

The Marriage That Longs To Give Up

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Part One: Hope Still Stands

To those who share in the Body of Christ:

No subject on the planet seems to hold more mystery than marriage. What other topic in existence can see two people grow from friendship, to love, to hate, and lastly to hopelessness? While one marriage thrives on improbable circumstance, the next seems to drag along for years of apathetic discouragement. One couple looks at another couple and inadvertently rates themselves against the other. In some cases, an experienced marriage of struggle tells a new marriage of bliss that they should anticipate suffering. What message are we hoping to relay to one other when marriage itself is never the same in any house? Today, my heart is focused on the marriage that longs to give up on itself.

For many years during my childhood, I was at the disadvantage (or so it seemed at the time) of having to relocate with my parents every three or four years. Somewhere along the way in my early adult life, a very subtle problem began to surface within the relationships that I formed and the choices that I made. Without intending for this to become a pattern, “giving up” and moving on to something else was almost instinctual.

This pattern of behavior is, what I believe, many marriages begin and end on. They begin on a question, a doubt, or a possibility of failure where one or both involved are saying to themselves, “I want this to work, but I’m not sure if it will. I’ll give it everything I’ve got, but it might not be right.” Sometimes a pre-marriage relationship has parental pressure, internal pressures, or it might even just involve two people who are afraid they might never meet anyone else. They marry, they move forward, and within months or years, they pass the point of the original questions, doubts, or possibilities of failures. By this time, they’re positive that their marriage is over.

Why do we do this to ourselves? Why do we lose hope before we ever had it? Why do we lose hope at all?

Those are questions that may not have answers. They’re questions that rely heavily on analyzing the past. While that may be necessary for counseling or some other aspect of psychological discovery, these are not the types of questions I want to address here today.

My wife and I have observed several broken homes in our short marriage that were only being held together by thin strands of thread. It’s almost impossible in this nation to NOT know someone who is discouraged about their marriage. Having said that, the biggest challenge we’ve seen through those that

have shared their struggle is this... "If I'm unhappy in my marriage and it's been this many years, wouldn't God want me to be happy and support me in leaving?"

While the question itself has logical answers, it is not logic that these individuals are looking for in most cases. For if someone asks this question, they have already given themselves the answer of their choice: "Yes."

So how then, can you speak with someone who has already made up their mind about giving up on marriage? If they are longing for it, how can you change that and give them reason to believe in hope again (or even for the first time)? Not a single word from the mouths of our humanness can touch the heart of a hardened spouse, but several words of God's grace from the lips of His Word can offer the tender affection of love and patience that may just soften the hurting moments of their heart.

The term divorce is used in the Scriptures 34 times, but none has had such an impact on my reading than the story of Mary and Joseph. All prior and post mentions of this word are held within the context of expectation, rather than experience. By that I mean that the Word of God is full of "expectations," but sometimes we can get so caught up there that we miss the Biblical experiences that relate to our own lives. Let's take a look at the human side of the following situation.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily." Matthew 1:18-19

If you can, close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in Joseph's shoes when the rumor hits his ears about his fiancé. You're standing there as a young man prepared to marry and you hear this. I can tell you that if it were me, I'd have so much anger welled up inside of me that I might be inclined to go and get into an argument with her about this so-called, "child of God." I would find the whole thing an absurd way of lying about her affair with another man. Would any of you be so gracious as Joseph to think of divorce?

Of course, I say that in good humor. He didn't want her to be disgraced, so he considered walking away and "giving up." He was preparing to enter a marriage with tremendous doubts.

We all pretty much know the rest of the story, but let's continue it anyways...

"But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:" Matthew 1:20-24

Does it say that Joseph's fears all went away? Does it say that Joseph wasn't still slightly embarrassed to consider the next several months of being around her? Of course he loved her. Of course he honored her. But can we be absolutely sure that as a human being (just like one of us) that he wasn't still fighting certain doubts of reality? Who was going to believe that an angel talked to him, right? I can imagine him asking questions like...

"What if this is wrong?"

"What if the dream I had was only my imagination?"

"What if Mary isn't really a virgin?"

Did Joseph still have doubts? He was human. That's the best answer we can offer to one another as we read. Though he was obedient and followed through with the vision from above, he was no less a realist than any one of us in a situation of never-before-seen experience.

Doubts and questions are not the beginning or end of a marriage... they are the pieces of the process by which we figure out who we are, who our spouse is, and what our roles are in the marriage. When Joseph realized that he HAD to marry this young woman on the command of the angel, isn't it possible that he could have viewed it as forceful and unfair? After all, it was his ego to lose as friends and family would watch him marry a pregnant woman.

The reality is that over the years that passed, Joseph could have easily looked back saying, "I was forced to marry my wife. If things had gone MY way, we would have divorced." In retrospect, this only makes sense. Joseph was a man. And men of centuries and millennia have always struggled with the outward appearance of pride. The truth of the matter is, Joseph had a choice on how he would react to what was ultimately a "forced" marriage. He could be disgruntled from the beginning or he could find joy in the circumstances of hope.

"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Philippians 4:11

All of life is a circumstance of hope. None of us are in a perfect situation and none of us have found the cures that will ail our everyday frustrations. We all struggle and we all move forward. The happiness we find is never in what we leave behind or what we gain from having left. The joy we find in life is learning to love beyond our own depths of comprehension. It's a joy that we discover in the moments we stop worrying about what someone did or didn't do right in the past, and open our eyes to the many incredible things that make them who they are. Being loved is being noticed, being appreciated, and being considered.

And so we return to the question of those who struggle so deeply in their marriages: "If I'm unhappy in my marriage and it's been this many years, wouldn't God want me to be happy and support me in leaving?" Unfortunately, the question isn't worded in a way that's even fair to the Lord. It puts Him in a box that suggests "no" means one thing: He wants you to be miserable. It's like asking a parent whether they love you enough to be "okay" with your choice of living in a sexual relationship with someone

you're not married to. If they say yes, then you feel okay. If they say no, you naturally assume they don't love you. It's not a fair question.

What God sets before us is hope... not sorrow. Our faithful Father has not set us on paths of destruction, but paths of direction. We need only to open our eyes and realize the steps we're taking and who the Lord has put beside us.

If you are in a marriage, you are there for a reason. Someone is walking beside you because they were put there by your Gracious Savior. Ten years may have gone by without a word of love shared. Twenty years may have gone by without softness or companionship. You may have even seen this person in your house for thirty years and they only seem worthless. They are the Lord's, just as you are. They are not worthless, nor are you. Together you were brought near for a reason that all these years may have never shown.

The divine providence of God is one that does not allow for mistakes. You do not take a step on this journey of life while He sits back saying, "Now what? They took the wrong turn!" He knows your steps because He set them before you ever walked in them. Those steps include your spouse. Does He desire that you get out of your marriage in order to be happy? Of course not! He desires that you discover the happiness He set up within your marriage.

There are no mistakes in the providential sight of God. You are where you are for a reason. You're with who you're with for a reason. Find that reason and there you will share in the reconciliation of love that may never have been before.

Of course, one might say, "But what about this person and that person." Clearly there are exceptions to the rule. It is not as though God desires to see abusive relationships, nor that He would desire to see unfaithful relationships. But this is not being written to the exceptions. This is to those who simply look at their marriage with an unsure lack of confidence. More often than not in this nation, divorce doesn't happen because of "exceptions" (such as unfaithfulness or abuse), but because one or both in the relationship are simply tired of the other. Instead of searching out the possibilities for their marriage, they look at it with an early sense of disappointment and failure. This is my audience. These are the marriages that are on my heart.

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before," Philippians 3:13

All that Scripture leads us to is hope. Though we do not gain all that we want or desire in this life, we still press on toward those things we believe will take place. We look at the future more brightly because we know and have confidence of great things. But would you believe that there is an amazing connection between our hope in Christ and our hope in marriage?

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word," Ephesians 5:25-26

The love that Christ gave to us was one of great patience, mercy, and grace. That is what He desires that we give to our marriage. We give the Lord our sin and yet He still offers His gracious mercy. If your spouse has given you reason to be bitter, empathetic, or angry, realize that you cannot change the past, nor can you change the future from the divine knowledge of God. Rediscover the patience, mercy, and grace of love by beginning to look at your marriage with the hope that you were destined to find.

May the Lord Jesus Christ bless you all with this reminder of a great treasure we so often long to give up on. Don't give up on this person that God has set beside you.

Part Two: Grace Still Stands

In the previous article (Part I), the focal point of my intention was to engage thought, hope, and reconciliation among those readers who are currently enduring marriage and can't figure out where to turn, what to believe, or how to feel. There can be nothing less valuable in life than to encourage and lift the spirits of those believers who feel "trapped" inside a relationship. But as is the case for any God-fearing teacher or leader, we certainly cannot entertain a "cut and run" philosophy or message in which the encouragement is to walk away, give up, or quit running the race that they have entered into. Hopefully that was seen in the previous article as my audience was quite different than the one I am addressing today.

At this early morning hour, the dawn has not yet risen and the things that need to be addressed are often as clear to me as the darkness outside (which is to say that they are not very clear). No doubt my audience now will agree that the previous content was necessary, applicable, and imperative to the following text:

"That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded;" Titus 2:2-6

The Word of God implores those teaching to "urge" those listening, reading, and/or needing guidance toward lives of sensible godliness, purity, and righteous actions. But here is where I will begin to define my audience. Part II that is being written at this hour is aimed toward those in the church who surround the "couple who longs to give up." Now I am no longer speaking to the couples who struggle, but to the churches who nurture, observe, and shepherd these couples.

As you just saw, the term quoted as valuable at this present time was the word, urge. We find it from the Greek word Parakaleo, which means to aid or to be by the side of. Perhaps this may seem obvious, but I believe the obvious sometimes serves to be an illusion that evades our common sense when it comes to the things we do in life. What exactly do I mean?

To urge is to aid and stand by through encouragement and comfort. When you, as the Body, see someone fail with respect to the things that you've "urged" them not to do, what is your normal response? No doubt you have to stop and think about that, don't you? Why? Because the standard response we give to those who make decisions contrary to our teaching, our leading, or our guidance is disdain, disregard, and the plain fact is... WE GIVE UP ON THEM WHEN THEY NEED US MOST!

"For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another..." Titus 3:3

Message? You were there once yourself. You have failed. You have fallen short of the expectations set before you. All of this to the end that...

"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;" Titus 3:5

It's the aspect of mercy that I want you to consider this day. When we "urge" someone toward a particular decision, purity, or righteous behavior, we are very simply giving direction that we trust they will uphold, adhere to, or if nothing else... consider. Yet there is one vital thing that we cannot and should not have the capacity to do and that's to force a decision.

Let me ask when, as a man or woman of God, God has ever forced you to make a certain decision? Has it ever happened? Surely God the Father has called us to that which He already knew we would choose, but why was it that you turned to Him in the first place? Speaking solely for myself, the call of God brought me to my knees as I saw how little I deserved His mercy. I had done everything in the world AGAINST what I knew He desired and yet there He stood before me with a gift of salvation. What more could I do but allow my heart to break at such grace?

Some decisions we make are irreversible. Some are not. If I were to choose to begin having an affair, my actions would be absurd, foolish, unrighteous, impure, and ungodly (with no question), but it would have the potential for reversal. As in, my marriage would not be without hope if I reversed the actions that led me down that path (though it would, of course, be scarred in the humanity of fallen flesh and would struggle to heal if at all). On the other hand, if my wife and I were to divorce legally, what would that mean? Could we remarry at a time in the future? Quite possibly. But the official document of divorce would be irreversible. Not something that one can go back and change.

The process that leads people THROUGH a divorce is one that we, as a church, often have no choice but to observe as we have done everything within our capacity to urge otherwise. But once such a thing is done and the decision has been made, what happens next?

What is it about hearing that someone is "divorced" that makes us cringe? Is it because we feel they are dirty, impure, or unclean? Perhaps. But I want us to consider a situation exemplified in the naivety of Peter's once foolish notions regarding the "unclean." That means that, yes, as Grace Believers, we're going to dive into the uncharted waters of a kingdom program apostle. While there are many things

inapplicable to the Body, there are many universal truths that were beginning to open up in the book of Acts regarding the "unclean." Let's look...

"And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man. And as he talked with him, he went in, and found many that were come together." Acts 10:25-27

Why was Cornelius falling at Peter's feet? Because he knew that it was not considered proper for a Jew to be in the company of a Gentile through manner that they were about to do. Cornelius was familiar with the customs and expectations of Israel upon Peter, so it served as common sense for him to feel immediate gratitude and hospitality.

"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation;;" Acts 10:28a

Peter defines this himself in a way that might actually make some of us feel uncomfortable momentarily. It'd be like someone coming into our home saying, "I'm not actually suppose to be here and you know this." Perhaps it would come across as a guilt trip if we were not expecting it, but that's beside the point. Consider for the moment that Peter feels it necessary to remind this home of the law.

"but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean." Acts 10:28b

Peter's law has not changed at this point, my friends. It is still "considered unlawful" for him to be there. Regardless of the dream, the vision, and the experience of his being present, it is still deemed unlawful. And yet, Peter expresses to his audience that NO MAN ought to be considered unholy or unclean. Having said that he now believes and acknowledges the revelation from God, he says this:

"Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for:." Acts 10:29a

He came with mercy and grace. Though slightly uncomfortable on some level because of the law he is expected to uphold, he follows the instruction of God to give compassion where the Lord desires there to be an extension of mercy. Most of you taking the time to read this know the rest of the story and the blessed assurances that Cornelius and his family received through the gracious time that Peter spent with them.

So what does this have at all to do with our topic? You, as the Body, have grown a tendency to look at those around you in your own church family who are divorced or are GOING THROUGH a divorce (that being any believer you come into contact with), hear their personal stories, and ascertain judgments of uncleanness about who they are, what kind of people they have been, and what kind of person they will be. This is not our role.

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Ephesians 4:32

Not everything forgiven involves a wrong done against us personally. There isn't a single "divorced" believer I've met in my short life who has seemed eager to jump on the bandwagon of ministry or leadership and there's a reason for that. They KNOW that the church does not entertain divorce as a practice of common standards. They KNOW this because they are adults. But the thing we often fail to see as Body believers is that if they are IN the church with us, it means that they have not gotten divorced and turned to the world. It means that they have made a decision (however approved or disapproved in the eyes of God) and are yet seeking the mercy of the Body. So what is our responsibility to them? Forgiveness.

Perhaps this sounds watered-down or in some way demeaning to the expectations of God's Word, but let me remind you of our self-proclaimed title... we are grace believers. Let me say that again... we are grace believers. To believe in grace (as our title states) is to believe in mercy undeserved. It means that we believe in the grace given us through Christ. Likewise, we are to be gracious as He was gracious to us.

Bear in mind that I am not speaking of being gracious or compassionate to all sin, unrighteous behavior, and impure characteristics. For there are those who may easily walk the road and path of destruction to their own end through means of sexual immorality, malicious gossip, or any other facet of moral disregard. It is not my intention to encourage our grace toward those actions which are seemingly both spiteful and engraved within the roots of sin. Divorce can indeed BE one of those things from time to time, but not always.

No one believer that I know has ever been involved in a divorce (as a spouse) and come across as proud, overjoyed, or ecstatic about the trouble that such a decision will mean. In fact, what seems more common is a fear that this decision to divorce will turn away all their friends, and most importantly the body of believers that they seek to fellowship among. Our responsibility at this stage in their struggle is less about describing their failures of the past, but about giving them hope for the future. They will find that hope when they can once again be embraced and not shunned.

Let me repeat one of the most common observations about how we often handle the divorced (as mentioned earlier in this letter)... The standard response we give to those who make decisions contrary to our teaching, our leading, or our guidance is disdain, disregard, and the plain fact is... WE GIVE UP ON THEM WHEN THEY NEED US MOST!

Don't give up on the people who need you. Though it may appear that they have in some way dishonored your hope for their lives, bear in mind that you can do no more than "urge." From there you have an overwhelming responsibility toward grace.

The dawn has now risen and the intention of my words may or may not have played a role in how you begin to view the "divorced" in your churches, but if nothing else, I hope that it will offer you a reason to re-consider the condemnation that you likely feel toward those who have endured such a turbulent decision. There is no "cure-all" to the common cold of divorce, how we should respond, or what happens next, for each situation holds its own unique storyline. No matter your situation this day or your situations in the past, please know that it is with great admiration to Paul that I hold up the following passage:

"but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 3:13b-14

If anyone had reason to regret, live in the past, be bitter toward those who were disregarding, or focus on the irreversible decisions made... it was Paul. Yet he chooses to focus on the resurrection that he knows is awaiting him in the upward call of Christ Jesus. Paul's focus is a hope for the future. Please, please, please... by all means... remind those divorced of that hope and offer them your right hand of fellowship if indeed they are now living in the light of his grace and mercy.

May you find this letter to be with great compassion. There are many things I will often write focused toward immediate needs of "rightly dividing," but sometimes we need to stop and discuss the matters that have a tendency to break us apart from the inside-out. I have no hope greater than seeing believers re-uniting toward the promise of our inheritance in Christ Jesus.

Thank you for taking the time to read over these words. I trust you will go in the grace and peace of our Lord and Savior.