



Marriages in CRISIS

 Family Fire

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Introduction

When we marry, we envision that we will happily grow old with our spouse at our side. Yet, sometimes the brokenness in this world injects itself into our lives and fractures our hopes and dreams. In an instant, our world can come crumbling down, leaving us struggling to see God and his care for us. A husband announces that he is running off with a colleague from the office. A wife decides she is tired of trying to make a marriage work.

When a spouse walks out of a relationship that God designed to be permanent, the pain can feel overwhelming, anger can consume us, and our insecurities can trap us in doubt. In embarrassment and shame, we often carry our pain alone. In such a season of discouragement, we at *Family Fire* want to come alongside you as a source of friendship and hope.

Our prayer is that this book will be a resource to help you make sense of a terrible situation. We pray it might guide relationships back to a place of healing or help strengthen your faith as you make the difficult decision to move forward without your marriage.

Every marriage encounters bumps along the way, but sometimes those obstacles are difficult and may even be insurmountable. We want to help you find hope and see God at work through these hard times.

We pray these writings are a blessing to your life and that your relationships will experience the blessing of healing.

Grace and Peace,

Deb & Steven Koster

FamilyFire.com



When Your Spouse Walks Out

BY DEB KOSTER

Sometimes a marriage is riddled with conflict and there are a host of signs that the relationship is in danger. Other times a spouse is completely blindsided when their partner announces an end to the relationship. Either way, divorce is probably not what you envisioned when you walked down the aisle and said “I do.” Division in your relationship is a loss to be grieved and a new reality to be navigated. It can be paralyzing to have your world shook-up, but focusing on a few specific tasks can help you get through the challenges.

Acknowledge the loss

When a spouse walks out or wants to end a relationship, it can set our minds awirl with concern. Losing a foundational relationship shakes our world and leaves us with so many things to process. Our emotions can sometimes get the best of us in times of distress. We can lash out in anger or withdraw in despair. The root of our pain is often sadness, we have a loss that we need to process and grieve. A trusted counselor can help keep us from getting stuck in despair. Journaling feelings can also be a helpful practice. And sometimes, just allowing time to have a good cry might be the release that is needed. Acknowledge, name, and confront the pain—the loss is real. Seize the moments you have to process and use them well to begin moving back toward peace.

Care for those in crisis

In the midst of a crisis it is important to circle the wagons and focus on protecting those in danger. We must look after our kids who are struggling to understand the situation. Divorce significantly undermines a child’s sense of security. We must offer regular reassurance to help our children feel secure. It is also common for children to blame themselves for the situation. We must communicate, again and again, to assure them that they are not responsible for causing a parent to leave.

Self care also becomes critically important because we can’t care for others without caring for ourselves. Recognize that you are in a difficult season. You may need to say “no” to outside commitments in order to manage the chaos brewing on the home front. Making time to speak with a counselor is a healthy exercise in self care.

“God does not define us by the pain of our past, but loves us as one of his precious children.”

Don't despair

When a spouse leaves, a world of negative emotions can be triggered. Their absence raises feelings of abandonment and triggers self-doubt and despair. These negative thoughts can lead to depression if we don't realize that our hope will never be found in an earthly relationship—it can be found only in Jesus Christ. We may grieve the loss of a marriage that never lived up to our hopes and dreams, but we still have hope for the future because we are not defined by a failed relationship. God does not define us by the pain of our past, but loves us as one of his precious children. You may feel isolated and alone, but God has promised that he will never leave you nor forsake you ([Deut 31:8](#)).

Seek God

Relationships often reach a breaking point because one party or both has wandered away from living faithfully according to God's word. When something occurs as drastic as a spouse leaving, it is an opportunity to reset your compass. Point yourself in the direction of following Christ and living the life he has called you to. God is always ready to welcome us back and give us his comfort and guidance. God has promised to walk with us through the darkest of valleys ([Psalm 23](#)). He assures us that he will not fail us or forsake us ([Joshua 1:5](#)), in fact nothing can separate us from his love ([Romans 8:38-39](#)), and he will be with us until the end of time ([Matthew 28:20](#)). God will never leave you, lean on him and he will get you through whatever you face.





Rules of Engagement

BY ROB TOORNSTRA

As a pastor, I have walked with numerous couples through marital deserts. These are seasons where the intimacy has dried up, conflict seems to beat down on a couple, and there is no oasis of healing in sight. Sometimes, it seems like the only option is to cut losses and leave the marriage—and sadly, that is occasionally the outcome.

But I've also watched God repair marriages that even I feared were beyond fixing. In fact, I've been a witness to couples who didn't just avoid divorce, but in fact began to enjoy intimacy with one another that they had never imagined possible. You may be reading this because you are in that place where your marriage seems beyond salvage—you see nothing but wasteland in every direction. You've just found out that your husband has had an affair. Your wife disclosed financial debt that she'd kept hidden for years. Can you survive?

In working with couples, I've observed several "make-it-or-break-it" factors. There are no guarantees in love, of course, but these are practices that a couple can take that significantly increase the likelihood of making it through the wilderness to a Promised Land of marital closeness.

Humble yourself before God

You cannot do this on your own. Let me emphasize: you don't have what you need, on your own, to get through this or to fix this. The good news is that God meets us in our lowest points, whether our lowest points are due to the sins of another or our

own shortcomings. Ask that God might reveal to you how you have contributed to the breakdown in your marriage. Confess your sin and need for help, and seek God's forgiveness. Seek the strength, the wisdom, and the grace that God only can give. I marvel as I hear couples describe the most impossible circumstances—infidelity, abandonment, or a marriage that has eroded over decades—and how God met them and began to work in their weakness. You will need God's strength for what is ahead.

Drop the D-word

You must decide early on that divorce is not an option for you. If you allow yourself that exit, then you will not so much be fighting for your marriage as you will be trying to avoid what you feel is inevitable. Taking the option of divorce off the table forces you work for solutions in the marriage.

One major caveat applies, however. This advice does not apply if your safety, or the safety of your family is at risk. Hitting and abuse should not be

"The gospel demands nothing less than the full commitment to letting go of your desire to even the score with your spouse."

tolerated by anyone. But, if that is not the case, approach your marriage as something that you are committed to fixing, not fleeing.

Consult Experts

When couples come to me for marital help, I will almost always encourage them to seek professional counseling. This is true for a couple that is facing a relatively minor rough patch, or a marriage-threatening crisis. Your pastor is a good place to start, and he or she can walk with you along the way. Many pastors lack the training and expertise of a trained therapist, but they should be able to refer you to a competent Christian counselor in your area who can serve as a specialist. In all likelihood, there are underlying issues in your relationship that need to be addressed—they may be wounds from your childhood, or they may be a lack of communication skills. It's sad to me when people deal with problems year after year, and yet for reasons of pride, or fear, they refuse to seek help until a crisis hits. There is no shame in seeking expert help!

Wipe the Slate Clean

Chances are, you have accumulated quite a record of wrongs that your spouse has committed. These wrongs can cut deep wounds in our soul and they can fester in a marriage. Holding on to this list of grievances against your husband or your wife will make long-term healing nearly impossible. You may have a right to your anger, since you may have been legitimately wronged. However, restoring your marriage depends on your commitment to “forgive, just as in Christ Jesus, God forgave you” ([Eph. 4:32](#)). This process—and it is a process—will take time. The hurt will linger and the anger will flare up from time to time. But, the gospel demands nothing less than the full commitment to letting go of your desire to even the score with your spouse.

Fight Fair

As you begin to work through the pain and brokenness of your marriage, it's important that you learn to fight fairly. Sometimes, marriages reach a breaking point because conflict has never been addressed; fights are left unresolved, and the underlying issues in a marriage have been ignored. I often tell a couple that a marriage will get worse before it gets better. That's because age-old problems come to the surface during counseling and you will have fights that you should have had years ago. It takes a while to bring these to the surface. But, it's important to learn to face these conflicts in a healthy way. In fact, this is one reason a marital crisis can be a healthy moment—it forces you to learn good communication. Fighting fair involves, among other things, learning to listen, learning to avoid extremes (“you always...” or “you never...”), leaving the kids out of it (either using them as weapons or by fighting in front of them), and learning to compromise.

Commit to Love

The apostle John tells us in [1 John 4:9](#) that love was demonstrated when “God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” While there is an ocean of beautiful theology here, in a nutshell, John is telling us that God, in Jesus, poured himself out for our good, regardless of what he received. That is, he gave himself, knowing full well that he would be hated and despised by the very people for whom he was giving his life. This should be the pattern for how we love others.

Saving your marriage from collapse requires that you demonstrate your love for your husband or your wife, even when they don't acknowledge it, don't deserve it, or don't reciprocate it. To love in this way is to pour yourself into the other person—meeting their needs, putting them first, and serving them before yourself. This is powerful—because it is a picture of the gospel! It is how God poured himself into us, and

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indeed, how he then enables us to pour ourselves into others.

Perhaps you are sitting in a barren place today. You aren’t sure if your marriage can come back—or even if you have the energy to invest in bringing it back. Don’t give up! God meets his children in the wilderness. With his help, you and your spouse may be on a long, but fruitful journey towards streams in the desert — loving and being loved, as God desires for you.





Owning Your Contribution

BY DEB KOSTER

Dr. Phil is famous for saying, “No matter how flat you make a pancake, it always has two sides.” It is his way of saying that there is always another side to every situation that needs to be considered.

When we hurt, it is difficult to look at the situation from the perspective of the other person, but it is helpful to look at things from another point of view. It takes maturity to step outside of your circumstances to consider how the other person might be hurting too. If we can see ourselves only as the victim, it is difficult to find healing. Taking a good honest look from another perspective can help us to own our contribution.

“Transparency is important for rebuilding trust in relationships.”

Repentance

True healing rarely comes without repentance before God. We will never be ready for a new relationship or find healing in a current relationship until we take ownership of the part we played in the conflict and commit to change our ways. It is too easy to blame someone else without considering how our behavior factored into the equation. Sometimes

the contribution is negative behavior, acting in ways that negatively impacted others. Other times, our contributions may be passive—allowing bad behavior, failing to require respectful behavior, or not calling out mistreatment. Playing the role of the victim will never bring healing and peace. Carefully consider your contribution and own it before God.

Confession

It is one thing to know how we messed up, but it is quite another to admit our errors to another person. It takes a good measure of humility to own our shortcomings and ask for forgiveness. Even if your contribution is less than what the other party contributed, lead the way in seeking forgiveness. A spirit of humility can guide a relationship to a place of healing. We can be confident of our position and certain about the failures of the other person, but those things will not bring us peace. Love keeps no record of wrong. It rejoices in the truth. Live into God’s truth by confessing your contribution to the problem.

Accountability

When trust is undermined in a marriage, it takes time to find healing and rebuild what was lost. Transparency is important for rebuilding trust in relationships. Maybe that means sharing passwords and calendars, or providing access to computers and cell phones. It also means being emotionally transparent and sharing your feelings.

“Being vulnerable is an essential building block for restoring intimacy in a relationship.”

Being vulnerable is an essential building block for restoring intimacy in a relationship. While these acts of accountability may seem annoying, they lay a foundation for trust to be rebuilt.

Restoration

Restoration of the relationship may not happen for every marriage, but personal restoration can come as we own our shortcomings and ask God to redeem them for his purposes. Personal restoration is worthwhile even if your marriage is never restored. Owning your participation in the breakdown lays a foundation for healthier relationships going forward. Personal restoration helps us to see beyond our failures, to see a future where we are loved by God and blessed in the fellowship of his people.





Enlisting Help

BY DEB KOSTER

Life can feel so isolating in the wake of a fractured relationship. Family and friends take up sides and even the children under our roof can feel torn about where their allegiance should lie. When life feels like it is unraveling, focus on God as your strength to weather the storm and reach out for the resources that are available to help you. If you're struggling with knowing where to turn, here are a few suggestions.

Professional counsel

When things break down in life we usually call in an expert. We find a physician to care for our illness or a mechanic to repair our broken car. In the same way, relationships in crisis often require the guidance of a trained professional who is outside of the drama. Get counseling help to restore your marriage. If that's not successful, a counselor can offer perspective to help you move past the crisis and plant your feet on solid ground. With a willingness to engage in counseling, personal growth can occur and a new kind of relationship can be forged. Even if only one person seeks counseling, that person can work towards healing and access resources to help them make decisions about the future.

Church community

A family of faith can be a tremendous resource in times of crisis, though congregations are notorious for taking sides when a marriage splits. Hopefully, the response of the church can have a significant impact

in supporting you through a crisis and if needed, recovery from divorce. Congregations can come alongside you in powerful ways to help you navigate the struggle. Church members can provide meals, rides, or child care. These may seem like small things but they can help diminish isolation when you are hurting. Not everyone within a church is going to be supportive, but focus on those who are and let them come alongside you and lighten your load.

“There is no shame in asking for help; as members of a community we have a calling to care for one another.”

Legal advice

Sometimes when tempers flare, behavior can spiral out of control necessitating legal intervention for the protection and safety of those involved. Police may need to be called to diffuse an argument or a restraining order may be needed for protecting one's safety. Finances may need to be separated to

avoid one spouse from draining a bank account or from running up excessive amounts of debt. Use the resources available to protect your safety.

Community resources

Separating a household can often cause financial distress as the limited resources that once covered one household, must now cover two. Some spouses choose to leave their families in the lurch, and the remaining spouse is left to struggle to get by. Explore what resources your community offers to help hurting families. Organizations like [Love in the Name of Christ](#) or [government living assistance](#) programs can guide you to resources and help you make ends meet as you get back on your feet. There is no shame in asking for

help, as members of a community we have a calling to care for one another.

Separation and divorce can be isolating and stepping into a new, uncertain chapter of life can be difficult, but God does not leave us alone. Jesus promised that he is with us to the very end of time. As we lean on God and trust his leading, God will guide our steps and care for us through his people. [Proverbs 11:14](#) tells us, "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety."





Setting Limits

BY DEB KOSTER

When relationships are in conflict, limits need to be set around unhealthy behavior. Boundaries place necessary limits around behavior that could damage anyone involved. When we set boundaries, we are committing to live according to the behaviors that God desires.

However, setting limits can be difficult both for the person setting the boundaries and for the one being limited. This is why it is important to always draw boundaries with love. When setting limits, it is also important to explain why you are doing so. Let your spouse know that you love them too much to watch them self-destruct. Remind them that God has entrusted you both with providing your children a safe and loving home. Below are three guidelines to help you set healthy boundaries when your marriage is in crisis.

Avoid conflict in front of children

Anger is common in homes where a marriage is in crisis or divorce and separation are actually occurring. It is important to handle your frustration constructively. When a family is broken, and threatened by separation or divorce, children lose their sense of security. Efforts should be made to stabilize life for your children by keeping them out of the conflict. Keep a united front for your children as much as possible. It is unfair to children to pull them into conflict when their world is already uncertain and their homelife is destabilized.

No addictive behavior under your roof

When we care for one another, sometimes lines get blurred, and we find ourselves caring for an addiction. Life starts to revolve around dealing with bad behavior instead of caring for one another. Whatever the addiction is that is causing struggles in your home, it needs to have limits placed around it. You don't get to have the car keys if you have been drinking. You can't view pornography on the family computer. You can't be around the children when you are high on drugs. You are not permitted to lay a hand on anyone in anger. Consider what limits need to be drawn in your home. It may be necessary to get help from a third party—a pastor, counselor, or attorney, for example—to help establish those boundaries.

“Relationships can find healing when we commit to live according to the behaviors God requires of us.”

Require accountability

Accountability is essential for healing to occur in a damaged relationship. Involve the police to hold your spouse accountable if your safety is endangered. Insist on accountability with a counselor or pastor to either help you work toward healing the relationship or guide you to an amicable parting.

If there was infidelity then part of rebuilding trust is having transparency so there is accountability for

negative behavior. This means being willing to share your phone and your computer to help reestablish trust. Trust is rebuilt when there is a track record of trust-worthy behavior and this requires transparency over time.

Relationships can find healing when we commit to living according to the behaviors God requires of us. Setting loving limits is a way of investing in the future of your relationship and committing to a better future.





When to Fight for Your Marriage

BY DEB KOSTER

God intended marriage to be a permanent covenant, not short-term investment. When there is a shred of hope, it is worth persisting onward and fighting for your marriage. The Holy Spirit can breathe life into the deadest of relationships and guide it toward health. Don't let the current state of your marriage discourage you. If God can make the whole world out of nothing, imagine what he can create with a couple of willing hearts. But how do you decide when it's worth fighting for?

“If God can make the whole world out of nothing, imagine what he can create with a couple of willing hearts.”

When you value your commitment

We should never take lightly the promises we make before God. When we stood before God at our wedding, we pledged to work at our relationship over a lifetime, in good times and in bad, through sickness and in health. So it is important that we are not quick

to let that commitment lapse. All relationships will face struggles, the question becomes, “How willing are you to persevere through challenges and fight when it is hard?”

When your spouse is committed to trying

If your spouse is willing to keep working at the relationship, don't toss aside that commitment lightly. Choose to persevere and see what God might build out of the ashes of your marriage. Friendship can be reestablished and romance can be rekindled. It may be hard to imagine now, but with God all things are possible. Even if a spouse is not initially willing to try, they may yet be won over by your commitment to extending grace. Sacrificial love wins the day.

When you desire a stable foundation for your children

Choosing to ensure a stable foundation for your children is more than just “staying together for the kids.” It means choosing to address your marital issues and create a home where commitment and communication are valued. A high conflict marriage can be destructive to children caught in the crossfire, but most marriage dissolutions are actually low conflict. Couples simply drift apart and the task of rebuilding feels too daunting. In these situations, putting in the hard work can not only revive your

marriage but also establish a stable and healthy foundation for your children.

When you are willing to own your failures

It is nearly impossible for a relationship to recover if you or your spouse paint yourself as a victim. We can never heal what we don't acknowledge and owning our contribution, even if a passive one, is a good starting point. Once you take responsibility for your

role in the breakdown of your marriage, you can begin to make needed and important changes.

There are a lot of reasons to fight for your marriage. It is not an easy path to work toward restoration, but God can rebuild great relationships out of ruins. When we value our commitments and want the best for our children, it is worth moving forward with whatever is left of our relationship and committing to build something better with God's help. God walks with us through the darkest of valleys and healing and reconciliation can still be possible.





When to End a Marriage

BY DEB KOSTER

When the Pharisees asked Jesus in [Matthew 19](#), “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Jesus lamented that divorce is not what God intended for marriage. But he also explained that divorce was given to Moses because of the hardness of the human heart. It does not take much convincing to see that hard heartedness still persists today.

Marriages can break

Simply put, some behaviors can break marriages permanently. Usually such behaviors build over time, and a first step to healthier boundaries and greater safety may be separation. It may begin with simple distance, and then progress to a legal agreement. You may need to protect not only your kids but also your legal assets. The goal of the separation is both to ensure your safety as well as to test the commitment of the erring spouse. One hopes a separation will end in health and reconciliation, but it may also end in permanent divorce. Divorce is never the ideal, but there are times when the hardness of a spouse’s heart suggest that it might be necessary.

When a relationship has become abusive

Hitting is never, ever, allowed or acceptable. If you or your children are in danger call the Domestic Violence Hotline number and get out. [1-800-799-SAFE \(7233\)](tel:1-800-799-SAFE). Take the initiative and seek shelter from abuse. We are all made in God’s image and

should not subject that image to abuse. Submitting ourselves to physical or verbal abuse devalues our identity as image bearers of God. The emotional abuse of being repeatedly lied to erodes trust and destroys relationships. Allowing abuse to persist without boundaries communicates to the abuser that this behavior is acceptable and invites more disrespect. It also allows the abuser to fail to get help and get better. Any cycle of abuse needs to be broken if healing is to be found. And when an abuser is unrepentant and unwilling or unable to change, hard boundaries can be necessary.

When a spouse has brought addiction under your roof

Addictive behavior is dangerous to everyone that it touches. A spouse addicted to porn, gambling, or drugs sets an unhealthy model for children and then endangers them directly. If your bank account is cleared out to support an addiction or your children are being driven around by an intoxicated parent,

“Submitting ourselves to physical or verbal abuse devalues our identity as image bearers of God.”

it is destructive to your family. Boundaries need to be placed around addictive behaviors. If a spouse is willing to seek treatment and honor boundaries related to recovery, you can work on getting well together. But if a spouse is unwilling to seek treatment and work on treating both the addiction and the underlying causes, hard boundaries may ultimately be necessary to shield you or your children from harm.

When an unbelieving spouse has walked away

[1 Corinthians 7:15](#) talks about letting an unbelieving spouse walk away if they have had enough. A believing spouse is encouraged to stick with a marriage if their unbelieving partner is willing, but if an unbelieving spouse walks away, the Bible says the remaining spouse should not be “enslaved” to a marriage with an absent spouse. Abandonment can break a marriage. If your unbelieving spouse has no willingness to persist in the marriage, your paths may need to diverge.

When an affair continues

Adultery is extremely destructive to marriage. It’s an obvious violation of marital vows, even explicitly mentioned in scripture as one of the ways marriages break. Yet, marriages can survive past affairs and move toward restored trust and intimacy. But such restoration can happen only if the couple is fully re-committed to each other. The unfaithful spouse must sever the ties of infidelity and change behaviors that led to it. Both spouses will likely need significant counseling together to rebuild their trust. A marriage requires the intimacy of a husband and wife alone. There is no ability to move forward if a third party remains involved.

When you have earnestly worked at repair

As soon as your marriage feels like it’s in trouble, getting advice from a counselor is a wise choice. A counselor can guide you through what’s normal for stressed couples and help you navigate good choices around bad behavior. And when you have invested the time and energy into seeking earnestly to repair your relationship without success, a counselor can also help you recognize when your relationship is no longer salvageable, but has instead become destructive. A marriage that damages more than it helps is a hard truth, but one that is easier to live with if you can honestly say that you tried every means at your disposal to work toward healing.

When you can no longer carry the weight alone

It is difficult to fix a relationship when you are the only one working at it. Bearing the burden of trying to repair a marriage alone can work for a time. All marriages have seasons where things are difficult and we sacrifice for our spouses. But over the long haul, a one-sided marriage will only result in burnout and probably expose you to unhealthy behaviors. Carrying the full weight of your relationship is an ineffective long term solution. A licensed counselor can help you see when the burden has become too much.

Marriages break, and deciding precisely when to end a marriage is never easy. Divorce is not what God intended for marriage, but sometimes it is the best way forward. It’s never easy, but God will not leave you alone in your pain. He will walk with you even through the dark valley of marital conflict, and by leaning on him, you can find hope and healing for moving forward.





When is Divorce Okay

BY STEVEN KOSTER

Nobody enters marriage expecting to divorce. Divorce was not in God's initial plan either. When the Pharisees came to Jesus to try to get him to pick a side in the when-is-it-okay-to-divorce debate, Jesus redirects them back to the beginning. In [Matthew 19](#), he quotes [Genesis 2:24](#), saying that when a man leaves his father and mother and becomes one with his wife, no one should separate them. Instead of listening to the Pharisees debate the rules of when it is okay to divorce, Jesus challenges them to focus on being one with their spouses. This should be our focus as well; we should strive for that unity.

Although divorce was not a part of God's perfect plan, scripture acknowledges that people can break marriages. Divorce was given to Moses because of the hardness of our sinful hearts ([Mt 19:8](#)). We sinners fail, even in marriage, which is seen at its worst in instances of adultery, abuse, or addictions. Divorce was not God's intent, but neither is marriage preserved at any and every cost. Marriage is not glorifying to God when it degenerates into abuse, neglect, or abandonment. As image-bearers of God, we need to protect ourselves and others from suffering abuse.

Even so, divorce should never be approached lightly. Some churches like to talk about the biblical grounds for divorce as if there are some situations where divorce is automatically alright. Infidelity can break marriages, but it is not a get-out-of-marriage-free card. If couples rush to dissolve a marriage because of infidelity, they could miss the healing and restoration that could make their marriage a beacon of God's grace. Marriages can survive a break in trust

and with a lot of hard work and rebuilding, become something that glorifies God.

Divorce, when a marriage cannot be salvaged, is the result of sin over time. It is a final breaking of our vows "not to part until death." Divorce can devastate whole family groups, and the fallout lasts for years to come, especially for children. It is unrealistic to think that "after this divorce is final I can just move on." Those involved do go on, but they live in the wake of the broken relationship—their scars shaping future expectations and approaches to family relationships.

"Divorce was not God's intent, but neither is marriage preserved at any and every cost."

But while divorce can build walls in many relationships, it cannot separate us from God or his love for us. Divorce and the sin that led to it are not beyond God's capacity to forgive. God will be there with us in the midst of hurt caused by divorce to bring healing. People may fail us, but nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Counseling is important, both when attempting to reconcile the relationship before leaving it as well as for healing before moving on to another relationship. [Proverbs 15:22](#) says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel,

but with many advisers they succeed.” After divorce, friendship, prayer, and counseling can help individuals move past the pain to a place where they can wish their ex-spouses well and take accountability for their own role in the dissolution of the relationship.

Divorce is never the way God wanted things to go, but sometimes it is necessary. Divorce is always about brokenness. Sometimes divorce is the better choice and the lesser of two evils, but it is never without pain, and it is never beyond the loving embrace of God.





Finding Hope Amid Marital Strife

BY DEB KOSTER

Despair is a common emotion in the wake of a fractured relationship. Often much of our identity and hopes for the future are connected to our spouse. When that relationship ends, we can feel lost. It can be easy for our fragile hearts to dwell in fear and despair. While the loss of relationship must be grieved, it is important that we intentionally seek hope in the midst of our struggle.

“Our true hope will never be found in an earthly relationship, it can only be found in Jesus Christ.”

Recognize your source of hope

Our true hope will never be found in an earthly relationship, it can only be found in Jesus Christ. We may grieve the loss of a marriage that never lived up to our hopes and dreams, but we are not defined by a failed relationship. God loves you as a precious child. You may feel isolated and alone, but God has promised that he will never leave or forsakes you.

Cling to your faith

Our faith is our greatest source of strength in good times and in bad. Leaning on God will bless us more than trying to go about things using our own strength. Even when spouses fail us and abandon us, God is faithful. Romans 8 tells us that the Spirit steps in to pray for us when our hearts are too heavy to find the words. Staying in God’s word and keeping fellowship with a community of faith will equip you for the challenges separation and divorce can bring.

Pray

Prayer connects us with God and enables us to follow his leading in our lives. In prayer we lay down our burdens and find God’s comfort for the concerns of our hearts. Prayer should not be your last option, only after you have exhausted your own resources, but rather prayer should be your first impulse, a faithful habit that gives you the strength to face each new day.

Equip yourself with God’s word

Claim God’s promises for your life by reciting them when you feel anxious or scared. As Jesus used scripture to defeat the devil when he was tempted, we have God’s word to serve as our defense when life feels overwhelming.

Reestablish routine

When your marriage is in crisis, the effects ripple out into every area of your life. Your marriage becomes the number one priority in your life, but it is important to not be pulled into panic about your relationship. God's plan for your life is not lost if your relationship falters. Hope can be found as you step out of crisis mode and recognize that God's world is still turning and his promises are still true, regardless of your marital status. Take a deep breath and step into your life, trusting that God is walking through it with you.

When life feels out of control these concrete actions can help our world to become less chaotic by resetting our priorities and guiding us to care for the things that we can control. We are reminded of the words of the serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*





Coping as a Single Parent

BY CHRIS HUNT

Single parents, both mothers and fathers, often describe a strong sense of isolation and loneliness. Recently divorced single parents can feel particularly cut off from friends and family, even while in their company. Early in my own season of single parenthood, though I loved the company of my kids, I felt very alone. My former spouse refused to be involved with our two toddlers, most of my family lived two states away, and my friends seemed to withdraw from me. And since I had turned my back on the faith of my childhood over a decade before my divorce, I also lacked the support of the body of Christ.

“God did not leave me in my isolation and my loneliness. He surrounded me with his people.”

The breakdown of my marriage found me unprepared spiritually, emotionally, and mentally for the sudden rigors of parenting on my own. No one—not relatives, friends, coworkers, my boss—seemed to “get” what I was facing. The addition of loads of material issues to the isolation—financial problems, car troubles, home repairs, and too much to do in the day-to-day—made me feel stone-cold alone. Does this situation sound familiar? If you too are struggling

with the growing pains of becoming a single parent after separation or divorce, I offer you words of hope.

Though it seemed unlikely to me at the time, my divorce and ensuing single parenthood was the crucible through which God finally got my attention and showed me the one person to whom I needed to turn: his son, Jesus Christ. Looking back now on that season, I see four ways God provided for me in my isolation and loneliness:

God revealed people in my life, already in plain sight

Convinced I was all alone with my challenges, I did not realize until much later that when my neighbor invited me to her church, it had been God who set up that conversation. Sharon, a single parent herself in her late sixties, lived next door with her youngest daughter who babysat for me. In hindsight, I realized Sharon had always been there: checking in with the kids and me, encouraging me, and finally, inviting me to reconnect with Jesus.

Are there people that God has placed in your life, but that you have overlooked? If no one comes to mind, pray that God would help reveal trustworthy people in your life that you can reach out to for help and will walk with you through your struggles.

God provided a new family through his church

After my wife left, I started going to church...and not just on Sunday. In the darkest days of my life, Sharon and her daughter invited me to visit the church in which my family worships to this day. After visiting, I received another invitation: to come to a small group. Starved for adult company and friendship, I leaped at the chance, and entered a community of people who cared about each other and who cared about me. When things got tough, my new church family stepped in with support. One couple would pick up my children from daycare when I worked late. Another family invited us to spend a holiday with them. Someone else would babysit a sick child so I wouldn't have to miss work. Eventually, it hit me what God had done: he changed my life and the lives of my children through his people.

“God can place just the right people in our lives, but when we won't admit we need them, or humbly accept their help, we hurt only ourselves.”

Are you surrounded by a community of faith? If so, is it time to seek out deeper relationships with fellow believers? If you have strayed away from the church, are there people of faith in your life that you could talk to about church? Even if there isn't, you can take the step to seek out a new church family. An easy way to start is to search online for churches in your area with divorce care ministries.

God reopened my heart

As my heart reopened to God, I slowly stepped into new friendships and pressed into family. I suddenly found I made friends much more easily. I was forming deep and lasting friendships; and I seldom felt alone. Because Christ was the fabric and thread of these friendships, they withstood hardship. What's more, my parents moved closer; my mother even stayed a few months with me. Their presence gave my family enormous support. God did not leave me in my isolation and my loneliness. He surrounded me with his people.

Don't be afraid to ask new friends and family for help. Take people seriously when they offer you their presence. God can place just the right people in our lives, but when we won't admit we need them, or humbly accept their help, we hurt only ourselves.

God made his presence felt

Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” ([Hebrews 13:5](#)). The feelings of isolation and loneliness I felt after my divorce were real. When my son woke crying at 2 AM, I was the only one there to comfort him. All the cooking and cleaning; just one person did it all. Bathing, dressing, putting to bed; you guessed it, me. In all of it, because of the love of Christ, I came to understand that I was never truly alone. He was with me, just as he is with you.

Are you alone as a parent? Do you feel isolated? Your feelings are valid. Every circumstance in single parenting and in divorce is different. So I offer no kind of formula. God, however, is always absolutely consistent. Your experience will be different from mine, yet, God's love and goodness will be wholly the same. Ask him to meet you in your isolation and loneliness. He will do it, because he too is a parent; your Father in Heaven.





Have Hope for Your Marriage

BY BOB RITSEMA

There are many unhappy marriages. No, that's not quite right. Better to say that there are many marriages passing through a period of unhappiness. The first formulation makes it sound as if unhappiness is the fixed and final state of a marriage. The second recognizes that marriages can change, and momentary or even seasonal unhappiness can turn to eventual satisfaction. The first phrasing is hopeless, the second, hopeful, and hope is essential for repairing any troubled marriage.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary states that to hope is "to expect with confidence." I have worked as a therapist with many couples who were experiencing marital difficulties. I've noticed that the hope (or lack thereof) with which couples entered into counseling makes a tremendous difference in their likelihood of success.

Two couples come to mind. The first couple, whom I'll call Dale and Donna, were going through a rocky time two years into their marriage. Dale was troubled that Donna didn't discipline her children from a previous marriage and that she interfered with his efforts to correct them. Donna said that Dale was judgmental and had angry outbursts in which he said hurtful things. Neither knew how to fix these problems, but both believed strongly that they would eventually get past them. Each believed they were loved and each voiced faith in the kindness and goodness of the other. Because they were hopeful, they worked hard in therapy, learning how to communicate more effectively, to empathize with the other's perspective, and to find solutions. Now their

marriage is quite close, with none of the dissention that was once present.

The second couple, whom I'll dub Matt and Maggie, had been married for about the same period of time. Matt distanced himself and was frequently sarcastic, while Maggie spent too much money and hid her purchases—significant problems to be sure, but no worse than Dale and Donna's. Matt and Maggie were much less hopeful, though. Each was skeptical that the other would try to change, and each was quick to give up on resolving their problems. They had little expectation that the marriage would improve. Each worked more on furthering their own interests than on thinking of ways to improve the relationship. They made little effort to make the changes I suggested, and soon dropped out of therapy.

"Hope is part of any healthy, Christian life."

Hope is part of any healthy, Christian life. [Romans 12:11-12](#) says, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." And this hope should extend to our relationships. Christian psychologist Everett Worthington and his colleagues have developed a [hope-focused approach](#) to couple's therapy. They regard hope as central both to the

Christian experience and to marriage. They suggest that there are three components to hope that are important for relationships: *willpower*, *waypower*, and *waitpower*:

- *Willpower* is the willingness to put forth effort to improve the relationship and the expectation that such effort will make a difference. *Willpower* is often lacking when a person is depressed, since depression typically involves thoughts of helplessness or hopelessness. Matt and Maggie lacked this aspect of hope in their relationship, which hindered their movement toward of success.
- *Waypower* entails seeing the ways that a relationship can be restored and possessing the skills needed to do what needs to be done. Some couples already have excellent *waypower*; others, like Dale and Donna, need

assistance in developing skills like communication, parenting, self-control, and other skills to improve their *waypower*.

- *Waitpower* requires the ability to persevere until marital problems can be resolved. Worthington and his colleagues believe that the conviction that God is present in difficult circumstances is particularly important in helping couples endure the hardships they experience as they wait for change.

Even as a therapist, my faith helps me maintain hope on behalf of the couples with whom I work. I believe with all my heart that both husband and wife are made in the image of God, and, as such, are made for relationship. Whatever their deficiencies, when it comes to attitudes or skills, they are endowed with the capacity to love God and others, and also possess a yearning to love and be loved. I am convinced most couple's efforts are likely to bear fruit, if they have hope in God, their partners, and themselves.



Authors



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Rev. Steven and Deb Koster produce Family Fire, ReFrame’s marriage and family ministry. They encourage families to thrive in the Holy Spirit online at FamilyFire.com and off-line through marriage and parenting retreats. Together they explore spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical intimacy, good boundaries and spiritual habits, and mentoring of the next generation. Steven and Deb live in Grand Rapids, MI and have three fantastic grown children.



Christopher Hunt

Christopher Hunt is Marketing Communications Manager at ReFrame. He loves to see God transform lives through the gospel. After an unwanted divorce, Chris recommitted his life to Jesus and experienced God’s complete transformation of who he was. For a season, he raised his two young children on his own before he remarried. His wife, Sarah, adopted his two children and they now have five wonderful kids. With a passion to encourage parents and families, Chris and Sarah serve together in children’s ministry and as small group leaders. Chris and his family live in Elgin, IL, a northwest suburb of Chicago.



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Rob Toornstra has pastored a church in Salem Oregon for the past ten years. He has been married to Amy for fifteen years, and together, they are enjoying the adventure of raising two girls and one boy. For fun, Rob enjoys cooking, reading, aviation, and geocaching. He is the author of “Naked and Unashamed: How the Good News of Jesus Transforms Intimacy” (Doulos, 2014).



Dr. Robert J Ritzema, PHD

Bob Ritzema is a clinical psychologist, having received his doctorate from Kent State University. He has worked for over 25 years as a psychotherapist and more than 10 years as a college professor. He retired from Methodist University in 2012 to return to his hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan in order to assist his parents. He currently works part-time at Psychology Associates of Grand Rapids and worships at Monroe Community Church. He has two sons and three grandchildren.



About Family Fire

Family Fire is a Christian ministry committed to fanning the flames of the Holy Spirit in our family relationships. *Family Fire* hosts an active Facebook community (facebook.com/familyfire) and offers a library of deeper resources on our website (familyfire.com). We also offer live teaching events such as marriage and parenting retreats. Together we explore spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy and how we should live as members of a Spirit-fed family.

Romans 8:14-17 tells us, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."



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