know they'd be there for me.

"But before you leave Bill," she said, "I have one task for you to complete."

Mom put down my sleeping son, took a sheet of paper and pen, and drew a vertical line down the middle of the page. She told me to list in the left column all the things Bill did that made him impossible to live with. As I looked at the dividing line, I thought she'd then tell me to list all his good qualities on the right hand side. I was determined to have a longer list of bad qualities on the left. This is going to be easy, I thought. My pen started immediately to scribble down the left column.

Bill never picked his clothes off the floor. He never told me when he was going outside. He slept in church. He had embarrassing, nasty habits such as blowing his nose or belching at the dinner table. He never bought me nice presents. He refused to match his clothes. He was tight with money. He wouldn't help with the housework. He didn't talk with me.

The list went on and on until I'd filled the page. I certainly had more than enough evidence to prove that no woman would be able to live with this man.

Smugly I said, "Now I guess you're going to ask me to list all Bill's good qualities on the right side."

"No," she said. "I already know Bill's good qualities. Instead, for each item on the left side, I want you to write how you respond. What do you do?"

This was even tougher than listing his good qualities. I'd been thinking about Bill's few, good qualities I could list. I hadn't considered thinking about myself. I knew Mom wasn't going to let me get by without completing her assignment. So I had to start writing.

I'd pout, cry, and get angry. I'd be embarrassed to be with him. I'd act like a "martyr." I'd wish I'd married someone else. I'd give him the silent treatment. I'd feel I was too good for him. The list seemed endless.

When I reached the bottom of the page, Mom picked up the paper and went to the drawer. She took scissors and cut the paper down the vertical line. Taking the left column, she wadded it in her hand and tossed it into the trash. Then she handed me the right column.

"Becky," she said, "take this list back to your house. Spend today reflecting on these things in your life. Pray about them. I'll keep the baby until this afternoon. If you sincerely do what I ask and still want to leave Bill, Dad and I will do all we can to assist you."

Facing facts

Leaving my luggage and son, I drove back to my house. When I sat on my couch with the piece of paper, I couldn't believe what I was facing. Without the balancing catalogue of Bill's annoying habits, the list looked horrifying.

I saw a record of petty behaviors, shameful practices, and destructive responses. I spent the next several hours asking God for forgiveness. I requested strength, guidance, and wisdom in the changes I needed to make. As I continued to pray, I realized how ridiculously I'd behaved. I could barely remember the transgressions I'd written for Bill. How absurd could I be? There was nothing immoral or horrible on that list. I'd honestly been blessed with a good man—not a perfect one, but a good one.

I thought back five years. I'd made a vow to Bill. I would love and honor him in sickness and health. I'd be with him for better or for worse. I said those words in the presence of God, my family, and friends. Yet only this morning, I'd been ready to leave him for trivial annoyances.

I jumped back in the car and drove to my parents' house. I marveled at how different I felt from when I'd first made the trip to see Mom. I now felt peace, relief, and gratitude.

When I picked up my son, I was dismayed by how willing I'd been to make such a drastic change in his life. My pettiness almost cost him the opportunity to be exposed daily to a wonderful father. Quickly, I thanked my mother and flew out the door to return home. By the time Bill returned from work, I was unpacked and waiting.

A new outlook

I'd love to say that Bill changed. He didn't. He still did all those things that embarrassed and annoyed me, and made me want to explode.

The difference came in me. From that day forward, I had to be responsible not only for my actions in our marriage, but also for my reactions.

I think back to one of the items: Bill slept in church. The minute he began to doze always marked the end of my worship time.

So often I thought he was rudely uninterested in the message—and my dad was the preacher! It didn't matter that Bill was unable to stay awake any time he sat for a longer period. The entire time he spent nodding, I spent fuming. I'd squirm in the pew, feeling humiliated. I'd wonder why I ever married this man. I knew he didn't deserve a wife as godly as I was.

Yet now I could see myself as I truly was. My pride was hampering a valuable portion of my life—my worship. This problem wasn't Bill's; it was mine. When Bill fell asleep in church, I began to bathe that time in gratitude and prayer. I took my eyes off Bill and myself and looked to God. Instead of leaving the services in anger, I left in joy.

It wasn't long before Bill noticed a difference. He remarked at lunch one Sunday, "You seem to be enjoying the services more lately. I was beginning to think you didn't like the preacher." My immediate instinct was to explain how he'd ruined so many services for me. But instead, I accepted his statement without defense.

Remaking the list

There have been many times through the years I've had to remake the list. I've continued to ask God to forgive my pathetic reactions and give me his wisdom in dealing with my marriage.

Fifteen years later, at the age of 49, Bill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He had to quit his teaching job, leaving me to support our family, which has led to trying days and nights of worry. Watching him fight to maintain abilities to function daily has been inspiring to my sons, as well as to me. We've had to depend on our faith that God is in control—especially when we feel so out of control. We've searched the Bible for answers to questions we struggle to understand. We've spent hours with every emotion from anger to grief. We've asked, "Why?" We've claimed God's peace that passes all understanding. Regrettably, many days I've run short on patience, even though I know Bill can't prevent himself from doing things that try my nerves. I realize my responsibility is to respond with the love God would have me show. I cry to God to love through me—because I know I'm not capable of loving Bill as God is capable of loving him.

Many times I've thanked God for a mother who was a spiritual mentor. Though she must have been tempted, she didn't preach to me or offer her opinion on my behavior. She guided me in discovering a truth that's saved a most treasured possession—my marriage. If I hadn't learned to respond as a Christian wife to Bill's small problems, I wouldn't be able to respond appropriately to his larger ones now. My son came home one day and asked, "Mom, what are we going to do when Dad doesn't remember us?" My reply was, "We'll remember him. We'll remember the husband and father he was. We'll remember him for all the things he's taught us and the wonderful ways he's loved us."

After my son left the room, I chuckled. I was thinking of all the things I'd remember about this man who loved his family and his God. Many of those enduring memories are those same annoying little habits that made their way onto a list of bad qualities so many years ago.

Becky Zerbe is author of [Laughing with My Finger in the Dam](#). Becky has been married to Bill for 29 years.

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"It's Over."

Even my Christian counselor was suggesting divorce. Did my marriage have a chance?

By Rose Michaels

That's it," my husband muttered, "I'm through."

Watching his back disappear through our bedroom door, I wondered if he meant it this time. We'd often been challenged by conflicting schedules and discipline differences concerning our two pre-teen sons. Although our marriage had weathered many storms, lately I'd begun to feel as if our boat was sinking.

I sat on our bed and stared out the window. The sturdy cherry trees and tall pines reminded me of God's protection. If he could care for those landmarks, surely he'd protect our family. But I recalled how a violent summer storm had cost us three trees—a reminder that sometimes the worst of nature gets the best of us.

Finally, I walked downstairs and found Ted* hunched over his computer—one of my regular complaints about him. The kids were playing next door, so we could talk openly. Placing an arm around his shoulders, I whispered, "I'm sorry."

Only recently had I begun to realize how my cutting words about his "inadequacies" as a husband and father had deeply wounded him.

Barely glancing up, he replied, "That's not enough anymore. Nothing ever changes."

Feeling foolish, I withdrew my arm. "That's not true," I snapped. "I've changed over the past 10 years. You even said so—"

Catching myself in defensive mode, I stopped mid-sentence and paused. "What would you like me to do?"

He sighed. "We've been through this before. If you don't know, I'm not telling you."

Thinking back over our married life, I recalled Ted's irritation on several occasions when he came home to a dark kitchen and no dinner as I spent hours on the phone cold-calling potential clients to jump-start a home business. Ted worked hard all day and wanted hot meals when he arrived home. He also wanted me to handle the kids' discipline immediately instead of waiting for him to get home, but I felt they needed his manly leadership. Slowly I was learning to let go of my way and trust God with his, but often I fell short, complaining because I had to lead family devotions when Ted was busy. Competing interests had drawn us away from each other. I realized guiltily that even the kids were uncomfortably aware of escalating tensions between us.

Interrupting my thoughts, he added, "I haven't loved you for a long time, and I'm not going to live like this for the next 50 years."

His words felt as if he'd punched me in the stomach. Shocked, I left his office in tears. It was one thing to be reminded of neglected duties; it was another to be told your spouse doesn't love you.

"We're incompatible. We should never have gotten married." Shocked, I returned to the house. I could only pray, "God, we need your help."

A God-ordained separation?

Hope withered with the late summer foliage. In a desperate attempt to salvage our marriage, I saw a Christian marriage counselor. Youthfully zealous, she incited me to action.

"Perhaps a divorce is best."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A *Christian* counselor was advising me to get divorced.

"I can't divorce Ted," I said. "That would hurt our kids. Besides, he'll start another life if I let him go now."

"Why not separate for a few months to clear the air?"

Though I wanted to dismiss the idea, I agreed to consider it. The counselor recommended I read Gary Chapman's [*Hope for the Separated*](#). While I didn't relish the prospect of separation, I did appreciate Dr. Chapman's urging both spouses to work on their own mistakes rather than dwell on their partner's. I knew I'd acted in an ungodly manner toward Ted, once angrily kicking a trashcan down the basement steps and sometimes telling him we should never have married. Of course he'd said such things too, but I was responsible just for *me*.

Meanwhile, I was invited to teach at a conference in England later that fall. *How ironic*, I thought, *that I, a communication expert and Christian, am contemplating marital separation*. Perhaps God had engineered the conference to provide a short-term separation of his devising rather than a longer, man-made one. I'd be gone a week.

The day I received the invitation, I found Ted in the garage, hunting for a screwdriver. He barely looked up as I asked coyly, "Will you miss me when I leave?"

He replied far too calmly, "You better get an attorney. Mine is starting divorce proceedings."

"But we have to separate first!" I exclaimed.

"Whatever," he said shortly. "The attorneys can handle it."

"Is this about my criticizing your lack of family leadership?"

"We're incompatible. We should never have gotten married."

Shocked, I returned to the house. I could only pray, "God, we need your help."

Calming myself, the next day I called an attorney who agreed to represent me. I e-mailed Ted the attorney's contact information, too hurt to discuss it in person. A few days later I received a letter with the hearing date. The words stared at me from the page in an accusatory manner.

Was this my fault? I wondered. What would happen to our family?

Beauty and loss

Just days before my conference, news spread around the world of Princess Diana's death. How could a beautiful young woman with the world at her feet suddenly die, leaving two young sons without a mother? Boarding a jet just hours later, the pain and worry of leaving my sons disheartened me. The four of us had prayed before I left, Ted's voice tense and unfeeling. As my plane soared into the sky, I wondered what the next several weeks and months would bring.

Headlines about the Princess's death cast a pall over London, settling a little more heavily each time I picked up a newspaper or passed storefront tributes. I kept thinking of her sons, and then mine, all close in age. Losing a mother or father was a serious burden for teenagers. How could I bear to watch it happen to mine?

My presentation on gender communication went well; too bad it wasn't helping at home.

On the last day of the conference, I watched Diana's funeral on television, then joined thousands of mourners on Finchley Road to view the hearse. Glimpsing the flag-draped coffin a few feet away, a profound sense of loss swept over me. If only she'd worn her seatbelt. If only Ted and I could try again.

If only ... the two loneliest words in the universe.

The sorrow of death and the joy of living urged me to fight for my marriage. On the return flight I prayed earnestly, "God, thank you for showing me beauty and loss, joy and pain. Help me respond to Ted as I should. Life is short, and love is precious; help me savor both."

When God moves

Arriving home at midnight, I peeked in on the sleeping boys. As I crept into bed beside my husband, he briefly stirred to mumble sleepily, "Glad you made it home okay." My heart raced to think that his heart might be softening! The next day after Ted came home from work, I found him in our bedroom changing clothes.

"Can I talk to you a minute?"

"Go ahead," he said indifferently.

"I had time to think about us when I was in England. God helped me realize how much you and the boys really mean to me. I don't want anything to tear us apart."

"I don't know—" Ted began.

"Look," I interjected, "Philippians 4:13 says we *can* do all things with God who gives us strength. I'm committed to a fresh start in honoring our marriage and you. I'll do whatever it takes. But you have to work with me."

Shaking his head, Ted replied, "I called the marriage counselor while you were gone, and she told me about your concerns."

"She's not supposed to do that! That's confidential," I gasped.

"I know, but I guess she could tell from my voice how desperate our situation is. I didn't realize how much our struggles hurt you. I thought you really didn't care."

Taking a step toward him, I said, "We loved each other once. I apologize for my mistakes. I haven't respected your needs, and I've complained too often. I want to be a good wife."

After a moment, Ted said, "I'm sorry too. I've done and said things to you that I'm not proud of. I've made a lot of mistakes too. But what makes this time different? We'll just do the same things over again."

"Only God can make it different," I said. "I know I need to focus on strengthening my faith first. I plan to read my Bible every day, and I'm going to join a women's Bible study."

He started to move, and just when I thought he'd leave the room, he drew me into his arms. We cried as we clung to each other several minutes.

"I'll find a men's study," he whispered. "Maybe if I grow in my faith too ..."

We canceled that divorce hearing seven years ago, and Ted and I joined Bible studies as we promised. It's been amazing to see how much we've grown—both in our faith and in our marriage. Ted is a church deacon, while I help coordinate women's ministries. Working closely with other Christians has brought us greater intimacy with God, which has helped us learn to love each other as God loves us. Now instead of looking for things to criticize, I focus on areas to compliment—such as when Ted mops the kitchen floor for me or pitches a backyard tent for the boys. I realize that he's showing me his love. And I make hot meals a priority, knowing that's one way to make him feel loved. To strengthen our relationship, Ted and I enjoy "talk-time" several times a week. Over coffee, we share ideas and catch up with each other. And we've made a commitment to attend church as often as the doors are open. As a result, all of us have become more grounded in the Bible and bonded to other believers in our church. We even host a home Bible study. And yes—we're in love again. We learned that Philippians 4:13 holds truth: we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. As Ted and I approach our eighteenth anniversary, I'm grateful neither of us "bailed" during the rough seas that threatened to drown us. God is good. Only he can use trials, disappointments, and even sorrow to reunite two stubborn people in a ministry of hope now shared with others.

* *Names have been changed.*

Rose Michaels is a pseudonym for a writer living in Ohio. Copyright © 2004 by the author or Christianity Today International/Marriage Partnership magazine. Fall 2004, Vol. 21, No. 3, Page 58. Reprinted here in THE PASTOR'S GUIDE with permission.