

Desire & Dominion

Redeeming Marriage after the Fall

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*To my darling wife, Jess.
Your love challenges me daily to be a better man.
I love you. - Tiko*

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Disclaimer: The stories you'll read in these pages are drawn from real counseling clients I've had the privilege of walking alongside. To protect their privacy, I have changed names and altered certain details. This book is written for informational and spiritual encouragement, and is not intended to diagnose, treat, or replace professional counseling, medical advice, or pastoral care. Every individual's situation is unique, and readers are encouraged to seek qualified professional support when needed.

Introduction

This book was born out of a conversation I had with a wonderful Christian woman I had known for many years. I knew her story and I knew her heart for Jesus. Now in her 70's, "Julie" came to me for counseling disappointed and frustrated with her husband. Her first marriage had ended decades earlier when she was a young mother with small children. He left to pursue an affair, leaving her with nothing but a broken heart. Julie was resilient, though, and slowly rebuilt her life to become a successful businesswoman. She poured herself into her kids, was active in her church, and became a stellar example of what it looked like to have faith and trust in God. She remained single for nearly thirty years, and devoted her life entirely to her daughters, who both grew to be amazing Christian women.

Then it happened! After years of waiting, God finally brought her another husband! He was a godly man who shared her values and faith. Julie's enthusiasm could hardly be contained! Restoration at last! They had a beautiful courtship and were married, but the excitement was short-lived as his brokenness began to overshadow their lives. He started experiencing health issues and soon became moody, irritated, and angry—his words

piercing her soul. The early joy they had experienced together as a couple melted away to reveal his embittered and calloused heart.

“Joel, I can’t believe I’m in this situation,” she said through tears. “I did everything right.”

The conversation was troubling for me. I knew Julie’s character and her love for the Lord. She had struggled, saved, and scraped her entire life with hard-won success. She was tenacious, faithful, prayerful, and kind. How could God allow her to be deceived by this man and let her dream of a second chance marriage become another nightmare?

Maybe you’ve felt that way too. Is your marriage not what you dreamed it would be? Perhaps you’ve tried praying, pleading, even pretending, yet the ache remains. You may wonder, *Does God see me? Does He care about my marriage?*

As a faith-based counselor, the counseling couch gives me a unique perspective on Christian marriages. Through rivers of tears, I have seen, time and again, the depth of frustrated desire within Christian wives to be *one* with their husbands—to be loved, valued, and protected. Yet, so often, that desire goes unfulfilled, and the wife experiences profound emotional pain that is directly related to him. No matter how strong, independent, or resilient she is, there is an inextricable connection that leaves her vulnerably tied to her husband.

Several cultures around the world observe a “marriage knot” ceremony as part of their wedding traditions, which represents the union of two individuals into one enduring bond. The knot is woven together in a way that cannot easily be undone. Each strand remains distinct, like the individual, but is now part of a new, tightly bound interconnected identity. In Celtic and Norse traditions, the hands of the couple were literally tied together with a knot and cord, which is where we get the saying “tying the knot.” Though meant to symbolize unity, for many women, the marriage knot also symbolizes a type of emotional bondage—where he goes, she is bound to follow. If he leads, protects, and loves her well, they will both reap the benefits of his positive role in the relationship. If not, the wife will suffer immeasurably from the husband’s lack of care for her. Though marriage should be equal in terms of mutual love, respect, and emotional reciprocity, the

ramifications of a husband's disengagement is lopsided—she will usually suffer more emotionally than he ever will.

In counseling, I hear the same lines repeated from women: “I thought I was marrying a good Christian man. I did everything right. I feel tricked. I’m angry and disappointed. I feel like we’re just roommates.” Some stories are worse than others. The difficult ones are those which recount years of infidelity. Sometimes the husband has an addiction to drugs, alcohol, or pornography. At worst, he’s physically and emotionally abusive; at best, he has a lack of empathy, is often ruled by passivity, and is emotionally disengaged. The wives are unequivocally racked with pain and regret.

I didn’t write this book to bash husbands. There are many good and godly men who daily give the best of themselves loving and protecting fiercely. But there are others who struggle with emotional volatility, complacency, and apathy, leaving their wives and families vulnerable and exposed.

The evidence is everywhere. Approximately 75% of Christian men have reported consuming pornography at some level.¹ Over one-third of Christian men have engaged in extramarital affairs.² In the United States, adult church congregations are approximately 61% female and 39% male. On any given Sunday, about 23% of married women attend church without their husbands.³ Approximately 80% of children raised in Christian homes disengage from the church by age 18, a trend linked to insufficient spiritual leadership by fathers at home.⁴ Divorce rates for Christian couples remain about the same as for non-religious couples.⁵

The void of male leadership in the home isn’t surprising, I suppose, except to the Christian wives who are painfully disappointed in the husbands they’ve prayed for. Sometimes the cracks in his character are noticed immediately after marriage; other times, some catastrophe is the catalyst for relational collapse. Often, the chaos of life simply pulls couples apart.

One young wife I counseled had saved her virginity for marriage, thoroughly vetting potential suitors for sexual sobriety, “I made it clear that porn was a dealbreaker for me,” she said. A week before her wedding, she found out that her husband-to-be had a “big problem” with pornography. She forgave him and they

worked through it, only to find out later he was texting a female friend and lying about the extent of the relationship. When confronted, “He turned into some kind of baby—a beaten puppy. He played the victim instead of communicating,” she said. They hadn’t been sexually intimate in months despite being married for less than two years.

The term *toxic masculinity* has been popularized recently with some men presenting aggressive and controlling personality traits, which are, no doubt, very harmful to women and families. *Toxic passivity*, though, seems to be the greater issue in marriages, and I certainly see it often in the counseling office. Toxic passivity is a pattern of emotional disengagement in men that hinders healthy functioning in relationships and personal development. It manifests as inaction, emotional abdication, or conflict avoidance, often under the guise of being peaceful, easygoing, or non-confrontational. While this might seem benign or even virtuous, toxic passivity can be deeply harmful. Women with these passive husbands frequently feel unseen, unsupported, and burdened with leading the family practically and emotionally. This results in an imbalanced marriage, where the woman may begin to feel more like a mother than a partner. Over time, this breeds resentment, anger, and emotional disconnection in both husband and wife.

The pendulum swings wildly from one extreme to the other. Either the husband is angry, insecure, and controlling, or he is a shell of a man, with little-to-no motivation or emotional engagement. He is either a workaholic and thrill-seeker, or consumed with boyish behaviors, like video games and pornography. The wife’s frustration mounts, the relationship pressure builds, and the marriage breaks down.

One client recently asked me, “How does he not notice something is wrong?” It’s tragic when a wife makes the realization that her husband may never change, and the disappointment I hear regularly from Christian wives is disheartening. Many come to me in crises of faith. Where is God in all of this? Why did He allow her to marry this man? Has God abandoned her? These are tough questions with no easy answers, but some clarity can be found if we go back to the very beginning.

And the Lord God said unto the serpent,

Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. (Genesis 3:14-17, KJV)

You probably know the story. Satan, the cunning “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14), deceived Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. The forbidden fruit was tempting and “when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). There’s a lot here to unpack in this one verse. Suffice to say for now, the greater tragedy is Adam standing idly by, watching his wife being tempted by the serpent which led to both their downfalls. As a result of their disobedience, a curse was pronounced upon both the man and the woman, and we are still under judgment to this day (Rom. 8:20).

The man’s curse was a physical judgment and forced him to become a relentless working machine. Adam and his male lineage would sweat and toil for every ounce of fruit from their labor. A man is cursed to wrestle nearly his entire life with the physical and financial strain of providing for his family. Men are bound indissolubly to work, and their labor usually takes constant and immense effort. They think about work even when they’re not working, they talk about work when they’re away from work, and

their stress about work causes them to serve it in a near slave-master way. For man, labor is his cursed identity. Whether he literally sweats as a physical laborer, or sweats under the pressure of a white-collar boardroom, men groan under the weight they feel to work and provide which plagues them all their days.

Because the woman was the first to succumb to temptation and eat the forbidden fruit, her curse was twofold—both physical and emotional. When we think about God’s pronouncement of judgment on Eve and her female offspring, we tend to focus on the pain of childbearing. Indeed, humans do have one of the most painful birthing processes among mammals, largely due to human babies’ proportionally bigger heads. This makes passage through the birth canal narrower and more difficult. A woman’s birth canal is also slightly twisted, requiring the baby to rotate during birth, increasing her pain even further. A woman’s curse of physical pain in childbirth is clearly seen. Every woman can remember the labor and delivery room table with all its groaning and pushing, but the joy of a newborn quickly causes women to forget about their pain (John 16:21). The second part of the curse, though, is unseen, not as easily forgotten, and applies to all women—not just mothers.

The second curse is this: “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Gen. 3:16, KJV). For the entirety of her life, she will have to endure emotional angst concerning her husband. Just as man is tied to his work, so she will be tied to him in ambivalent desire, ruminating about their relationship and often evaluating the veracity of his love for her. At times she will struggle with him, wrestling for control, through her own internal dissonance of needing security from him, while often feeling unsafe with the one she’s drawn to. The woman’s curse is pervasive, infiltrating her body, mind, and soul. It reaches far into childhood as little girls dream of the man they’ll one day marry, fantasizing in anticipation about their picture-perfect family and the husband who will love and protect them. Even for unmarried women, the longing to be in a relationship with a man is often an unabated, frustrated desire.

This is a politically incorrect statement in our modern culture, but *woman was made for man*—not the other way around. The Apostle Paul affirmed this in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9: “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man

created for woman, but woman for man.” God made woman from man’s rib and “brought her *to him*” (Gen. 2:22). In many ways she was man’s gift, glorious beyond words. The woman was fashioned to enrich his life, and man was to protect her life with his. Her name, Eve, meant “life” or “life-producer” but this was so much more than her ability to procreate. Adam *needed* her. When God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18), God knew Adam was ill-equipped and out-of-balance by himself. The word “helper” translated into English from the Hebrew word “ēzer” is a poor interpretation; a better translation would be “sustainer beside him.” Yes, Eve would create life, but she would also *sustain* it.

The phrase, “a helper suitable for him” (“ēzer kēnegdô”) is interpreted “opposite to” or “corresponding to.” This indicates balance, mutuality, or counterpart—not subservience. Moreover, *ēzer* can also be translated with overtones of rescue. The word is used in passages like Psalm 33:20, “Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our *help* and our shield,” and Psalm 70:5, “You are my *help* and my deliverer.” In every Scriptural instance outside Genesis 2, the word *ēzer* refers to powerful, life-saving help, most often found in God Himself. So, when God calls Eve “a helper suitable for [Adam],” He is not giving her a lesser role. He uses a word that elevates her position to one of rescue and sustenance, showing Eve as a resourceful, essential, and life-sustaining partner.

God often uses my wife, Jess, as my rescuer. She rescues me from my stressors, comforts me in my afflictions, and *ēzers* me beyond words. Many days, after hearing heart-wrenching horror stories in the counseling office, I’ll come home and lay my head in her lap. She’ll run her fingers through my hair as my vicarious trauma melts away into peace. I’m far less tempted and tried because I have Jess in my life. She is my counterbalance, mutual partner, life-beautifier and sustainer.

I’ve heard marriage sermons where the minister says something along the lines of, “God didn’t take a piece of Adam’s skull so that Eve could be over him, nor a piece of Adam’s foot so that Eve would be underneath him, rather He took Adam’s rib because she is equal with him.” Eve was not meant to be in lordship over Adam nor a passive follower. She was his equal in many ways but *dependent* nonetheless because she came out of

Adam—a piece of him was forever within her. The rib was unseen, and the unseen curse was that she would forever be bound to him because he was *literally a part of her*.

Though most men pursue marriage and family, that's usually not the singular focus of their lives. Men are internally hard-wired to go outside the home to protect and provide while enjoying exploration and external challenges. Hunting and fishing aren't just hobbies for men; it's their nature to provide, even if they only catch-and-release. A man enjoys romantic relationships and the challenge of pursuing a woman, but he also enjoys hiking mountain trails and risky business ventures—with or without his wife.

A woman, though, is usually more focused on her home, family, and husband. If I had a dollar for every time I heard a wife express, "I'd wish he'd stay home more with me," or a husband who said, "She never wants me to go anywhere," I'd be a much wealthier man! Obviously, a woman can have leadership roles, adventure, and external interests outside the home, but she feels an inherent draw to her husband; where he goes is most often where she wants to be.

It's interesting to note that, since Adam was the first to be created, he had a season—perhaps days, months, years, or even centuries—of being without Eve. In Genesis 2, we find him alone tending to the garden of Eden, naming the animals, and living in solitude. Adam was content by himself, while his complete purpose awaited companionship. This insight might give wives a bit more understanding regarding man's view of his partner in marriage. As his wife, your husband should certainly value and prioritize you; the weight of his interest, though, is variable. Like his father, Adam, he can experience a measure of contentment without you and may even long for solitude occasionally. His need for these moments by himself is difficult for many women to understand. Why is he always tinkering alone in his shop, or scouting for deer by himself in the woods? Why does he like gaming so much instead of spending time with his wife? Why is he always playing on his phone? It's not that he's rejecting you; he's simply remembering a faint echo of how it was in the beginning.

Eve, on the other hand, knew *only* companionship. Shortly after opening her eyes, Adam was present with her, and

throughout the rest of the creation account, there's no mention of Adam and Eve ever being separated. Though he knew a former life without her, he was all she had ever known. Thus, the curse brings anxiety to women with the unrelenting question, *Where is he?* It's more than physical proximity. *Where is he emotionally? What is the status of our relationship? Why is he in a bad mood? Is he allured by other women? Who is he talking to at work? What is he looking at online?* And the most pressing question, *Is there something wrong with me?*

I've seen this push-pull of her wanting to be close to him, and his need for space, create conflict in marriages. Here again is the curse in action: She wants to feel close to him, often feels apprehensive when he's gone, and worries about their relationship when he's out of view of her watchful eye. Though she may have other roles as a mother, teacher, businesswoman, artist, etc., she is destined to be acutely attuned to her husband and his every attitude, word, and action. Call it a *woman's intuition* or emotional perceptiveness, she is so attentive to her relationship, even the smallest change puts her on high alert. One wife said to me, "I can literally *feel* when something is wrong with him—it's like a physical pain on my inside."

No, you're not crazy, insecure, dramatic, or even out-of-bounds with your expectations—you're under a curse! Your preoccupation with your partner (both to you and to him) can feel mildly annoying or, at extremes, like an obsession. It can seem *controlling* but it's really about *connection*; even his subtle *detachment* ignites greater *desire* within you. And when your desire toward him is unmet, you will often feel unfulfilled.

My hope in writing this book is to bring clarity to your internal struggle as a wife, and to address the disappointment so many Christian women experience in relationship with their husbands. If you've ever felt unseen, unloved, or unsure if God notices your marriage, this book will remind you that He does. It will help you trace the threads of God's design through your brokenness, show you how to grieve honestly, and guide you toward hope, healing, and redemption in Christ—even when your husband falls short. I also hope to show a way forward through difficult marriages using a Biblical counseling model and insights I've gleaned from working with hundreds of Christian couples. Appendices for

further clarification of difficult topics in Christian marriages can be found at the end of this book.

The partaking of the forbidden fruit brought a curse upon all of us, male and female, which reverberates through every generation of the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. Add to *original sin* our daily struggles with selfishness, pride, lust, unforgiveness, resentment, and the like, and it's a wonder that any marriage survives! But God never leaves us in our sin, and He brings redemption to every curse, as we will soon see.

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no ... but in Him it is always yes. For all the promises of God find their yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put His seal on us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Cor. 1:18-22)

God has entrusted to us many great and precious promises, and you can trust Him at His word. No matter what the outcome with your husband, there is the promise of redemption and better things to come—and that is a guarantee.

One

A Frustrated Desire

“Thy desire shall be to thy husband ...” (Gen. 3:16)

Countless women have sat on my counseling couch frustrated with their husbands. It’s usually more than he needs to pick up his dirty clothes, give her extra help with the kids, or not work so much. They can’t quite put a finger on it, but they have a frustrated desire for something more from him. Underneath the daily irritations lies a deeper ache, a question of whether she truly matters to him and her place in his life. It isn’t about *complaints* but *closeness*. A woman may have her husband’s *help*, but does she have his *heart*? A wife doesn’t want merely his *partnership in tasks* but looks for her *presence in his life*.

A woman may also carry a quiet frustration within herself, wondering why the relationship feels so hard. His emotional responses, or lack thereof, weigh heavily on her heart. She clings to the hope that one day he will change, while at the same time trying to navigate both his actions and her own emotions in an exhausting search for safety. For some, the worst part about the relationship is facing each day with a lingering ache of rejection.

The present cause of this ongoing frustration can be found in the past with the woman's curse, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband" (Gen. 3:16, KJV). In Hebrew, the word for "desire" is "teshuqah," an unusual term meaning a "deep longing" or "craving." It appears only three times in Scripture: Here in Genesis 3:16; in Genesis 4:7 ("sin's desire is for you" spoken to Cain); and in Song of Songs 7:10 ("his desire is for me," describing lovers). The woman's desire in Genesis 3:16 is the same as the man's desire in Song of Songs 7:10. In these verses, the desire is good and holy, as it should be. It is reciprocal—the man and woman deeply *teshuqah* each other; but "sin's desire" in Genesis 4:7 keeps them apart, as if it were a wall between the two other references.

The entrance of sin into human relationships, followed by the Edenic curse, multiplied difficulty for both man and woman. For the man, labor became enormously more burdensome. For the woman, however, two areas of her life were directly impacted in parallel ways, "I will greatly increase your pain ..." and "Your desire will be for your husband ..." The matching Hebrew sentence structure in Genesis 3:16 indicates that both pain and desire are intensified, and the symmetry points to a double amplification: Greater pain in childbearing and greater desire for her husband. In both cases, the woman's longing is heightened—longing for children and longing for union—yet both longings are now intertwined with frustration: In childbirth through suffering, and in marriage through the intensity of her desire.

What was meant to bring joy is now mixed with struggle. A woman still longs to bear children, but that longing is now accompanied by pain, labor, and sometimes loss. She still yearns for closeness with her husband, but that desire is now tangled with conflict, hurt, and often disappointment. As the joy of childbirth is laced with sorrow, the joy of intimacy with her husband is shadowed by unmet longings. The curse left her with an amplified desire that disrupted the harmony between man and woman, producing relational struggles that manifest in several ways.

1. Possessiveness and Control

What begins as love and longing can slip into possessiveness. She may feel she needs to be with her husband constantly,

resenting his independence or friendships. She may try to control his schedule, decisions, hobbies and interests, under the guise of “concern.” The desire becomes less about union and more about ownership.

2. Idolatry of the Husband

Her sense of worth may become entirely tethered to him. She looks to him as her savior, source of happiness, or sole identity. Disappointment and bitterness rise when he inevitably fails to be perfect. This matches the Biblical theme of misplaced worship. What should be directed toward God gets misplaced onto the spouse.

3. Smothering Affection

Desire can cross into suffocation: Overcommunicating, needing constant reassurance, and not allowing space for silence or individuality. She attempts to merge identities so completely that the husband feels stripped of autonomy. This kind of emotional dependency can erode intimacy instead of building it.

4. Manipulative Dependence

Desire can become a tool for control. She may withhold affection to punish him or over-give affection to manipulate him into certain actions. “If you really love me, you’ll ...” becomes the framework of relating. Desire loses its purity and becomes entangled with power dynamics.

5. Insecurity Masked as Desire

Her longing may spring from her fear of abandonment, rejection, or being unloved, which leads to clinging. Small cues from him (a late text, a tired response) can be misinterpreted, causing constant pressure on the husband. Instead of drawing them closer, the insecurity drives a wedge.

6. Competition with His Leadership

Her desire can become competitive by wanting to be the one in control, to lead, to override. She might resent his decisions or undermine his role while still craving his leadership. This tension creates a cycle of striving, frustration, and resentment.

7. Loss of Self

Her entire life revolves around him, and she neglects her own calling, gifts, or friendships. This self-erasure, while seeming selfless, pressures him to be her everything, which he can never fulfill. It robs the marriage of mutual enrichment.

The curse magnified a woman's natural longing for her husband, bending it under the weight of sin so that what was designed for joy becomes distorted. But the curse also affected her own self-worth, leaving her vulnerable to her husband's estimation and approval. When his love is steady, she feels secure; but when it wavers, she feels diminished. Seasons of emotional distance—whether marked by financial pressures, parenting demands, illness, or simply the weariness of time—only exacerbate her insecurities. Her sense of identity is often tied to how he responds to her, as though her reflection is somehow found in his eyes rather than in God's.

A young, engaged woman came to my office, her life in utter shambles. Her employment was in jeopardy, her finances failing, her life choices more than questionable. Yet she giddily sat on my couch gushing about her long-distance fiancé and the additional credit card debt she was incurring from plane tickets to visit him. Her desire for him remained so strong it was as if she barely noticed her world crashing around her. "I crave to be in his presence," she said. Another mid-30's client, devastated by a sudden break-up, lamented, "I felt thrown away like a piece of trash. It's like the last six years didn't matter." She had ignored a parade of red flags holding onto the relationship out of fear of being alone.

What my clients expressed so intensely reflects a larger reality about the nature of desire. A woman's longing does not simply fade when life unravels or when the man she loves brings difficulty into her world. Instead, it often clings more tightly, looking for an anchor, even when it comes at great personal cost. This contradiction of craving regardless of dysfunction points to the ancient description of Eve's desire, a longing that endures despite the brokenness of the relationship and the pain a husband brings.

"Jennifer" was married for thirty years with grown children. Her husband was a workaholic, had multiple affairs throughout their marriage (one with her best friend), and he struggled on-and-off for years with substance abuse. He was borderline emotionally abusive, condescending, generally defensive and dismissive whenever she voiced any concerns. Gaslighting was his *modus operandi*, and he constantly told her he was waiting on *her*

to “get it together” so they could move forward in their “stuck” relationship. Leaving him was a complicated option, and she was plagued with the thought of him dropping another bombshell affair. I regularly met with Jennifer for two years, and the session focus was usually the same: She didn’t want to stay, but she didn’t want to leave, “Part of me is fed up and the other part still wants to be with him,” she said.

This inner conflict was Jennifer’s affliction, her desire unfulfilled. She kept holding onto the hope of being noticed, despite rarely being seen. She had her flaws, of course, but she remained loyal and steadfast through many turbulent years. She was dutiful in her role as a wife, diligent in being a good homemaker and was the epitome of being “submissive” despite feeling unloved, lied to, and often mistreated. The trust violations had taken their toll, and Jennifer suffered with debilitating anxiety.

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the core idea is that Eve’s craving, *teshuqah*, represents the woman’s abiding desire for her husband though he brings her pain. Whether understood as physical passion, emotional dependence, or obedient deferment, it binds her to the man’s care and control as a lingering consequence of the Fall.⁶ This interpretation is not a prescriptive ideal, but a descriptive reality of life after Eden. The first woman (and by extension all women) would look to her husband with an emotional yearning, even if he causes suffering, and that desire would define her relationship to him in a fallen world.

The teachings of the Jewish Talmud hold that a woman still desires her husband even though she may suffer because of him, using a woman’s labor and delivery as a metaphor. The curse of pain in childbirth is both literal and figurative, in the sense that when a woman is in childbirth pain, she swears never to be intimate with her husband again; but God’s decree ensures “you will return to your desire for your husband” and make love again.⁷ The medieval Jewish teacher, Rabbi Ramban, wrote that a woman’s intense longing for her husband causes her to endure the pains of childbearing, and still she almost compulsively returns to him. She is *driven towards* union with him in a way that defies explanation.⁸ Despite the physical pain he causes through childbirth, her longing for him always comes back.

Truly, lovemaking is a risk. A woman takes a gamble every time she is intimate with her husband during her childbearing years. Great joy is there but so is the potential for great pain in pregnancy, and in some cases, even death. Why would a woman take such a risk? The fulfilled desire of complete union with her husband—physically, emotionally, spiritually—trumps everything else.

A young wife and mother came to me devastated by her husband's closeted drug addiction and angry outbursts. She had been raped by another man before getting married and said, "Every time we have sex when my husband is drunk, it feels like the rape is happening all over again." Her nausea-inducing roller coaster of a marriage had lasted a decade; and yet, she stayed, wrestling with desire and pain.

In relationships it's inevitable we are going to hurt one another. Angry words and actions pervade every marriage at some point. But for most women, the desire for emotional connection with her husband, despite the deep pain he causes, is hard to reconcile. For some, it becomes almost an *anxious neurosis*, a continual worry which leads to emotional lability and an *OCD fixation* on their husband's behavior.

Early interpreters understood this desire as an "unfulfilled appetite." The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, renders "desire" as "apostrophe" ("turning toward"). Commentators have read "your desire for your husband" as describing a profound yearning the woman would have toward her mate, despite the pain he causes; often frustrated, yet always hopeful. Other conservative translators interpret "your desire shall be for your husband" more benignly, as the wife's ongoing orientation toward her husband which, even if good, results in a vulnerability to his words and actions. Eve's "desire" in Genesis 3:16 was widely understood as her continued attachment to Adam—whether that's out of longing, need, or even a *contentious* desire that nonetheless leaves her dependent. The wife's longing reinforces her dependence: She craves her husband's affection yet must wait passively as he dictates the terms. These interpretations underscore that, after the Fall, the woman is no longer autonomous; her *urges toward* her husband in the sense of

continually turning to him in unrealized expectation and yielding to his authority.

I'm reminded of the love triangle between Jacob, Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29. In the story, Jacob agrees to work for his uncle, Laban, for seven years in exchange for an arranged marriage to his younger daughter, Rachel. Jacob deeply loved Rachel who was "beautiful in form and appearance" and the years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen. 29:20). After seven years were completed, Laban tricked Jacob on his wedding night by substituting Rachel's older sister, Leah, in the darkness of the nuptial tent. Customs dictated that the older daughter was to be married before the younger daughter. Jacob didn't realize the swap had happened (probably due to lots of wine) and protested his uncle's deception the next morning, so Rachel was also given as a wife to Jacob.

Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" and Scripture recounts Leah's frustration and desire to be loved. She uses an incredibly strong word to convey her feelings of distance between she and her husband—it was an "affliction" (Gen. 29:32). The Hebrew word here, "onyi," can also be translated "misery." Leah isn't just physically suffering; she is in misery, not only with her own emotional pain, but also with social humiliation. Leah is second to Rachel and everyone knows it.

The tension in the relationship is palatable as we read the story. Leah tries to please Jacob by bearing him sons, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons," she says (Gen. 29:34). Later in Genesis 30, she leverages sex to gain his affections.

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came from the field

in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. (Gen. 30:14-16)

Most women won't readily admit to manipulating their husbands with sex, but when desire is unmet, it's an easy go-to. Withholding intimacy, offering it conditionally, or using it as a bargaining chip can feel like a form of power in an otherwise powerless moment. It is seldom premeditated or malicious, yet it surfaces as an instinctive attempt to regain a sense of being loved or in control. Over time, however, what seems like a solution can quietly erode trust and intimacy, leaving both husband and wife feeling more distant and unsatisfied.

Ultimately, Leah was disappointed by not winning Jacob's affections and remained second best to Rachel. It's interesting that mandrake is interpreted as "love apple" in Hebrew.⁹ The fruit of mandrakes were considered to possess aphrodisiac and fertility-related properties and were extremely valuable in ancient times. In essence, Leah gave away a precious and meaningful commodity which could have swayed Jacob's desire towards her.

What have you given up in a play for your husband's affections? One wife said to me, "I tried to be thinner, prettier, whatever he needed from me—but it was never enough." Behind her words was the exhaustion of a woman who had bartered away pieces of herself, only to find the affection she craved still out of reach. Countless women can identify with her story, trading security, boundaries, or self-respect for the fleeting possibility of acceptance, only to discover that the deeper hunger of the heart remains unsatisfied.

Why, Leah, do you keep trying to get Jacob's attention after so much rejection? He obviously loves Rachel more. Why can't you accept that and move on? This story has been painfully repeated for thousands of years—a woman unloved, unvalued, unseen; yet her desire is *still* towards her husband. The heaviness of Leah's longing lingers as the years pass. After giving Jacob his sixth son, she is still painfully hopeful, "... now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons" (Gen. 30:20).

Maybe your husband doesn't have a mistress, but he has a misfocus. He's consumed with work. He plays video games all night. He's a perpetual sportsman or sports enthusiast. He's distracted and detached. Like Leah, you've tried to get his attention in a myriad of ways. You've prayed, cried, argued, pleaded, maybe you've gone to counseling; but still, you are unable to catch his gaze and your desire remains unfulfilled.

Marie Louise of Austria was married to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1810, after he divorced his beloved first wife, Josephine, who could not give him a male heir. Marie Louise was only eighteen, shy, and politically pressured into marriage as a diplomatic pawn. Although Napoleon was initially affectionate, he was still attached to Josephine and emotionally unavailable to Marie Louise. She felt isolated and unloved, especially compared to the memory of Josephine, who had captivated Napoleon in a way she couldn't.

Marie Louise adopted a submissive, sexually responsive role early in the relationship. Napoleon, known for his dominant and impatient personality, praised her for being more fertile than Josephine. She focused on bearing him a child, which she did within a year, briefly strengthening their bond. She portrayed herself as innocent, obedient, and loyal, playing into Napoleon's ego and his need to feel adored. Her letters to Napoleon were full of flattery, dependence, and affection, even when she didn't feel emotionally fulfilled. Marie Louise rarely challenged him, even though she felt homesick and neglected. This emotional manipulation by omission—downplaying her feelings to preserve his attention—was her survival tactic.

While Napoleon appreciated her obedience and beauty, the emotional connection never matched what he had with Josephine. After his downfall and exile, Marie Louise never reunited with him. Instead, she found a lover and eventually married him secretly, suggesting she had grown weary of suppressing her needs and had moved on emotionally. It's funny how history repeats itself: Emotionally distant husband + Unfulfilled wife = Affair.

Whether queen or commoner, past or present, a woman's response to unmet desire is an attempt at emotional survival. Knowingly or not, she'll sometimes lean into strategies of withdrawal, subtle pressure, or comparison in her effort to be seen and heard. Other times, she'll withhold affection, layer on guilt,

use intimacy as influence, cast herself as the victim, or let frustrations spill out in passive-aggressive remarks. This vicious cycle rarely fulfills her desire and leaves her wrestling with guilt, frustration, and a deeper sense of isolation.

The woman's curse of Genesis 3:16 is subtle, pervasive, and extends even to healthy marriages. Though she has a good husband, there is regularly an emotional tension, unrealized yearning, and a *desire for more* that never quite goes away. This creates frustration on both sides as husbands grapple with their wives' expectations, which they often believe are unrealistic. One husband related a sentiment to me that many guys feel: "She's chasing a fantasy dude she thinks exists." Another man told me in counseling, "It's always about the next thing. As soon as I feel like I'm doing better in one area, she finds something else to complain about." And here is where the danger lurks, as unfulfilled desire leads to dissatisfaction, comparison, and fantasy.

A young wife came for counseling, having been married for six years with two small children. She said her husband was "a great partner, he's not doing anything particularly wrong." He was kind, affectionate, a good father, but "I'm miserable in this marriage," she complained. She had lost weight recently and was trying to better herself, while he remained unmotivated. "I feel like I'm changing as a person," but it appeared he wasn't changing enough for her satisfaction. "I have an expectation, but I can't say exactly what it is. I have a storybook ideal of what I think our relationship should be," she said. As we talked about her enigmatic marital discontentment, she concluded, "I'm always looking for more. Why can't I accept and be happy?"

Remember "sin's desire is for you"? Sin was hard at work trying to divide her heart and lure her away from her spouse. She had allowed her irritation at his lack of change to shift her desire away from her husband to the sin of her own expectations of happiness. If left unchecked, her secret dissatisfaction would lead to an open, damaging expression in any number of ways.

The Apostle Paul said it this way: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). It only takes a pinch of leaven (yeast) to infiltrate the loaf of bread—so it is with sin. The smallest secret thought, when cultivated, can grow to ruin the heart. If not quickly

dealt with, a woman's "desire to thy husband" can become "sin's desire" leading to destruction.

"Brenda" and "Carl" came to me having been married for 13 years with two children. "Over the years, it's been clear that we didn't have a strong emotional connection," she complained. "I feel like I'm not understood." Carl worked a lot, had trouble communicating, and a hurricane here in Southwest Louisiana had made for a very difficult year. Her dad was a preacher, and she grew up with deep faith, but her devotion was wavering because of their marital crisis. Carl's response to her, though, remained consistent, "I haven't given up that her faith is going to be restored."

Sadly, Brenda did eventually leave Carl. Her only real indictment was that he wasn't the best communicator, and she needed more from him emotionally. He and the kids were devastated, and the family forever fractured. She gave him primary custody of their children to pursue her happiness. I counseled Carl for several months afterwards, helping him adjust to his new normal. My conclusion was that Carl was a great guy who loved his wife. He worked hard, treasured his family, lived out his faith at home, and wanted to make the marriage work; but she wanted *more*. Her desire became sin's desire which eventually destroyed their home.

We see a Biblical example of sin's desire destroying a relationship in the story of David and Michal. Michal was the beautiful daughter of King Saul. She deeply loved David (1 Samuel 18:20), which is a rare statement in the Bible to say a woman loved a man first. David returned her love, with the price of her hand in marriage being one hundred Philistine foreskins, at her father's request (now *that's* love). David went over and above that price and killed two hundred men to secure his bride. Michal was David's first wife, his first true love, and she was proudly beside him for at least a decade as he rose to power from famed shepherd boy to king over Israel. She also bravely put her own life at risk, daringly helping David escape her father's wrath, as Saul sought to kill her husband.

Let's look at the story.

Saul sent men to David's house to watch it and to kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, warned him, "If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed." So, Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped. Then Michal took an idol and laid it on the bed, covering it with a garment and putting some goats' hair at the head. When Saul sent the men to capture David, Michal said, "He is ill." Then Saul sent the men back to see David and told them, "Bring him up to me in his bed so that I may kill him." But when the men entered, there was the idol in the bed, and at the head was some goats' hair. Saul said to Michal, "Why did you deceive me like this and send my enemy away so that he escaped?" Michal told him, "He said to me, 'Let me get away. Why should I kill you?'" (1 Samuel 19:11-17)

Michal played a key role in David's rise to power, embodying the saying, "Behind every good man is a good woman." Yet her love and loyalty gradually shifted. Over time, she seemed to withdraw from David—emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Whether it was jealousy or offense at his growing influence and popularity, Scripture doesn't say, but her resentment clearly deepened. By the time David brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem, celebrating by dancing before the Lord with all his might, Michal "despised him in her heart" (2 Samuel 6:16, 20–23). Instead of sharing in his joy, she accused him of disgraceful behavior.

Michal chose *appearance* and *status* over *worship* and *relationship*. The text implies that this hardened response led to a severance in her relationship with David, and she remained childless until her death, a significant tragedy in Hebrew culture (2 Samuel 6:23). Michal had been part of a powerful love story and marriage with David, a man after God's own heart. Yet she allowed bitterness, contempt, pride and resentment to rob her of intimacy

and legacy. She traded a connection to a godly man for a moment of scorn rooted in her own offense.

The turning of the heart happens so subtly, doesn't it? One small annoyance here, a covetous desire there, then compromise pounces like a crouching lion (Gen. 4:7). Perhaps part of the problem with Michal's heart was her spiritual compromise. In 1 Samuel 19:13, we're told that Michal used a large human-shaped household idol, a *teraphim*, as a decoy for the royal guards sent to kill David. Some scholars believe the teraphim in the bed foreshadows the fracture between Michal and David: She used an *image* to stand in for the *real man*. This speaks to *illusion* over *intimacy*, and *deception* over *devotion*. It's also a narrative echo of mismatched spiritual values in marriage which often create conflict.

Michal's use of an idol was not just a clever escape trick; it was a subtle red flag. The idol suggests her heart was contaminated by *a little leaven*, not fully devoted to God, and may hint at why her relationship with David ultimately failed. Her desire became sin's desire, and the presence of an idol in the house of the man who would bring the Ark of God to Jerusalem is loaded with meaning.

Many wives, like Michal, can be tempted to clothe their choices in reasoning that feels justified, even spiritual, but ultimately undermines the marriage covenant. Consider some of the common ways it might show up today:

“I’ll be sexually distant because I disapprove of his actions.”

Michal put the idol in the bed—the symbol of deepest marital intimacy. She replaced David with a lifeless image. Many wives today are tempted to substitute their real relationship with something more controllable, convenient, or emotionally safer.

“He used to be my focus, but now it’s all about the kids.”

Children are a blessing but when they become the center of a woman's identity, the marriage suffers. The husband gets sidelined, emotional intimacy is diverted, and the relationship fades. The idol of motherhood replaces covenant partnership.

“I’m doing God’s work, he’ll understand.”

Even spiritual activity can become an idol if it replaces connection with your spouse; even a “godly” idol is still an idol if it distances you from your husband. The idol of significance can feel holy but leave the bed cold.

“If only he were more like...”

This could be an emotional attachment to romance novels, past lovers, or social media influences. Maybe Michal’s bitterness grew because David was no longer who she imagined. The idol of imagination disrespects the real man God gave.

“I haven’t forgotten what he did.”

Michal may have resented David for taking other wives, or for neglecting her as he rose to prominence. Her unresolved offense became the lens through which she saw him dance before the Lord. The idol of past pain creates false justification to harden the heart.

“I don’t need him. I can do this on my own.”

Like Michal placing the idol, she’s managing the crisis herself. Some women protect themselves by staying emotionally self-reliant, substituting vulnerability with control. The idol of self-sufficiency keeps the heart unavailable.

It’s tempting to take control when we feel wronged. Many scholars believe the meaning of Genesis 3:16 is a woman’s drive to dominate, some translators reading the verse bluntly: “And you will desire to control your husband” (NLT). The harmony between man and woman would now be marred by a power struggle. The woman, who was created as an equal partner and strong helper, would be tempted to resist or overturn her husband’s leadership; her desire to control rooted in her insecurity towards him. In response, the man, whose role was meant to be one of a loving leader, would tend toward either passivity or harsher rule. This isn’t a prescription for how marriage should work—it’s a diagnosis of how sin would twist God’s established order.

Jezebel stands in Scripture as a vivid example of sin’s desire growing to supplant her husband through control. Rather than supporting Ahab, she usurped his role and pulled him deeper into sin. Scripture portrays Ahab as weak and passive, but instead of using her influence to encourage righteousness, Jezebel seized

control, manipulating her husband's authority for her own ends. When Ahab sulked over his inability to purchase Naboth's vineyard, it was Jezebel who took charge by devising a murderous scheme, writing letters in his name, and arranging Naboth's death (see 1 Kings 21). By taking authority that was not hers, she placed herself above her husband, above God's law, and outside the protective order God designed.

The consequences were severe. Jezebel became infamous for leading Israel into idolatry and for persecuting God's prophets. Her violent end was foretold by Elijah: She would be devoured by dogs at Jezreel (2 Kings 9:10). Her death—thrown from a window, trampled by horses, and left unburied—symbolized divine judgment and the collapse of her illegitimate power. Jezebel's story warns us that when sin's desire is embraced, God's order in marriage is overturned, resulting in destruction rather than liberation. Jezebel and Ahab's story reminds us that what was meant to be a partnership under God can become a battleground of manipulation and judgment if desire is left unchecked. Jezebel demonstrates the danger of desire twisted into domination.

In counseling husbands through the years, a frequent complaint I hear is about their controlling wives. Usually, a husband who feels his wife is controlling might express things like:

"I feel like I can't make any decisions without her approval."

"She treats me more like a child than a partner."

No matter what I do, it's never good enough for her."

"It's easier to stay quiet than to argue, so I just shut down."

"I wish she believed in me enough to let me lead sometimes."

"I'm constantly walking on eggshells, afraid of setting her off."

Some men might say these things openly in counseling, while others may only think them privately and act them out by withdrawing, avoiding, or rebelling in subtle ways. I understand the wife's emotional drivers, though. Women don't necessarily want to be controlling, but it can feel like a viable way of protecting themselves, or they may be needfully filling the leadership void in their husband's emotional absence. She says to herself:

“If I control our money, I’ll have plenty of savings for an emergency.”

“If I control his time, I’ll have less resentment about his friends or hobbies.”

“If I control sex, I can use it to get his attention.”

“If I control parenting, the kids will be raised the way I think is best.”

“If I control decision-making, I’ll have more certainty about my future.”

Many women reach for control when they feel unsafe. God intended a husband to provide security for his wife, but if he fails, control is a woman’s instinctive response to man’s passivity. Control, though, is only an *illusion* of safety. It might cover and protect in one area but leaves other areas exposed and vulnerable. No matter how dominant the wife or passive the husband, control leads to resentment in both parties and is often a precursor to the dissolution of marriages.

But Genesis 3:16 doesn’t make women the only cause of this marital conflict—the verse assigns a distortion to both sides. The wife’s fallen inclination is to control; the husband’s fallen inclination is to oppress or remain apathetic. God’s plan was never about dominating each other but flourishing together. When sin entered the world, the marriage relationship was distorted into competition, mistrust, and grasping for control. Instead of harmony, suspicion entered. Instead of joyful interdependence, selfish independence took over.

The New Testament presents the Gospel as the solution to this dissonance. The power struggle of Genesis 3:16 is not the final word, nor is unfulfilled desire a hopeless condition. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church—sacrificially, humbly, and for their good. Wives are called to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, which means their trust ultimately rests in God, not in the perfection of their husbands. When both live this way, the “desire and rule” battle of Genesis 3:16 is replaced with a picture of unity, love, and mutual service that reflects Christ and His Church. But when we ultimately fail—and fail we will—the

love of Christ will embrace us in our brokenness, filling us with grace that sustains and restores.

If you find yourself living in this tension, or if your story mirrors one of the women in this chapter, you are not alone. Jesus, though a perfect Man, knows intimately the pain of a woman's curse. She may suffer in her childbearing until the baby is born, but Christ's pain was immeasurably more as He suffered on the cross so that we might be "born again" through His love and labor (see John 3). Though she desires affection from her husband and wrestles with his rejection, Jesus, too, knows the pain of unfulfilling relationships: "He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care" (Isa. 53:3, NLT).

A woman's longing for love and connection often collides with disappointment, unmet needs, or betrayal, and points us back to the curse of Genesis 3:16: Desire mixed with pain. Scripture doesn't sanitize this reality. Instead, it points us back to God's loving redemption through Christ Jesus. The ache you feel is part of your fallen mother's sinful condition, but your response matters. You can either let frustration fester into manipulation, comparison, or despair—or you can bring it before God and ask Him to reshape your desires. When you feel unseen, resist the temptation to entertain sin's desire of seeking idols of attention, self-sufficiency, or control. Instead, anchor your worth in Christ, who sees you fully, understands how you feel, and loves you perfectly. From that place of security, you can re-engage your marriage with hope, trusting God to fulfill every unmet desire.



Reflection Questions

Have you emotionally or spiritually substituted your husband with something else? Is sin's desire creating a barrier in your relationship with your husband?

Do you hold something in your heart that takes up the space he should occupy? What idol might you be using to replace your husband?

Do you honor him, or just tolerate him while turning elsewhere for connection? Is your desire good and holy, or is it tainted with jealousy, resentment, or anger?

Prayer

“Lord, reveal to me any idol in my heart that has taken the place of my husband. Teach me to honor, respect, and reconnect with the man You gave me—flawed as he may be, just as I am. Restore intimacy and godly desire for my husband, in my spirit and heart, that my words, actions, and attitude towards him would be pleasing to You and bring You glory. Amen.”

Two

Man's Rule

“And he shall rule over you ...” (Genesis 3:16)

Ineffective leadership affects everything.

I take meticulous notes during my counseling sessions, laptop open, typing furiously between “mmm-hmmm” and “tell me more.” As I prepared to write this chapter on ineffective male leadership, I looked through my files to find relevant examples to use. There were so many examples; really, I was appalled at how many examples I had of terrible male leadership in marriages.

In couples' sessions, one of my standard lines is, “I'm hard on husbands.” I say this to drive a point home to the man that he must be serious about fixing his marriage and taking the lead. I can confidently say the common denominator in most failed marriages is the inadequacy of the husband's leadership. Ironically, I've never been challenged on this—not even once. No matter how passive the husband, or strong-willed the wife, they both instinctively know that the husband is meant to lead. They both recognize his God-ordained authority in the relationship and

the wife desires to follow his lead, even if she's insecure in his ability to do so.

Certainly, every woman has her own set of issues she brings into the marriage. Maybe she was abused, mistreated, or had emotional baggage from her past. She may be critical and condescending towards her husband; she needs to work on that. But security for her, and healing for the relationship, is directly related to her husband's ability to lovingly and gently lead, helping her feel safe—emotionally, physically, financially, and spiritually.

One of the many examples I found of, dare I say, *horrendous* male leadership was with “Dave” and his wife “Cathy.” They had been married for thirty years with several children still living at home. To say their lives were a mess would be an understatement. He came to see me first by himself with nothing but complaints about his wife. He framed her as financially irresponsible, a shopaholic, suspicious and accusatory, “She doesn't believe that she is wrong in any way,” he complained. Their relationship had been fractured to the point where she consulted psychics to find relief, “The demons were feeding her, and it was destroying my life.” Divorce was threatened several times through the years by both parties. I commiserated as best as I could, knowing there are always two sides to the story. He did admit, “When we first got married, I didn't understand the priority of a wife.” It appeared he still didn't understand, even after thirty years.

Cathy came to the next session by herself to present her view. She had suspected he had multiple affairs through the years, finding odd pieces of jewelry in the dry cleaning and other strange clues, though she could never quite prove it (thus her reasoning for the psychics), “I gave up asking him not to ogle women,” she said. Cathy stated his family hated her and when his mother was repeatedly disrespectful to her, “Dave never stood up for me.” He was often irritable, “We are always walking on eggshells because he is constantly fussing.” With six kids, he gave her little-to-no help with cooking or cleaning. And the money issue? “He wants to control the money for his investing.” She claimed she had to beg him for money to buy groceries, “I have to steal because he doesn't give us anything.” Ultimately, her greatest problem was, “I don't feel loved, and I don't trust him,” she said.

Cathy had been a stay-at-home mom but was now looking for work, contemplating her next move. She didn't have the resources to leave, and felt helpless in her marriage, paralyzed under his disastrous leadership. Her situation, though somewhat extreme, is not uncommon for many women. She had been *robbed* because of her husband's *rule*.

Male leadership was never meant to be oppressive or harsh. Adam's headship was meant to mirror God's own care: Protective, sacrificial, and wise. Eve once walked in the garden as Adam's equal, side by side, sharing in the wonder of creation. But after the Fall, the harmony of partnership gave way to the weight of subjection. Adam now carried the tendency to rule irresponsibly, his leadership no longer untainted by sin. He left Eve vulnerable, failed to cover her, and sadly, sometimes used his strength against her. The one who was created to be her loving head now became her harsh ruler, and the beauty of their unity soured into a struggle of dominance and distrust. The relationship meant to reflect God's image became fractured, leaving Eve to bear the wounds of misused authority.

In Genesis 3:16, the Hebrew verb for "rule" ("māshal") means to "govern" or "have dominion." This term appears elsewhere in scripture for exercising authority; for example, "The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying, 'Rule (*māshal*) in the midst of your enemies!'" (Ps. 110:2). So, "he shall rule over you" plainly signifies the husband's authority over his wife. Traditional commentators view this as part of Eve's punishment after the Fall: A shift in the marital relationship whereby the wife falls under the firm authority of her husband. The phrase is understood not as an ideal from creation, but as a consequence of sin, introducing a prejudicial hierarchy in place of the original harmony of a more equitable relationship.

As countercultural as it may sound, the imperative of a husband's headship and a wife's submission to his authority runs consistently throughout Scripture. It is not a cultural invention or a temporary arrangement, but something God rooted in His created order. In Genesis, Adam was formed first and then given Eve as a "helper suitable" for him (Gen. 2:18–23). This sequence is not arbitrary; Paul later refers to it when teaching about marriage and church order (1 Cor. 11:8–9; 1 Tim. 2:12–13). From the very

beginning, God established a pattern of headship and help, where man leads and woman complements.

This framework of hierarchy is further reinforced in the details of the creation narrative. Adam's role was one of initiation and accountability, setting the tone for how authority and responsibility would function in human relationships. Adam was not only placed first in sequence but given specific responsibilities that reflected his role as head. God charged him with tending the garden, bearing the weight of stewardship before Eve was ever formed, and naming the animals entrusted to his care.

In the ancient world, the act of naming was closely tied to authority. To give a name was not a casual gesture but a declaration of responsibility and position. This is first seen in Adam's naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19-20) which reflects the dominion God entrusted to him as steward over creation. By assigning names, Adam was exercising the delegated authority of God's image-bearer, shaping the created order through language and classification. Naming was an outward sign that Adam had real responsibility and authority over the world he inhabited.

This same principle is seen when Adam names the woman. At first, he recognizes her shared nature with him, calling her "woman" (*'ishah*) because she was taken out of man (*'ish*). After the Fall, he gives her the personal name "Eve" (*ḥawwāh*), meaning "life" (Gen. 3:20). In doing so, Adam not only asserts his role of headship but also affirms her divinely given vocation as life-bearer and sustainer. His act of naming was an exercise of authority and illustrates how naming in Scripture marks relational hierarchy. The Fall distorted but did not erase this order, and the serpent deliberately approached Eve rather than Adam, subverting God's design and exploiting the lack of Adam's protective headship.

The rest of Scripture reinforces this pattern of hierarchical order. The patriarchs led their households, and wives were honored for respecting that leadership (1 Pet. 3:6). Proverbs portrays the excellent wife as strong, industrious, and wise, but always in a way that blesses and supports her husband (Prov. 31:10-31). The New Testament makes the principle explicit: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. Now as the church

submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph. 5:22-23). Wives are called to submit to their husbands “as to the Lord” (Col. 3:18), while husbands are commanded to lead through sacrificial love, laying down their lives for their wives as Christ did for the church (Eph. 5:25).

Sobering, isn’t it? In God’s divine order, man submits to Christ, who is perfect; but woman must submit to man, who is imperfect. He can never lead her without fail, which creates a paradox: Submission is harder precisely because the object of submission is now flawed. Yet Scripture never relaxes the call; instead, it elevates the quality of headship. Husbands must love as Christ loved the Church and grounds a wife’s submission in trust in God, not blind trust in her husband. When proper perspective is maintained, this can lead a woman’s heart to trust God’s sovereignty more than man’s competency and creates an ordered environment where her sanctification can grow through loving her husband despite his deficiencies. When love and service are not reciprocated, her kindness to him *passes through him* and is done unto the Lord. By her loving example, his conscience is pricked, which can lead to his heart changing towards her and the Lord (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Let’s linger here a moment since the meaning of “submission” in marriage is such a misunderstood flashpoint in our culture and churches today. When Sarah followed Abraham into the unknown, she embodied submission that was rooted not in Abraham’s perfection but in God’s promise. She left her homeland, family, and security because she trusted the God who had called her husband. Peter points back to this when he wrote, “For this is how the holy women who *hoped in God* used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands ...” (1 Pet. 3:5, NIV).

For a woman to walk in any measure of godly submission to her husband, she must know this to be true: She can submit to her husband, not because of his infallible leadership, but as Peter writes, because of her hope in God. This means (1) she trusts in God’s character, believing He is faithful, good, and sovereignly brought she and her husband together for a divine purpose, even if her husband is flawed. (2) She has confidence in God’s promises and knows He will honor her obedience and use her gentle spirit to influence her husband toward greater godliness. And (3) she

has security in God's care with her ultimate security and identity anchored in Christ, not her husband's perfection. This hope keeps her from fear (1 Peter 3:6), despite outward appearances, because her heart rests in One greater than her marital circumstances.

A correct view of submission is powerful because it leads a wife to show greater respect for the husband God gave, opening his heart to her influence as she speaks the language of respect. 1 Peter 3:6 says, "... Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him her lord." Many of us will recoil at that word "lord" ("*kurie*" in the Greek). Some extremists take it out of context to mean a man has absolute authority over his wife. That's clearly not the case since *kurie* is meant primarily to communicate respect to an authority figure. It's like saying "sir" in today's vernacular, e.g., "And the servants of the household came and said to him, 'Sir (*kurie*), did you not sow good seed in your field?'" (Matt. 13:27). Sarah's submission was not blind loyalty but an attitude of trust in God's sovereign hand working through her husband's leadership, while showing him honor and respect. When Scripture says Sarah called Abraham "*kurie*," she was expressing honor in a kind of respect that breathed life into her husband's role.

Imagine a modern scene: A husband comes home weary from work, questioning whether he provides enough or leads well. His wife greets him not with criticism but with words of gratitude, "I'm thankful for you, my beloved husband!" That small act of respect is her way of saying "*kurie*." It doesn't mean he is flawless or infallible, or that she must bow down to his every whim; it means she chooses to affirm his God-given place in their marriage. In that moment, his shoulders square a little straighter, and his burden feels a little lighter, not because his ego is fed, but because his spirit is encouraged to rise up and live under the Lordship of Christ as a man of God. Her respect echoes Sarah's, and his submission to God is strengthened through her honor, like Abraham's.

When a wife chooses to respect her husband, even in his failures, she is not merely giving up her own way; she is actively creating an atmosphere where her husband's heart can soften and open to her influence. Respect is, in many ways, a man's native "love language." While he may not always recognize other forms of appeal, he is wired to respond to honor and esteem. A wife who

speaks this language communicates in terms he is most likely to hear and receive.

In this way, Biblical submission becomes a tool of influence rather than a loss of voice. Her respectful spirit, rooted in hope in God, positions her as a gentle guide. She can then share her thoughts, convictions, and even corrections in a manner that a husband is more inclined to consider, because they come wrapped in respect rather than resistance.

Thus, submission, rightly understood, is not weakness but strength under God's order. It magnifies a wife's influence rather than diminishes it, as she learns to speak to her husband's heart in the way he best understands—through consistent, genuine respect. An out of order marriage, however, will breed resentment. Even if she is a natural leader, the wife will eventually become resentful of having to bear the weight of decision making, and the husband will eventually become resentful of having to follow her dictates, even if he is passive.

When submission is difficult, wives, remember that your husband too is not free to rule as he pleases; he is under authority and must submit to Christ. Paul reminds us, "The head of every man is Christ" (1 Cor. 11:3). Just as Sarah trusted God by yielding to Abraham, Abraham himself had to submit to the Lord's command. He could not chart his own course or rely on his own wisdom. He was accountable to the One who called him out of Ur and promised to make him a great nation (Gen. 12:1-4). Abraham's leadership to Sarah flowed from his submission to the Lord.

What if a husband is not obedient to God? Though poor leadership makes it more challenging, a wife's submission is not rooted in her husband's worthiness but in her confidence that he still stands under Christ's authority. Scripture calls a wife to honor her husband's leadership, not because he is always godly, or makes good decisions, but because her submission itself is obedience to the Lord (Col. 3:18). As we will soon read, Abraham had deep character issues which exposed Sarah to harm. But as she continued in humble submission trusting God, He dealt with Abraham's heart, and they were both blessed!

An obstinate husband, whether a professing believer or not, will not remain unchecked when he resists God's design for his

role in the marriage. To harden his heart against his wife's godly conduct is to harden his heart against God Himself, for she is an heir with him of the grace of life. Peter warns that if a husband fails to honor his wife, his very prayers will be hindered, cutting off the lifeline of communion with God until repentance is made (1 Pet. 3:7). This warning exposes how seriously the Lord regards a husband's treatment of his wife—not as peripheral to faith, but central to it.

The Old Testament repeats the same theme. In Malachi 2:13–16, the Lord rebukes men whose faithlessness to their wives nullified their worship, making their offerings unacceptable. God refuses to be appeased by outward religious acts while the covenant of marriage is despised. Jesus also warns that greater knowledge brings greater accountability: “That servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating” (Luke 12:47). And James intensifies this call, declaring that to know the good and fail to do it is sin (James 4:17). Together, these passages reveal that a husband's complacency is not neutral ground—it is culpable disobedience. Far from escaping consequences, the stubborn or neglectful husband invites the discipline of God and risks the weight of divine judgment until he humbles himself in repentance and embraces the role for which he was created. Truly, husbands who abdicate their role are evidence of the deep tragedy of the Fall where loving headship shifts to sinful domination.

“He shall rule over thee” is viewed as one of the penalties decreed upon Eve by ancient rabbinic sources. In the Jewish Talmud, the verse is read as a curse of subjugation: The man articulates his will and demands his needs, but the woman must silently endure her desire. There's a feeling of *weightiness* here. The man's words and opinions are heavy and powerful, and she is sensitive to his authoritative voice. Even if she disregards his instructions, his disdain still cuts like a knife. A wife's words, however, carry less weight and appear to the husband as insignificant or nagging. Simply put, the wife has trouble asserting her will, whereas the husband openly “rules” by fulfilling his will through his words. Another commentary states, “And he will rule over you’ means that a man declares his will aloud, while a woman keeps hers silent.”¹⁰

In 1 Samuel 25 we read the story of a critical and egotistical husband named Nabal, who was very wealthy. His wife, Abigail, was “discerning and beautiful” but Nabal was “harsh and evil in his dealings” (1 Sam. 25:3). When David, the future king, asked Nabal for provisions as thanks for protecting his shepherds, Nabal insulted him and refused to comply. David was furious at Nabal’s lack of appreciation and prepared his army to attack and destroy Nabal’s household and servants. But Abigail, wise and courageous, quickly gathered food and supplies and rode out to meet David herself. She humbly apologized for her husband's offense and pleaded for mercy.

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, “On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears and hear the words of your servant. Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him.” (1 Sam. 25:23-25)

Abigail was stuck with a man whom she knew was recklessly irrational, even pointing out to David that Nabal’s name means “foolish.” His character was one of arrogance, irresponsibility, and spiritual blindness. The root word for “foolish” in Hebrew, “nāval,” also gives imagery of withering, or decay.

The grass withers (nāval), the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it ... (Isaiah 40:7)

How many men have scorched their wives with fiery anger, leaving them wilted and wounded? How many husbands, reckless in their leadership, have sown ruin into the fabric of their marriages? It’s far too many to count, a tragic testimony to the cost of neglecting God’s design.

David was moved by Abigail's words and called off his attack. We later read that after Nabal learned what happened, he had a heart attack and died. David then sent for Abigail and made her his wife. Through her wisdom, Abigail saved her household and was lifted from a life of oppression into one of honor and royalty.

It's comforting to know there are happy endings like Abigail's, but the reality is that many men are harsh and foolish "rulers" with no relief for their wives in sight. Christians may deride women's empowerment movements, but after ages of vulnerability at the hands of men, one can see why so many women have distrust for the opposite sex. In their fallen nature, men have become cowards, abandoners, irresponsible, and passive preservers of their own self-interest. Women desperately need redeemed masculinity and their husbands to yield their authority correctly.

But "rule" goes beyond a man's dominion over his wife; it also extends to *dominance*. Sadly, dominance is power exerted over someone else, often for control or superiority, and can often be aggressive, self-serving, forceful, or even fear-inducing. Jewish tradition holds that the woman's craving for the man is so strong that she accepts an otherwise unnatural domination. Rabbi Ramban sees this as part of God's justice: Eve used her influence to make Adam heed her; now her consequence is being made subject to him in all things. He explicitly comments that this dynamic is measure for measure, "*middah k'neged middah*": Since Eve led Adam astray, now "he will get to do to her whatever he wants." Thus, "he shall rule over you" is Eve's fate; from now on, the husband will command, and she must comply.¹¹

Every husband is not domineering, of course, and there are many women who do not feel controlled by their husbands (and may even think it's the other way around). The idea here is that womenkind, in general, are dominated by men in a myriad of ways since the Fall. Call it toxic masculinity, misogyny, gender oppression, or sexism, men have used and abused women since the beginning. Women are treated like objects, sexual playthings, discounted, and demeaned. Nearly all domestic violence and rape cases are perpetrated by men against women, and women have only recently been given the educational and vocational opportunities afforded men (mostly in developed countries). It's

estimated that between 10-15% of the global female population are forced to wear some sort of covering due to religious or cultural expectations imposed on them by men.¹² One would think that women would have more equality since they represent fifty percent of the population, but this has never been true. Due to their superior size, strength, and aggressiveness, men have pummeled women into subjection for all of history.

Early Christian theologian St. John Chrysostom explicitly addresses the husband's "rule" in his Homilies. He imagines God saying to Eve, "In the beginning I made you equal to your husband ... and entrusted you both with dominion over creation; but you misused your equality. Now, because of sin, he will be your master." Chrysostom taught that male dominance was not part of God's original creation—"I created you equal in honor to your husband, but you abused your status"—rather, it arose as a corrective punishment. Thus "the domination of man over woman was a result of sin and didn't exist before the Fall."¹³ Eve's subjection is therefore understood as remedial discipline; the wife must now submit to her husband's authority, in response to the order she disrupted.

The English Puritan commentator Matthew Henry confirmed this. If our first parents had not sinned, "The man would have always ruled with wisdom and love, and the woman would have obeyed with humility and meekness; then [his] dominion would have been no grievance. But now sin and folly make that yoke heavy."¹⁴ In other words, the Fall corrupted both the ruler (who may now rule harshly) and the ruled (who now struggles under his authority).

All this sounds misogynistic, doesn't it? Women are tempted to be offended here by God's punishment, but the greater truth is that we do not get to pick-and-choose the consequences of sin we feel are most favorable to us. The offender, male or female, doesn't get to negotiate with the Judge his sentence, and sin always has consequences. It's undeniable that sin has wrecked our world in many ways, i.e., poverty, sickness, disease, and death. We can accept that—but husbands? They're supposed to be *safe*. Relationships are supposed to be *stable*. Men are supposed to bring *security* to women.

The curse says not so.

Why does this matter? For wives who have been mistreated by their authoritarian husbands, there is seldom any recognition of the principal problem of *original sin*. We are living in a fallen world with the fallout being dysfunction in all areas of life and relationships. We are no longer living in idyllic Eden, though we long for it in our hearts. For some, there is a fantasy that somehow it can still exist; it no longer does. The sooner we accept that fact, the sooner we can come to acceptance, and embrace the life (and marriage) we have with greater joy.

In no way does this excuse or minimize the actions of men who are dominating and abusive, and those men should be held responsible for their actions accordingly. Each woman should do as she sees fit according to her own convictions and godly counsel. But instead of raging toward or retreating away from a difficult husband, perhaps she could consider the bigger picture: Like a cancer, sin has infected her relationship, and she should look to Christ for healing and redemption. Joy is still to be found in her dysfunction, and there is *joy unspeakable* soon to come.

Even though a husband may fail in his leadership, that does not necessarily mean all is lost. As long as there is breath, there is hope; and if even if there is no breath, Christ can bring dead things back to life! Despite core-shaking betrayals, many women have found a way forward because of Jesus' promise, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:16). This God-given faith empowers them with strength to extend forgiveness, the courage to rebuild, and the confidence to believe that God can breathe new life into what seems beyond repair.

I've counseled several men whose marriages found redemption regardless of their worst-case-scenario headship. One of those guys was "Dan," who came to me crushed under a burden of decades-long guilt confessing, "I've been a serial adulterer almost since day one of our marriage." He and "Emily" had been married for more than 30 years and had several adult children together. "She's knows about some of my cheating," he said, "but the whole story is too awful to tell her." One of his affairs had resulted in a child—a daughter Emily already knew about. His other children, too, had difficult relationships with Dan due to some limited knowledge of his affairs over the years. His family was languishing, and he desperately wanted to come clean and tell

Emily everything. He needed to lay a new foundation of trust, but the final confession felt like handing her a hand grenade.

“Sometimes, I wonder if I just need to let her start her life over, but I know that wouldn’t fix everything,” he said.

But Emily had been desperately praying, and God had been deeply working in Dan’s heart. “I haven’t seen my sin rightly,” he admitted. “I really want to change, and I know that God can help me truly repent. I’ve done some business with the Lord and He’s been taking away my desire for other women.” Dan had been entirely faithful to Emily for almost three years, confessed his affairs to his pastor, deleted lovers’ phone numbers, and changed his circle of friends. His remorse and meekness were evident, “I’ve got more fear of God in me right now; I do weep over my sin.”

We worked on strengthening his accountability circle and preparing Dan for a potentially life-altering conversation with Emily. He said, “I know what I need to say could end our marriage, but I need to come clean about everything in my past. I’m tired of living in the dark. If it ends in disaster, so be it; I know I’ve reaped what I’ve sown.” I could see Dan’s contrition and humble acceptance of uncertain outcomes. “I’m asking the Lord to bless my confession,” he humbly stated.

A few months later, Dan came back to my office saying he had fully disclosed every affair to Emily. In brokenness, he told her she was free to leave if she wished, assuring her he would not hold her back and would make sure she was cared for if she chose to go. She was hurt and angry but also relieved to have her suspicions confirmed. It had been a rough season of marriage, but things had recently been “sweeter” between them, and he was cautiously optimistic about the future. “I think we are going to be able to work through it,” he said through tears. “I’m thankful for her Christ-like spirit.”

I was happy for Dan, albeit a little skeptical of Emily’s ability to move forward with such weighty revelations. But God does miracles every single day. As my sessions with Dan progressed, he and Emily continued in faith and prayer, and their relationship continued to improve as they trusted God for their marriage. He started praying with her nightly, grew more attentive to her emotional needs, and became a stronger spiritual leader, both at home and in their local church. It was truly a miracle! They still

had struggles, but words like “great,” “wonderful,” and “peaceful” peppered his descriptions of their relationship throughout our sessions. One year post-confession, Dan said to me, “Emily still has her moments, but we’re in a good place. My prayer is, ‘Lord, teach me how to love her well.’”

Dan’s story is one of devastation met by grace. After decades of infidelity, broken trust, and fractured relationships with his wife and children, he finally reached the end of himself and sought true repentance. What began as a desperate confession, one he feared might destroy his marriage, became the turning point for restoration. Through humility, accountability, and a renewed fear of God, Dan found strength to walk faithfully, while Emily, though deeply wounded, displayed a Christ-like willingness to forgive and press forward. Their marriage, once on the brink of collapse, began to taste sweet again—not because the past was erased, but because God was supernaturally changing both of their hearts in response to prayer and repentance.

Jesus shows us what true headship looks like. He washed His disciples’ feet, provided loving care for His followers, laid down His life for the Church, and never used His authority for selfish gain. When husbands imitate this pattern, their rule is no longer domination but protection, no longer oppression but love. If your husband leads poorly, you can entrust yourself to God (see Appendix 2 for questions about a husband’s leadership). When men fail, Christ remains the faithful Head over His people, reminding wives that their ultimate security rests in Him.



Reflection Questions

Have you felt the weight of being under poor or passive leadership in your marriage? How has it affected your sense of security, trust, or your ability to be vulnerable?

When your husband fails to lead well, where do you tend to turn—control, criticism, withdrawal, or something else? How might God be inviting you to respond differently, not because your husband deserves it, but because God is trustworthy?

What does it mean to you personally to submit to your husband “as unto the Lord”? How does this perspective shift your focus from your husband’s imperfections to God’s bigger redemptive plan?

Prayer

“Lord, You see the places where I feel unseen, unheard, or unloved. Help me entrust my heart to You when my husband’s leadership falls short. Teach me to follow You even when it’s difficult to follow him. Let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness. Amen.”

Three

The Loss of Protection

*“She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”
(Genesis 3:6)*

The Hamas terror attacks on October 7, 2023, were the stuff of nightmares. It was a sleepy Saturday morning when 36-year-old Israeli, Yahav Winner, heard the first gunshots. As armed militants stormed their home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza, he barricaded the bedroom. The terrorists pushed hard against the door and Yahav used his baby’s stroller to jam the entrance in a desperate effort to hold off the attackers and hide his family. Refusing to flee, he used his own body to stall the invaders while his wife huddled in a hiding spot with their one-month-old baby. Yahav’s efforts allowed his wife and child to remain undiscovered, and they were rescued after 24 hours hiding, unharmed. Tragically, Yahav himself was found slain by the terrorists. His grieving wife later remembered his sacrifice, “He didn’t run away. He kept trying to save us. That was my husband. He was my best friend.”¹⁵

Travis Juetten, 26, and his wife Jamilyn were asleep in their Marion County, Oregon home in the early morning of August 13, 2021, when a masked intruder broke in and launched a knife

attack against them. Travis fought the armed assailant to defend his wife, suffering numerous stab wounds. He was stabbed multiple times, and his injuries would prove fatal, but his resistance allowed Jamilyn to survive despite being gravely wounded herself. Friends and family later emphasized Travis's protective bravery, with one family friend stating, "He saved her life ... He protected her from the attacker." Travis died from his injuries, but his actions ensured Jamilyn received medical help in time and lived.¹⁶

Sonny Melton, a 29-year-old nurse from Tennessee, was attending the Route 91 Harvest music festival in Las Vegas with his wife, Heather, on October 1, 2017, when a gunman began spraying the crowd with bullets from a high-rise hotel. Amid the chaos, Sonny wrapped his arms around Heather to shield her as they tried to flee, putting his body between her and the gunfire. He was struck by a bullet in the back and fatally wounded while protecting her. Heather survived the massacre, and she credits her husband's heroism for her survival. "He protected me ... He saved my life," she said, recounting how Sonny's self-sacrifice ensured she lived through the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history.¹⁷

Brenton Estorffe, 29, was shot dead in his Fort Bend County, Texas home after he confronted armed intruders to protect his wife and two young children in October 2019. Estorffe woke to the sound of breaking glass and immediately rushed toward the danger, coming face-to-face with the burglars who had forced their way in. He was shot in the chest during the struggle and succumbed to his wounds, but crucially, his wife and 1-year-old and 3-year-old children survived the attack unharmed. Local Sheriff Troy Nehls praised Estorffe's actions, stating that "He gave his life in defense of his family."¹⁸

This is what men do—at least, this is what they are *supposed* to do: Defend and protect their wives and families at the cost of their own lives. It's in their nature to do so. In Genesis 2:15, we see God's imperative to Adam to defend what was entrusted to him, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The Hebrew word for "take care of" is "shāmar," which means "to keep, defend, preserve," or "watch over." It often refers to guarding something sacred, implying intentional stewardship and protection from defilement or danger.

Intentional stewardship of something sacred.

What could be more sacred than marriage? What could be more valuable than a wife? What demands more intentional stewardship than the marital union? Yet Adam and his lineage have failed women miserably in this holy task, starting with the loss of protection.

Safety is a woman's number one need. This makes sense because safety was the first thing taken from Eve in the Fall. There Adam stood, strong but silent, while the serpent beguiled his wife. They both knew God's prohibition, "The day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17, KJV). The heaviness of this moment is not to be taken lightly. This was life or death—and Adam knew it, yet his passivity prevailed.

Eve "took some and ate it." Then Adam watched, waiting with bated breath. *What's going to happen?* A moment passed, everything seemed fine, so *he* ate. Only then "both their eyes were opened" (Gen. 3:7). As her spiritual head, the curse appeared to have no effect on either of them until Adam partook.

The account is bewildering. Why would Adam do this? Men are curious creatures, more so than women; they tend to enjoy risk and danger. Was Adam risking his wife's life out of some juvenile curiosity or cheap thrill? We'll never know, but his inaction left her vulnerable to the serpent's temptation. When God asked questions, Adam *again* exposed Eve and threw her under the bus: "The woman gave it to me and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). Can you imagine the look of shock on Eve's face? That was the first *if looks could kill* moment and death was now their destiny.

Those two actions, Adam's idle-watching and finger-pointing, were the first seeds of mistrust sowed into his relationship with Eve which would follow them (and us) like a plague forever. And how quickly those seeds grew; we see several examples almost immediately.

In Genesis 12:10–20 and Genesis 20, Abram (later called Abraham) fails to protect his wife—twice. Fearing for his own life, Abram lied about Sarai (Sarah), calling her his sister so he wouldn't be killed. In Egypt, Pharaoh takes Sarai into his palace to become his concubine, and in Gerar, King Abimelech does the same. God preserved Sarai's sexual integrity, but Abram exposed

her to potential harm, prioritizing his own safety over her protection.

Though not a husband-and-wife relationship, Genesis 19 tells the story of Abram's nephew, Lot, who refused to protect his daughters. When the men of Sodom surrounded his house and demanded to rape his angelic guests, Lot offered his virgin daughters instead, "Look, I have two daughters ... let me bring them out to you, and you can do to them as you please" (Gen. 19:8). Some scholars suggest that Lot was trying to stall for time in a panic, but can you imagine the horror those girls experienced hearing their own father say those words? Lot degraded his daughters' value attempting to protect strangers, utterly abandoning his responsibility as a man. We later read the outcome of his lack of good stewardship, resulting in them committing incest with their father while he was drunk.

In Genesis 38, Judah refused to give his youngest son to his daughter-in-law, Tamar, after his son had died, even though it was required by custom to ensure her survival and legacy. Later, when Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and Judah slept with her, he nearly had her burned to death—until she exposed his hypocrisy. Judah left Tamar abandoned and shamed, forcing her into desperate action to live and preserve her family line.

These stories reveal the deep and immediate impact of Adam's actions which led to a loss of protection for wives and women, in general. Sadly, history continues to repeat itself.

"Gina" had been married for seven years to "Charles" and together they had four children. She was a small business owner, full-time shift worker, and had been diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder. If that wasn't a full plate by itself, Charles had cheated on her two years earlier and had a history of secretive porn use. They had been to another marriage counselor without success. Gina came to me individually to help process her feelings about the relationship.

"I never truly healed from the affair," she said. "Life got busy, we had another kid, but it was always in the back of my mind. I still think about it almost every day." Their physical relationship had suffered greatly, and sex was almost nonexistent. "I'm okay with living as roommates, but he says he is not staying in a marriage without affection; he is not okay," she said. Though I

never saw Charles, I could sense her frustration with his demands. He would constantly pressure her for sex and use guilt to manipulate her, “I feel like he’s suffocating me.” She could only be intimate with him if she drank alcohol.

We discussed the standard counseling topics: Good self-care, boundaries, and forgiveness. Then I noticed a subtle mention of a coworker in whom she was confiding, “We’re close on our shift together,” she admitted. I probed deeper. He had been commiserating with her, providing a comforting ear and emotional support. I encouraged her to disclose the friendship to her husband immediately. She replied, “If our relationship was better, I could find it easier to be honest.” Unsurprisingly, Gina came into my office a short while later confessing to having an affair with her coworker.

Adam, once again you’ve put your needs before Eve’s, and you’ve both suffered the consequences. She is vulnerable and unprotected by your lack of leadership. She is, by design, the weaker vessel (1 Peter 3:7) who needs your strength. But you’ve spent it on your own desires. When man fails, though, God Himself will be her Champion.

Going back to Genesis, we revisit the story of Abram and find that Sarai was not the only woman he failed to protect. In the early days of God’s covenant with Abram to “be a father of many nations” (Gen. 17:5), he and his wife Sarai were childless. Though God had promised Abram that his descendants would outnumber the stars, years passed, and Sarai remained barren. Tired of waiting and doubting the promise, Sarai took matters into her own hands. She gave her Egyptian servant, Hagar, to Abram as a concubine. This was a common practice of the time, where a servant woman could bear children on behalf of her mistress.

This was not traditional polygamy where the second woman had any measure of influence or input with Abram. Hagar was strictly the property of Sarai and was likely young with no say in the matter. The child of the consummation, also, would often be born “upon the knees” of the mistress (Gen. 30:3), signifying Sarai was involved in the labor process, as well, and the child was given to her without exception.

When Hagar became pregnant, though, something shifted. Once invisible and lowly, she now carried the patriarch’s child and

Sarai grew jealous. Tensions rose. Hagar's small taste of status brought contempt in Sarai's eyes, and she began to treat Hagar harshly. There's no mention of Abram's concern or intervention; he looked on without saying a word and left the mother of his child defenseless. Eventually, Hagar's pain became unbearable, and she fled into the wilderness of Shur, pregnant, alone, and afraid. Abram's comment to Sarai before Hagar ran away is more than heartless, "Your slave is in your hands ... Do with her whatever you think best," he said (Gen. 16:6). There are several Hebrew words Abram could have used describe Hagar's servant status. He chose the lowest form, "shiphchah" ("slave"), even though she was carrying something of precious value to him.

For all Abram knew, the child in Hagar's womb was his heir and the fulfillment of God's promise, yet he called her a worthless slave. Have you ever felt like Hagar, carrying a weight of expectation from your husband without ever being recognized as valued? Like Hagar, maybe you've fled into a wilderness of despair, loneliness, apathy, bitterness, or addiction. The wilderness is a desolate place but you're not alone there, nor are you defenseless.

As Hagar ran, tears stinging her eyes, we read the rest of the story in Genesis 16.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he

shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen Him who looks after me.” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi ... (Gen. 16:7-14, NKJV)

The most powerful encounters with God are often in the wilderness. There, in her hopelessness, Hagar had a profound revelation of God: “I have seen Him who looks after me”—El Roi, “the God who sees.” Maybe Abram didn’t see her; but God did. Maybe Abram didn’t hear her; but God did. The boy’s name would be called “Ishmael”—God hears. Even the wilderness into which she ran, Shur, had meaning. “Shur” is translated “wall” or “guard.” God had built a wall around Hagar to protect her, even in her wilderness.

Encouraged by the angel of the Lord, Hagar returned and gave birth to Ishmael, but her problems didn’t go away. Things were still tense with Sarah. Years later, after Abraham’s true heir, Isaac, was born to Sarah, Hagar and her now 14-year-old son were once again cast out—this time permanently. Sarah saw Ishmael as a threat to Isaac’s inheritance and demanded their removal.

So [Sarah] said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. (Gen. 21:10, NKJV)

Hagar is still unrecognized, unloved, and called again “slave woman” even after fourteen years of diligently raising Ishmael. It’s telling that Abraham was displeased to send them away, but it wasn’t because of his concern for Hagar; it was “on account of his son.” At this point in the story, Abraham is lavishly wealthy. Genesis 13:2 tells us, “Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold” but when he sent Hagar away, he took only “bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child ...” (Gen. 21:14). In ancient cultures,

giving extravagant parting gifts was a way of granting inheritance or status. By giving only bread and water, Abraham may have been symbolically severing Ishmael from his household inheritance, avoiding the appearance that Ishmael was still part of the covenantal line. Can you imagine Hagar's heartbreak—again? Banished into the wilderness once, driven away with nothing twice. Her life is the epitome of unfairness; but the story was still unfolding.

Hagar wandered with Ishmael in the desert of Beersheba, aimless, lost, alone, having to carry the weight of their survival. After a few days, their water ran out; death was near. Hagar could not bear to watch her son die, so she sat him under a bush and walked away, weeping. But she was in the desert of Beersheba, which means, “Well of the Oath” and God had an oath to keep with her there. Beersheba was known as a borderland, a threshold between the settled lands and the wilderness. For Hagar, a woman doubly marginalized as both a slave and an outcast, it was the perfect setting to reflect on her life in the margins. It was in this place, far from Abraham's household and seemingly outside of God's plan, that He met her once again.

*And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.
(Gen. 21:17-21)*

Just as He had done years earlier in the wilderness of Shur, God found Hagar in her desperation and opened her eyes to a well

of water, giving provision in a place of despair. The well in Beersheba was not just a source of water; it was a symbol of God's protection when man had failed her. Though Abraham had sent her away with nothing, God supplied what she needed to not only survive but *thrive* in the land of Egypt. We're not given specific details about what happened to Hagar, but we know that Ishmael did become the father of twelve sons and was himself a mighty man, despite being rejected by Abraham (Gen. 25:12-18).

The encounter at Beersheba mirrors the meaning of the place's name. While Abraham would later formalize covenants there with foreign kings, God had already made an oath to a powerless woman and her son in that very wilderness. Beersheba became not just a borderland, but holy ground where God's faithfulness extended beyond man's rejection. For Hagar and Ishmael, it was the place where abandonment turned into restoration, and where divine presence overcame man's exclusion.

The wildernesses of Shur and Beersheba stand as reminders that God sees, hears, and provides, even when a man doesn't. Hagar was betrayed, used by the man who was supposed to care for her, and then cast aside when she became inconvenient. She was an outcast and a slave, yet her story is one of the most tender displays of God's compassion in Scripture. She's the first person in the Bible to name God, and the only one to call Him *El Roi—the God who sees*. Though betrayed by man, she was seen, heard, provided for, and protected by God.

The failure of man's protection should point us to the One who never fails. Christ is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11), and He is a "very present help in times of trouble" (Ps. 46:1). He defends, intercedes, and covers His people with steadfast love and abiding care. When a husband falls short, wives can remember that Christ's protection is strong, constant, and unfailing. His care does not waver with mood, weakness, or circumstance, because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Unlike human strength that falters, His arm is never too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear (Isaiah 59:1). Even in seasons of loneliness, betrayal, or disappointment, the Lord surrounds His daughters as a shield (Ps. 3:3) and binds up their broken hearts (Isaiah 61:1). Earthly husbands may fail to

protect, but the eternal refuge of Christ remains unshakable, offering security that no human hand can match.

Marie Durand was only nineteen when her world collapsed. Married scarcely a day, her husband, Matthieu Serres, was arrested by King Louis XV's government on suspicion of supporting the Protestant underground. Though he was eventually released, Matthieu fled France for safety and never returned for his young bride. Marie was left behind, vulnerable and unprotected, when soldiers came looking for the Protestant Huguenots. Not long after, she too was arrested and cast into the grim prison of the *Tour de Constance*. Her brother had already been executed for his faith, her father had passed away, and now her husband was gone. Marie stood utterly alone, with none of the earthly supports a young woman might expect in marriage.

And yet, she was not abandoned. Though Matthieu never tried to secure her release, she was never defenseless. The dank prison tower, meant to crush her spirit, became the place where God's sustaining grace was most vividly displayed. For thirty-eight long years she remained behind stone walls, watching some fellow prisoners recant their faith and others die. But Marie received a divinely imparted strength that was inspirational to all who knew her. She is remembered for scratching a single word into the prison stone: *Résister*—"Resist." That word became her testimony, a symbol of God's power to uphold the weak when human support had failed.

Though the conditions were brutal—chilling winters, suffocating summers, no daylight—Marie sustained the hearts of the prisoners by nursing the sick, leading the singing of hymns, teaching psalms, and writing letters on behalf of others. Historians note that her life bore the marks of supernatural perseverance. One commentator reflected, "Forsaken of husband, bereft of family, she yet lived as one never forsaken of God. Her soul clung to Him with an endurance as immovable as the walls that enclosed her."¹⁹ Though no husband's arms encircled her in comfort, she rested in the everlasting arms of God. Though no husband fought for her freedom, she trusted the One who declared, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

When Marie was finally released at age 57, she emerged not as a victim, but as a victor of faith. The final years of her life were

marked not by public acclaim but by quiet faithfulness, the same endurance that had carried her through captivity. She died in 1776, closing a life that, though largely hidden, continues to speak through the single word she left etched in stone. Her story reminds us that while the protection of a husband may falter, the love of God never does. He will be a Husband to the forsaken and a protector to the abandoned. Marie's life is a solemn witness to this truth: God will sustain the woman left vulnerable, and His presence can fill even the darkest prison with unshakable hope.

Drawing from Marie's experiences, let's look at five key areas a woman must resist when overwhelmed with a tough marriage.

1. Resist coercion.

Marie Durand's act of inscribing *résister* into the stone wall of her prison cell was, at its core, a refusal to yield to the voices that demanded she abandon her faith. In her case, government officials sought to coerce her into renouncing Christ. For wives, coercion often comes in subtler but equally dangerous forms—from voices within culture, or even within their circle of friends, family and counselors, that urge them to abandon their marriages for reasons short of true Biblical grounds. The modern age cloaks such advice in the language of empowerment, but at its root it often undermines God's covenant design for marriage. To resist coercion, then, is to remember that a woman's highest allegiance is to God's Word rather than to cultural norms, and that faithfulness to God is never to be bartered away for temporary relief. Marie's etched word reminds women that even when human voices pressure them, God's truth must remain louder. While there are circumstances, such as abuse, where separation is necessary for safety, many women are told to leave simply because their husbands are flawed, inattentive, or spiritually immature. To resist coercion is to anchor one's hope in God, not in shifting cultural advice or opinions.

2. Resist despair.

Marie's life behind prison walls offered her countless opportunities to give way to despair, and decades in a dark prison could have drowned Marie's soul in hopelessness. Yet she chose to resist despair by fixing her gaze on God's sustaining hope. Likewise, a wife may look at her circumstances—a cold marriage bed, a neglectful husband, a broken trust—and feel swallowed by

darkness. But despair is resisted by lifting one's eyes to the One who never forsakes (Ps. 9:10). When a woman resists despair, she declares that her story is not dictated by her husband's failures, but by God's unchanging promises. To resist despair is to stake one's confidence in the God who raises the dead (Ezek. 37:3), who restores the years that locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25), and who is able to bring beauty from ashes (Isa. 61:3). Hope is not naïve optimism; it is a settled confidence that the covenant-keeping God will accomplish His purposes, even when His timetable is hidden. Marie waited 38 years behind stone walls, yet she emerged not broken but unbowed, her life a declaration that God's promises outlast prison doors, political decrees, and human abandonment.

3. Resist compromise.

Under pressure, Marie could have gained immediate relief by renouncing her faith. Simply signing her name to a denial of the truth would have meant a swift release, but she loved the Lord more than her freedom. In marriage, compromise is equally tempting. It may come in the form of emotional escape into another relationship, self-medication through substances, or settling into silent resentment. To resist compromise is to guard one's heart from sin and to continue walking in obedience, even when unmet needs scream for shortcuts. It means choosing purity, prayer, and perseverance over easy but destructive alternatives. To resist compromise is to recognize that character is of greater worth than comfort, and that obedience to God carries eternal weight even when earthly circumstances remain difficult. Every small act of obedience, though it may feel costly in the moment, becomes part of a larger story of sanctification and testimony. A wife who resists compromise testifies not only to her husband but to the watching world that Christ is enough, and that her allegiance to Him outweighs every temptation to grasp for temporary satisfaction.

4. Resist isolation.

Marie's story reminds us that resistance is not borne in isolation. Though she lived within a prison, she was part of a community of women whose shared endurance fortified one another. Wives too must resist the impulse to retreat into silence or isolation when marriage wounds cut deep. Withdrawal often amplifies pain, while fellowship with the people of God offers

strength, encouragement, and accountability. To resist isolation is to acknowledge that perseverance in faith is nourished in community, where the burdens of one are carried by the many. Community, wise counsel, and fellowship with other believers become lifelines in seasons of trial. By resisting isolation, a woman keeps her soul tethered to the body of Christ, where encouragement and accountability can sustain her when strength runs thin. Even in prison, Marie's steadfastness became a beacon that strengthened the faith of her fellow captives, proving that endurance is contagious. Likewise, when a wife resists isolation and allows her story to be known, her testimony can become the spark that ignites others to endure in their own trials.

5. Resist shame.

Marie could have internalized her abandonment—forsaken by husband, imprisoned by the state—and believed she was forgotten or worthless. Instead, her testimony shows a woman whose identity was secure in Christ. Many wives wrestle with shame when protection fails or a spouse strays, wondering if they are the cause of their husband's failures or their marriages' brokenness. To resist shame is to rest in Christ, who defines worth and dignity apart from any man's failings. Shame whispers that a woman's worth is tied to her husband's treatment of her, but the Gospel answers differently: "Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed" (Ps. 34:5). In Christ, the veil of shame is lifted, for there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). To resist shame is to anchor identity in the Redeemer who clothes His people "with garments of salvation" and covers them "with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10), declaring worth and honor where man has failed.

Marie Durand held tightly to the Psalms, which have given voice to weary saints for millennia, reminding them that God Himself is their Keeper. Psalm 121, especially, has been cherished in calamity, in places like prisons, and for wanderers in wildernesses.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.*

*Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right
hand.*

*The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from
this time forth and forevermore. (Ps. 121:1-8)*

The loss of a man's protection never means the absence of divine protection. There may be times your husband is not a very good "keeper." He may be asleep on the job and allow you to be unprotected; but you have another Husband, who always keeps wakeful watch and guards your every moment. Isaiah 54:4 says, "For your Maker is your Husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer ..." The same God who protected and provided for Hagar, and sustained Marie Durand, is the same God who will do so for you.



Reflection Questions

Have you ever experienced a time when the man who was supposed to protect you fell short—or left you exposed? How did that affect your sense of safety, trust, or identity as a woman?

When you feel unprotected in your marriage or relationships, do you turn to God as your Defender—or do you tend to retreat into fear, control, or resentment? What might it look like to let God be your Keeper in those moments?

Hagar called God "El Roi"—the God who sees. In what area of your life do you most need to remember that God sees you, hears you, and will provide even when others fail you?

Prayer

“Lord, when human protection fails me, remind me that You never do. Open my eyes, like Hagar’s, to see Your provision even in the wilderness. Be my Keeper, my Defender, and the One who sees me. I rest in Your faithfulness, even when others fall short. Amen.”

Four

Grieving the Loss

“He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24)

A lot can happen between two verses. Between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2, there’s something called the “Gap Theory.” Simply put, many scholars believe there may be eons of unrecorded history between verse one, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” and verse two, “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.” Since there’s no mention of God ever making anything imperfect, there is a possibility that God created a flawless world and something happened, a cataclysm perhaps, to make it formless and void. This was the catalyst for a potential *remaking* of life as we know it today.

Eve had her own cataclysm between two verses—being driven out of the garden of Eden with Adam in Genesis 3:24—and starting a new life with him in Genesis 4:1. We aren’t given any detail

about this period, but we can be assured that she grieved at least two losses: The loss of protection from her husband, and the loss of the beauty of her safe and perfect world. For Eve, it was the emotional loss of Adam that was probably harder to bear.

There's a certain excitement for young couples first starting out in life. It's them against the world as they band together to build their lives and dream of a home and family. There will be setbacks, challenges, financial struggles, sicknesses, of course; but their union is greater than any trial. They have comfort in knowing, no matter what, *We've got each other's backs!*

But Adam was no longer completely safe for Eve. He had failed to protect her from the serpent and had betrayed her before God. This realization was, undoubtedly, hard for Eve to bear. Her friend, confidant, counterpart, lover, had wrecked her soul with his disloyalty. Who could she turn to when he was all she had ever known? He was, after all, the only other person on earth! There was deep grief on Eve's part, certainly, as they fled the Garden and tried to rebuild their lives.

Eve's feelings of betrayal cut like a knife, and it's unlikely her grief ever went away completely. Wounds may heal but the scar will always be felt as a sober reminder of the past. I think God designed it this way to remind Eve, and us, we can never fully put our trust in man.

"John" and "Katie" had been married for a decade when they came to my office. They were in the thick of life, both working full-time, and busy with small children. It had been discovered that John had slept with his brother's wife—three times. John's brother and his wife were trying to work through it, but Katie refused to see her sister-in-law or go to family gatherings, creating even more tension in the family. She was reeling from the disclosure, "I'm shocked, embarrassed, and humiliated. I don't know who I can trust anymore."

It's one thing to sleep with an old flame, or even a stranger on the internet, but your brother's wife? Even from my counseling perspective, it was extreme. This wasn't the first time he had cheated, either. He admitted to me privately in another session, "I wanted to leave her, but she didn't let me." The more we talked, the more I saw the echoes of Adam—John's dad was also unfaithful to his mother. Shockingly, Katie became pregnant during their

time in counseling, which further complicated their relationship. The last comment in my notes from her was, “I feel like he’s never going to change; there’s no compassion.”

What do you do, Eve, Katie, wife, when you’re holding the ashes of broken dreams and shattered promises, looking at the smoking charr of the house which has been burnt to the ground? Grief is not always about physical death. Often it is the death of expectations: The dream of a perfect family, a tender protector, the hope of a faithful companion, or the longing for spiritual leadership. These “living losses” are no less real, and no less shattering. They create a silent ache that follows a wife into the kitchen, the bedroom, and the pew at church.

King David suffered his fair share of disappointments in relationships and had to grieve several significant losses. In 2 Samuel chapters 13-18, we read a dark and twisted story about David and his wayward children. David had a son named Amnon, who raped his half-sister, Tamar, David’s daughter. This infuriated their half-brother, Absalom, and he ended up murdering Amnon in revenge. Amnon’s murder prompted Absalom to flee into exile for three years, but David deeply loved Absalom and he “mourned for his son every day” (2 Sam. 13:27). When Absalom returned, he cunningly manipulated and divided his father’s inner circle and attempted to overthrow David and make himself king.

In the end, Absalom is killed, David is restored, and the story ends with David weeping over his son saying, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33). David’s grief was so deep, he was reprimanded by his commander for demoralizing the people who remained loyal to David and making the situation worse! David ended up losing two sons, Amnon and Absalom, while having his kingdom divided, running for his life, betrayed by advisors and friends, all within a period of a few short years. At the end of his life, another son, Adonijah, also tried to make himself king and is killed by his brother, Solomon!

I can imagine David in his younger days when he first became king. He was thirty years old, full of strength and vigor. David had overcome the persecution of Saul, the opposition of his rivals, and was uniting Israel under one banner. As the elders of Israel anointed him king, they exclaimed, “We are your bone and we are

your flesh” (2 Sam. 5:1), which was also Adam’s declaration to Eve in Genesis 2:23. Commitment, honor, respect—that was David’s expectation from his kinsmen, as well as every woman’s expectation from her husband.

As David grew in prominence, he built a house for his family. The Bible doesn’t give many specifics, but it talks about David’s house in two different places, meaning it was extravagant, made of luxurious and rare cedar trees. The Bible says, “David became greater and greater ... And David realized that the LORD had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for the sake of the people of Israel” (2 Sam. 5:12).

I can picture young and naïve David standing there, hands on his hips, looking this magnificent house which he was constructing, saying to himself, “I have arrived! It’s going to be smooth sailing from here!” Little did David know that his greatest pain would come from inside his own house, from the people he loved the most. In much the same way, many wives begin marriage with bright hope, convinced of a beautiful future that lies ahead. Yet, like David, they often discover the darkest days don’t come from battles outside the home, but from disappointments, betrayals, and sorrows that arise within the walls where they expected only joy.

Fast-forward to David’s mid-life in 2 Samuel 11. He’s probably between forty-five and fifty years old. We read of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, her unplanned pregnancy, and the murder of her husband in David’s attempt to cover up the scandal. In chapter 12, we read of God’s judgment on David because of his sin. Just as with Adam and Eve, the consequences are far-reaching and intergenerational: Nathan the prophet declares that the sword will never depart David’s house.

Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die...Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so

that he was very sick. David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them. Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was still alive, we spoke to him and he did not listen to our voice. How then can we tell him that the child is dead, since he might do himself harm!" But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me." (2 Samuel 12:13-23, NKJV)

"He will not return to me..."

David spoke of his infant son, but perhaps you would say this about your husband? What if he *never* returns to you emotionally and the marriage is as good as dead? This is a sobering reality for

countless Christian women who feel stuck in loveless, lifeless marriages. Many stay in the relationship holding to their conviction that the only real “out” is adultery (Matt. 5:31); others stay for the sake of the children, for financial security, or other personal reasons.

What do you do when hope is dead, when the marriage is cold, stiff, and lifeless? King David, this *man after God’s own heart*, gives us a good example to follow with five actions in grieving the losses.

1. David took ownership of his sin.

It’s easy to point the finger when we feel hurt. Defenses go up, walls are built, arrows fly. Yes, your husband should have protected you, he should have led, he should have *done better*. We’re not minimizing his abdication of responsibility to care for you as a Christian husband should, nor are we minimizing your depth of hurt; but let’s examine your outward actions for a moment. There were times your gentleness was lacking; there were moments you had fierce anger. You were sometimes more concerned with the *speck in his eye* than the *log in yours* (Matt. 7:5). As easy as it is to point all the blame, he sometimes felt disrespected, maybe also unloved, which caused him to shut down and turn away.

David acknowledged his own guilt, “I have sinned ...” Confession is imperative as it lessens our offended anger and hastens forgiveness. When we take a measure of responsibility for the way things turned out, even if it’s only a small part, our hearts begin to soften. David penned Psalm 51 grieving the tragedy of losing his son with Bathsheba. A key line is verse 17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” When a wife focuses only on her broken heart, she’ll frequently take on a victim mentality in response to her husband’s actions. Her bitterness grows and she becomes a calloused woman, often emotionally detached from even her own children. But if she is “broken and contrite,” owning and acknowledging her own sin, she will be more likely to move past her trauma, look to Christ, and find healing.

To be “contrite” means to feel deeply remorseful and repentant from the heart. Even if your outward actions have been next to

perfect, the inner “thoughts and attitudes of the heart” are judged before God (Heb. 4:12). If you were to look closely, thoughts of revenge might be there, feelings of retribution, the allurements of adultery, possibly even murder. Maybe you’d never do it, but thinking about it still makes you guilty—that’s how much heart issues matter to God (Matt. 5:28). We must take moments to daily reflect upon our heart’s condition and mourn our own sin. This gives less time to judge the actions of others and broadens our perspective. An attitude of repentance always proceeds healing (James 5:16).

While being contrite is a state of the heart, “contrition” means to do something that demonstrates repentance—it’s an action word. Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” The worst possible enemy is the one with whom we share a bed, but we are still commanded to show them loving actions—to bless them, do good to them, and pray for them. We can *bless with boundaries* and *love with limits*. We can do good without necessarily opening ourselves up to more harm, but we *must* love. My wife often says, “Love disarms the heart.” Perhaps loving your husband through consistent actions would disarm his heart? Perhaps it would disarm yours?

Personal repentance is a fundamental part of the grieving process, as we acknowledge our sin of idolizing our marriage, as well as our opinion of what we think our lives should look like. As Christian author, Elisabeth Elliot wrote, “To pray ‘Thy will be done,’ I must also be willing, if the answer requires it, that my will be undone.”

Part of David’s grieving process was repenting over the dream of the family he wanted with Bathsheba. The desire for the child to survive was a good desire, but God had other plans for David’s life which included remedial discipline. David had to surrender his will through repentance.

Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy

salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.
(Ps. 51:10-12)

I had a client tell me that breaking up with his fiancé had caused his relationship with God to falter. I told him, “Young man, if your relationship causes you to lose faith in God, you’ve made that relationship an idol. You’ve elevated your fiancé above your God.” A fault with American Christianity is that we have often made marriage and family the pinnacle of a godly, happy life. For many wives, husbands are idols and marriage the shrine at which they worship. When the house crumbles, so does their faith. True repentance recognizes this tendency towards idolatry and responds in contrition, even in grief.

2. David pressed into God.

David didn’t curse God. He didn’t rail. He didn’t accuse. He didn’t become angry at what he felt was God’s unfairness or injustice. He didn’t say, “How could You let this happen to me? How could You let this innocent child die?” Instead, the Bible says he worshipped while grieving.

The Hebrew word for “worshipped” here is “shāchâh” which implies bodily humility. David was face to the ground in total submission to God’s sovereignty. He couldn’t control outcomes, so he *let go* in recognition of God’s providence, even in the heart aching death of his son. David’s *shāchâh* encapsulated a heart posture of reverence and signified his trust in God’s plan.

Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Pressing into God means pressing into His peace. This is not merely peace *with* God, but God’s *own* peace—a tranquility and security that flows from His nature, shared with the believer. Some commentators call it “the divine tranquility.”²⁰ This peace isn’t irrational; it’s transcendent above the circumstances.

In this world, we will have difficulties which will sometimes make us depressed; but as we press into our relationship with God, our faith can *supernaturally transcend* our need to know why, or our need to stay in bed all day, or our need to be angry, or

our need for vindication. We can know, with absolute certainty, that there is a God-given, doesn't-make-sense, abiding peace and joy in our hearts which transcends all understanding, even in the grief of a dysfunctional marriage.

I remember many days of weeping in my life, post-divorce, disappointments, failures, and tragedies; but worship and meditation on God's promises would always transcend my difficulty. Like David, I often found, "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5).

3. David took time to grieve and let go.

In 2 Samuel 12:16, the Bible says, "David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his household stood beside him to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them." David's mourning over his own sin, and for the sick child, lasted seven days. He prayed for a miracle and entered a season of grieving. He hoped beyond hope that his baby would live; but when the child died, he washed his face, got up from the ground, and let go. His second son with Bathsheba, Solomon, would pen a contemplative lament in which many have found solace during difficult seasons of life.

*To everything there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to break down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones
together,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to count as lost,
a time to keep and a time to discard,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace. (Eccl. 3:1-8)*

I reference Ecclesiastes 3:6 in counseling often, “a time to search and a time to give up as lost.” Let that verse sink in for a moment. David had to grieve the physical loss of the child, but he also had to “give up as lost” the dream of the child who would have potentially been his successor. As painful as it was losing a child, this was the loss of David’s dream of legacy, as well.

Many women spend decades ruminating the *losses* of their relationship, instead of accepting that the dream of an ideal marriage may never be fulfilled. “To give up as lost” doesn’t mean that she gives up on the marriage completely, sees it as hopeless, or gets a divorce. What it does mean is that she gives up as lost the dream of what she felt the marriage should have been. The home she created in her mind must be painfully disassembled, brick-by-brick, and her view of marriage recast with more realistic expectations and deeper trust in God.

For many grieving wives, though, the “time to weep” becomes their life, instead of just a passing season. They become a victim, and the loss becomes an idol. They bow down before it, lay before it, and give it offerings of time, tears and devotion. Instead of embracing a season of “to give up what was lost,” they spend their lives searching for answers which never come.

David let it go. In verse 20, after he mourned and wept for seven days, Scripture says he “arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, changed his clothes and worshiped.” This signifies closure and resumption of life. Though there might always be pain in thinking about the loss of the child, he resolved to let go and embrace the life he had been given.

4. David kept an eternal perspective.

In 2 Samuel 12:22, “David said, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’” But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”

David understood that there was a life to come where he would be reunited with the child he lost. The child could not come back to him, but he could go to the child. This illustrates an important principle in dealing with grief in marriage, as well: We must remember that this dysfunctional life is not all there is. We must

refocus on eternal life which is shortly to come, especially when our present lives are difficult.

The Apostle Paul knew pain and suffering well. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, he gives a list of his hardships: “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” What enabled him to continue his mission of spreading the Gospel despite the opposition and disappointments he endured? Clearly, it was his eternal perspective.

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18)

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Colossians 3:1-2)

When grief comes, we must remember that suffering is temporary, and we have an eternity of joy soon to come. We must change our vision from things of the earth to things of heaven. David suffered immense pain by losing his infant son, having a daughter raped, a son murdered, another son betray him and killed in battle, along with many other personal failures and relationship disappointments. But here’s a thought: If David’s worst heartache lasted 30 years and he’s been in heaven now for

about 3000 years, that's only 1% of his existence that was filled with pain. He's had 99% of his existence experiencing exceedingly great joy, filled with glory (1 Peter 1:8). We don't know if David remembers his pain, but it's safe to say he's currently overwhelmed with the glory of God and the goodness of Jesus Christ. Eternal perspective helps us reframe hardship as incredibly temporary and, in the grand scheme of eternity, a small footnote in a much larger story.

Knowing the end of our story helps us endure the middle. And if, within our brief paragraph of life, we hear Jesus say to us, "You must learn obedience from the things you suffer" (Heb. 5:8), then we need not grow despondent or depressed. It's just a moment, and our lives are like a passing vapor (James 4:14). We will soon be with Christ, and to "depart and be with Christ" as Paul said, "is far better" (Phil. 1:23). It may not lessen the hurt much now, but the more we ruminate on a problem, the bigger it becomes. When marriage gets tough, we must remember our frustrations are temporary and transitory. This suffering will one day soon be over. We look to an eternal kingdom, a better country (Heb. 11:16), and fix our hope on life eternal to come with Christ. In that place, as Revelation 24:4 says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Author Greg Morse writes, "For what do we wait? We wait for our *blessed hope*, the appearing of Jesus Christ. He is a very different hope than we have on earth. He is a happy hope, a hope that shall not fail, falter, or break. Once buried, He is the only hope that conquered the grave. Do you lament a life that never came? Behold our 'resurrection and the life.' Our Hope sits enthroned at the Father's right hand, immortal; our inheritance, imperishable. The believer's true life appears when He does: 'When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.' On that day when He casts His children's reproach to the bottom of the sea, the saints will be seen—even in our mundane, ordinary lives—as the great treasures of Christ's crown, the kings and queens of heaven. It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, that He might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for Him; let us be glad

and rejoice in His salvation.’ Life begins at His arrival. The adventure begins beyond the grave.”²¹

5. David embraced the life he had.

*Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon.
(2 Sam. 12:24)*

One of the best ways to overcome grief, as David’s story demonstrates, is to embrace and celebrate the common graces of life which God gives every day. After David mourned the loss of his first baby, he got up and celebrated the grace of food as he ate; he “put on lotions” (2 Sam. 12:20) and enjoyed the grace of calming perfume and ointment. David celebrated the grace of intimacy with his wife and the birth of his son, Solomon. In the Psalms, repeatedly, he celebrates the grace of new mornings, the beauty of nature, and the goodness of God. Thankfulness for small things can shift perspective in a big way.

We should embrace each new day as a gift, “Thank You, God, that I’m alive! That I can see! That I can move!” Eating a sandwich, drinking a warm cup of coffee, or having clean drinking water is a blessing, “Thank You for providing daily bread when so many go without.” Enjoying the comfort of a warm bed and clean sheets at night, “Thank You, Lord, for a safe place to rest and sleep in peace.” Receiving a spontaneous smile, a joke, or an infrequent embrace from your husband, “Thank You for this moment of joy, Lord. Help me treasure it.” Getting a text from a friend, “Thank You for friendships that remind me I’m not alone.” Celebrating beauty and wonder in a sunset, “Thank You for beauty that lifts my spirit and reminds me You are near.”

A gratitude journal is a simple yet powerful tool for shifting perspective and cultivating joy. By regularly writing down small things we’re thankful for, we can deepen contentment, cultivate greater appreciation, and even improve sleep and overall well-being. Over time, a gratitude journal becomes more than a record of good things; it becomes a reminder that hope, joy, and meaning can be found even in difficult places of life. When we begin to thank God consistently for these small things, we start seeing the

world differently: We become more present, we complain less, we notice blessings instead of burdens, and our hearts become more open to God's presence in daily life.

One inspirational example of a wife embracing life through many griefs is the author, Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015), missionary widow of the famed martyr, Jim Elliot. Jim was killed, less than three years into their marriage, trying to reach the Auca Indians in Ecuador. Elisabeth found herself a widow at 28 years old and the mother of their ten-month-old child. Though she is more often known for her husband's martyrdom, Elisabeth's second and third marriages were marked by hardship. Her second husband, Addison Leitch, died of cancer after only four years of marriage. She described her third marriage to Lars Gren as difficult, with tensions flaring over her public ministry and their different personalities.

Lars' initial help with Elisabeth's ministry eventually morphed into a relationship of control. He told her, "I want to build ... fences around you, and I want to stand on all sides." Elisabeth felt overwhelmed with the demands of her flourishing ministry, and took his words as encouraging and protective, but Lars would slowly box her in. Biographer Ellen Vaughn describes their marriage like this: "I could see ... Elisabeth's understandable loneliness, deep need for affirmation, physical hunger, weariness, and desire to be 'protected' [that] gradually, insidiously, led her, step by cajoling step, into a difficult third marriage that confined and controlled her for the rest of her long life."²²

Elisabeth would later confide to close friends that she knew, almost immediately, she had made a mistake in marrying Lars. According to one biographer, when the newlyweds returned home to collect their luggage, Lars stubbornly refused to leave for their honeymoon "until he was good and ready." From start to end of her 38-year marriage to Lars, their relationship was often defined by his anger and control. Biographers describe how her once steady independence was slowly stripped away. Lars determined the rhythms of her days—when she might sip a cup of tea, draw a bath, or go to bed. He checked the odometer on her car to be sure she hadn't made an unapproved stop. He kept the thermostat under his authority, listened in on her phone calls, and took it upon himself to decline invitations on her behalf, often at the very

last minute. One biography noted, “[Lars] introduced her at the podium, adjusted her microphone, managed the book table, and made sure she ate. He decided when she rested and when she worked and when she socialized ... he berated her for errors in speaking ... even critiquing her posture.” When angered, his punishment was silence that could stretch on for days.²³

Many readers will bristle at this description of what could be considered an emotionally abusive relationship. *How dare he treat her like that! Why didn't she leave?* The theological underpinnings of her acquiescence can be seen in her own words. Just months after marrying Lars, she gave an interview to *Christianity Today*, where she lamented America's high divorce rate, insisting that couples too often confused infatuation with true love. She recalled hearing a feminist declare that “marriage and motherhood are like deaths,” and then surprisingly agreed. “That's exactly what it's supposed to be. When a woman marries, she dies to her past, her name, her other commitments, her identity, and herself. And why? Because Jesus says, ‘He that loseth his life shall find it.’”²⁴

For Elisabeth, the calling to love her husband well, despite his controlling tendencies, was her highest aim. She valued God's prohibition against divorce higher than her “freedom.” She lived not for popular opinion, but for the glory of God—even in the grief of a dysfunctional marriage. Does this seem extreme by today's standards? Certainly. Denying oneself and following Christ's commands is often viewed as absurdity by our culture. But Jesus plainly stated, if anyone desires to follow Him, there will be heavy crosses to bear (Matt. 16:24).

“It is in the giving of ourselves, sometimes at great cost, that we find joy. Marriage will cost you dearly. But the cost is nothing compared to the glory that may be revealed in it,” Elisabeth wrote. She chose to remain faithful, quiet, and gracious, speaking publicly about surrendering her dreams, trusting God's sovereignty, and embracing life and its suffering without complaint. Her writings (e.g., *Suffering is Never for Nothing, Let Me Be a Woman*) have influenced generations of Christian women, and her life has had significant impact. It could be argued that it was her suffering, and subsequent lessons through grieving, which gave her a platform to reach a multitude. She is famously

quoted as saying, “The secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances.”

Grieving with thanksgiving and hope is one of the deepest and most Christlike callings a believer can live out (see Appendix 1 for a Biblical approach to the grieving process). It doesn't mean pretending everything is okay; rather, we are anchoring ourselves in a perspective rooted in faith, God's promises, and the eternal hope that only He can give. Gratitude in the midst of sorrow doesn't erase the pain but reframes it in light of God's presence and promises. When we bring our mourning under the covering of thanksgiving, we are testifying that loss does not have the final word. With that attitude, grief becomes both an expression of love for what was lost and a sacred trust that God is redeeming what we cannot yet see.

Scripture shows us that God welcomes honest lament but woven into our grief is a call to remember God's faithfulness with gratitude. Thanksgiving becomes an anchor of trust, not because we are thankful *for* tragedy, but because even in the darkest valley, we know God is near to the brokenhearted (Matt. 5:4). When we choose to worship through grief, we lift our eyes from what has been taken to the One who promises restoration. We acknowledge that sorrow is real, yet not final, for Christ has secured resurrection hope. This recognition transforms our grief into gratitude and allows us to carry pain honestly with a heart that leans into eternal perspective. In doing so, our sorrow, mingled with hope, becomes both a testimony of faith and a quiet act of resistance against despair.



Reflection Questions

Which “loss” in your marriage has been the hardest to grieve—was it the loss of trust, emotional safety, dreams for your future, or something else? Why do you think that particular loss has affected you the most?

What does taking personal ownership look like in your story, even if your husband was the one who deeply failed you? How does repentance (not blame) open the door for healing?

Are there any dreams about your marriage or life that you now sense God is asking you to surrender? What might it look like for you to grieve, let go, and embrace the life you actually have?

Prayer

“Father, You see every broken place in my heart and every dream I’ve laid at Your feet. Help me grieve what was lost without becoming bitter. Give me courage to repent, strength to release, and faith to trust You with what remains. Restore joy in my heart and keep my eyes fixed on eternity. Amen.”

Five

Remaking the Heart

“I have acquired a manchild from the Lord.” (Genesis 4:1)

The Bible is silent on what Eve felt after the Fall, but her emotions were probably reeling. Betrayed twice by her husband and banished from the Garden, God “drove [them] out” into an unknown land to the east of Eden (Gen. 3:24). They weren’t given a two-week notice, either. The original language denotes a *forceful expulsion* that probably left them both scared and spinning. Eve was evicted from her perfect home and forced to make a new life outside of the immediate protection, provision, and presence of God. Their new land was green and beautiful, but also vast and uncertain, filled with many dangers of the fallen world—rocky terrain, wild animals, poisonous plants; any misstep could now result in certain death.

I can imagine Eve looking over the expansive wilderness nervously. Adam, though strong, was now forced to labor by the sweat of his brow the now obstinate and unforgiving ground. His body, too, had been affected by the Fall, and she noticed his

tiredness and strange physical pains. Her beautiful world had been shattered and replaced by a disturbing new reality.

Adam and Eve found comfort in each other, though, and in Genesis 4:1 we see their intimacy leading to the first human ever born, Cain. Despite all the challenges, finally, a moment of joy! “I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord,” Eve exclaimed. Shortly thereafter, we see her birth a second son, Abel. The Bible doesn’t tell us how many years passed, but it’s safe to assume that the brothers were relatively young when Cain became a murderer and killed Abel.

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (Gen. 4:8)

The loss of a child is difficult for any mother, but to have one son *murder* another? There are no words. After the killing, we’re told that “Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen. 4:16). There’s no textual evidence of Cain ever reconciling with his parents, and the Bible insinuates God more-or-less banished him to the land of Nod, which means “to wander” or “to flee.” Eve seemed to have lost both her sons in one day.

I wonder how much blame Eve shifted onto Adam for Abel’s death and Cain’s exile? After all, had Adam not stood idly by watching her be deceived by the serpent, they wouldn’t be in this mess! She might have frustratedly viewed Adam as an uninvolved father who rarely corrected Cain, or favored Abel, which could have been a precursor to Cain’s horrific action. We can only speculate. Nonetheless, their perfect lives had been upended by Adam’s inaction and irresponsibility and now her sons were gone. Perhaps Eve was at her breaking point?

The Jewish Midrash is a timeless collection of interpretive literature that fills in the gaps and paints fuller pictures of stories from the Old Testament. It helps us imagine what might have happened *between the lines* of the text. The Midrash supposes that after Abel was killed, Adam separated from Eve, for a time, in his pain. As a counselor, I would argue that the opposite was true—Eve withdrew from her husband in grief. Compounding her sorrow,

the murder of their son and Cain's exile caused her to completely shut down and separate from Adam.

Eve was doing instinctively what women have always done: Put up walls to protect themselves from more pain. The Midrash says that it was 130 years later, at the urging of their descendant Lamech, that "Adam knew his wife again," resulting in their third son, Seth.²⁵ This might explain the word, "again," to mean Adam's desire for Eve (or vice versa) was renewed after a long abstinence. That makes sense, doesn't it? Eve was hurt so deeply that she separated from her husband for a season between the births of Abel and Seth (see Genesis 5).

We tend to forget that these larger-than-life Biblical figures were human just like us. Eve was the first woman to struggle with feelings of resentment and anger, grief and loss, at her husband's disloyalty and the death of her son. Her injury was so deep, her walls so high, she possibly disconnected from Adam completely. Her heart was with Cain's, in a way, as she wandered in a wilderness of her own emotions.

Eve probably wrestled with God and pain for years, just like any grieving woman would. She had to learn to trust Adam again; she had to learn to trust God again. Assuredly, over time God dealt with issues of her heart, and slowly, she softened. Embracing Adam again, the birth of Seth was Eve's turning point and heralded a continuation of marital life and renewed hope after a prolonged period of mourning. It was the process, though, which deeply changed her.

How can pain not change you? Most Christians have been taught that pain has a purpose. God can take an illness, a financial disaster, a rebellious child, and work something good out of it. It's drilled into our heads that "God works all things together for good ..." (Rom. 8:28), but a difficult husband feels different because it's so *personal*.

Why does the pain of a husband reverberate so deeply in the hearts of women, more than other significant losses? The answer is clear in Ephesians 5:28-29, "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church ..." The truth is that a husband and wife are *one body*, and it is impossible for

them to separate their physical, emotional, and spiritual union. Just as it is unnatural to abuse yourself, so the betrayal of *one flesh* (Mark 10:8) is also unnatural. That's why we wince at self-harm behaviors, like cutting. We know such behaviors are perversely abnormal. In a similar way, when a husband strikes against his wife, he also strikes against himself.

All women who have been struck by their husbands, like Eve, wrestle with forgiveness in their hearts. Offense becomes a wall that divides and barricades a woman in a prison of her own mind. She will often spend inordinate amounts of time ruminating over the offense, obsessing over the details, and grappling with anger towards her husband. This negativity becomes her new normal and her heart becomes inflamed. Left unaddressed, unforgiveness poisons intimacy with God and others, hardening the heart and leaving little room for joy. But when forgiveness takes root, even in the ashes of betrayal, it becomes the soil where hope can grow again. It's not easy, and may need to be practiced daily, but forgiveness is the first step toward tearing down the walls of resentment and rebuilding a life of love. Understandably, there are some pains which are especially hard to forgive, but the barrier to a changed heart still starts with forgiveness.

"Linda" came to see me with an incredibly hardened heart. She had been married to "Johnny" for 30 years and tried several counselors without success. They both had been married before, and she was considering leaving him, primarily, over what she felt was the preference of his children over their marriage, "He will always choose his kids over me," she told me. Linda was bitter, resentful, and intensely angry. As she recounted her experiences, I could see her point of feeling betrayed, at times, but I also knew the difficulties of navigating a blended family.

In a subsequent session with Johnny alone, his rebuttal was that his children did love Linda, and they had wonderful times together through the years. Despite the many positives, "There are so many resentments she has towards my family," he said. "It's hard to agree with everything she's saying about my kids, and she's upset because I'm not agreeing with her. She harbors so much anger towards me. She reminds me all the time in how I have failed her." Johnny was at a loss. "She can't forgive; she can't let go," he said.

Johnny was nearly 80 years old, financially independent, and he and Linda had a beautiful life together in many ways. They traveled on lavish vacations, had quality time together eating at their favorite restaurants, went to great concert venues, and frequently enjoyed their children and grandchildren—almost always together. He had been faithful to her for 30 years and, overall, had been a loving, dependable partner. Maybe they had some disagreements about his children, but Linda had almost anything she could desire, as well as many positive connections with her husband. He also appeared to be making some changes she was asking of him, including attempts at making her feel more prioritized as his wife.

I tried to point out the good, redirect her focus to Christ, and encouraged her to be grateful. The negativity and husband-bashing only continued to the point where I dreaded seeing her on my schedule. In desperation, I tried another approach. There's a counseling technique called *Paradoxical Intention* where the counselor says something shocking in an attempt to jar the client out of a warped perspective. I tried it. "Well, at least you don't have much longer to deal with Johnny," I said. "He'll be dead soon." She stopped talking and gave me a surprised look, "Well, that's a terrible thing to say," she said, and immediately went back to criticizing him. I see many women like Linda who have erected a wall of unforgiveness around their hearts. The husband will often improve in his actions towards her; the problem is, she can't see his efforts because she refuses to lower the barrier of unforgiveness between them.

The first step on the path to a changed heart starts with forgiveness, and it is truly the catalyst for taking down walls. In Matthew 18, Jesus taught a powerful and sobering lesson about forgiveness and its relation to the heart.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his

servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:21-35)

The wicked servant owed ten thousand talents. One talent was worth about twenty years wages, so this was a massive amount of money; yet he refused to forgive someone else a much smaller debt of hundred denarii—about three months' salary. The wicked servant discounted the grace and forgiveness that was shown to him by his master, while being angry and punitive about the debt he was owed. How often do we discount the grace and forgiveness

shown to us in Christ, while holding the sins of others against them? How often do we put others in “prison” until we feel the debt is satisfied?

The point of the parable here is not to minimize the debt owed, nor to say it should not have been paid. Three months’ wages is still a lot of money, but it paled in comparison to the wicked servant’s original debt. Jesus is admonishing us to show mercy because of the mercy that we’ve been liberally and freely shown. Most certainly, there will be debts collected on judgment day for unrepentant sin; but we must remove ourselves from the place of judge and show mercy to those who are in debt to us (Matt. 6:12).

It is said that pride is the *original sin*, and the serpent’s lure to the forbidden fruit was, indeed, a prideful declaration: “You shall be like God” (Gen. 3:5, KJV). As much as we recoil at the thought of being like God, the underlying temptation is still very much there—especially regarding the judgment of others. We often think we know better than God about who should be judged and how.

An offended wife holds court in her heart. Her husband is guilty as charged and doesn’t deserve mercy. If he doesn’t act like a husband, why should she act like a wife? She’ll dole out punishments befitting of his actions to remind him of his transgressions. Those punishments can be malicious and many. She is the judge, jury, jailer, and with each bang of the gavel the serpent hisses in delight.

The remedy for our judgmental tendencies is seeing our own sin rightly. Romans 3 reminds us, “There is none righteous, not even one” (v. 10), and “... all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (v. 23). In our unrepentant state, we deserved eternal punishment and separation from God because of our sin; but Jesus showed forgiveness and mercy. He expects us to do the same. As we contemplate the weight of our own sin, even the secret sins of the heart, we will begin to view others with greater compassion and respond in greater kindness. Only then will our hearts truly begin to change.

What’s beautiful to see is a remaking of Eve’s heart condition between Cain’s birth and Seth’s birth as God gently deals with her deeply rooted emotions. She seems to brag on herself with her firstborn, “*I have acquired a manchild from the Lord*”; but when Seth is born, she speaks with gratitude tempered by sorrow, “God

has appointed for me another offspring ...” Eve is much more reverent after Seth’s birth, using the more general Hebrew word for God, “Elohim” in Genesis 4:25, rather than the covenantal name of “YHWH” (“LORD”) in Genesis 4:1. This is taken by some commentators as indicating her faith in God has deepened. One writer noted, “She is in a sadder, humbler frame than when she named her firstborn ... and therefore does not employ the personal name of the Lord ... Her heart is not so downcast as when she called her second son ‘Abel’ (vanity). Her faith in God is sedate and pensive.”²⁶ In other words, Eve has matured spiritually, she has forgiven Adam, and her heart has been humbled. She attributes Seth wholly to God’s grace, not her own doing, and she holds this blessing with a quieter, faithful hope. What made the difference? Clearly, it was the suffering she endured.

I often quote Romans 5:3 in sessions, “... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” How many women give up when faced with suffering in relationships? No one is going to argue that life is hard. Marriage is hard, finances are hard, kids are hard, being a full-time mom is hard, being a working mom is hard. When confronted by a hard husband, it often feels easier to throw in the towel and walk away. You’re tired of fighting, tired of being let down, tired of walking on eggshells; but suffering “produces” good things in our hearts—primarily endurance, character, and hope. Let’s look more closely at these three positive heart changes which suffering produces.

ENDURANCE

I went through a season in my life where I ran about 10 miles every week. When I started, it was extremely difficult. Running was not enjoyable at all because there was suffering involved—aching legs, sweat, physical strain, and emotional challenge; but the more I ran, the more I learned to endure the suffering. I wouldn’t say I ever got to the point where running was *enjoyable* necessarily; but later on, I saw the way it was changing my body, and I did start to enjoy the results.

“No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields a harvest of righteousness and peace to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). The suffering that life brings, and the discipline that God gives, is painful; but our focus must be “later on” to help us endure.

Right now, this work God has started in you is very difficult; but *later on* He “will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Right now, you feel rejected and abandoned by your husband; but *later on* God “will Himself restore you and make you strong” (1 Peter 5:10). Right now, you may not understand why your marriage is in shambles, but *later on* you will “fully know” (1 Cor. 13:12) the reasons why. So, until *later on*, you must endure!

“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.” (Hebrews 10:36)

The word for endurance here in the Greek is “hypomonē,” meaning “to remain under.” It describes someone carrying a heavy load by *choice*, rather than trying to escape it. *Hypomonē* isn’t passive patience, but steadfast, active perseverance in the face of suffering, trials, or delay; it’s an intentional refusal to give up or turn away. The early Christians in Hebrews were enduring persecution, the loss of their property, and social rejection (Heb. 10:32-24). Their lives were extremely difficult, but their ongoing faithfulness mattered so they might receive what was promised. Have you felt persecution from your husband? Scripture calls you to endure. Do you deeply feel the loss of your best years? Christ teaches you to endure. Have you suffered the sting of your husband’s rejection? God promises to give you the ability to endure.

Galatians 6:9 reminds us, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). We must shift our perspective from the temporal to the eternal and remind ourselves that we are enduring for an everlasting reward, not necessarily a better relationship. If the marriage improves over time, that’s much to be thankful for; but if

not, we are still instructed to endure hardship (2 Tim. 2:3). If we are to be taught character, hardship is often the school (Heb. 5:3).

CHARACTER

Nothing reveals the heart's inner character better than when it's confronted through conflict. It never ceases to amaze me to find the ugly condition of my heart revealed when my wife and I argue. I am never more selfish, more angry, more judgmental, more impatient, more unwilling to yield, than when we're at odds with each other. God thus designed it this way.

God isn't concerned so much about our comfort as He is with our character. It's easy to point the finger at all the wrongs our spouse has committed and how they've wounded us. The pain is real, and our feelings are valid—we're not going to discount that. But instead of throwing punches, this upsetting moment presents an opportunity to examine our hearts. Marriage is the ultimate proving ground for the heart, and intimate relationships give us daily opportunities to set aside our pride and be conformed into Christ's image. I heard it said once, "If you want to serve Christ, stay single; but if you want to be like Jesus, get married because there's a lot of death involved." Truly, Christ laid down His life to be with the ones He loved, and we are called to do the same.

In Galatians 5, Paul writes, "... those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v. 24) and are called to "not gratify the desires of the flesh" (v. 16). Christians are admonished to kill the carnal with all its heart-corrupting rancidity, and to aim to "walk in the Spirit" (v. 16).

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness, self-control ... (Galatians 5:22)*

Fruit-bearing, in the Galatians 5 way, is the pinnacle of our service to God and to others, and the goal for which all Christians should strive. We relish the *produce*, but hardly do we enjoy the *process*. But how can we tell if we truly have abiding fruit in our lives unless we are presented with opportunities for their manifestation?

*How will I know if I have love, unless I'm tempted to hate?
 How will I understand true joy, until my happiness is taken
 away?
 How will I know peace, unless my world is in chaos?
 How will I know I have patience, unless my patience is tried?
 How will I show kindness, except when I am ridiculed?
 How will I demonstrate goodness, except will I'm tempted to
 do evil?
 How will I know I'm faithful, except when I'm tempted to be
 unfaithful?
 How will I show myself gentle, until I'm treated harshly?
 How will I recognize I'm self-controlled, unless I feel out-of-
 control?*

Maybe you've been loving, gentle, and kind to your husband; you've been a fruitful branch and a patient wife, despite his actions. The sobering good news is that Christ expects even *more* good fruit from you.

*... every branch that does bear fruit He
 prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (John
 15:2)*

God is never satisfied with “good enough” and is always encouraging us to “excel more and more” (1 Thess. 4:10), especially in the development of our character. “By this My Father is glorified,” Jesus said, “that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples” (John 15:8). Trials become the furnace where dead and sinful works are burned up, stripping away what is shallow or self-reliant and drawing us into deeper dependence on Christ. Just as gold is refined by fire, our hearts are remade through the pressures of adversity, teaching us endurance, humility, and a faith that cannot be shaken. God’s goal is heart transformation, shaping us into vessels that reflect His glory more fully, and bear fruit more bountifully, with every test we endure.

Sarah Edwards (1710-1758) was the wife of the great American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, who led the First Great Awakening. Her life reflected the fruitful patience of a woman who supported a husband whose calling often came at

great personal cost to her, with little recognition or emotional reciprocity.

Jonathan Edwards was intensely focused on theology, preaching, and revival work. His passion for ministry often left him neglecting household matters, and his intellectual and spiritual preoccupations left Sarah with the full responsibility of raising their many children, running the home, hosting countless guests, and managing the affairs of their busy New England household. She frequently lived with financial strain, social pressure, and limited emotional support, especially during revivals and periods of controversy in Jonathan's ministry. In 1750, Jonathan was dismissed from his church after 23 years of service, leaving Sarah to deal with the shame, pain, and uncertainty of that loss.

Despite hardship, Sarah consistently supported her husband's calling, often sacrificing personal comfort and desires. She raised eleven children mostly alone, many of whom became pastors, educators, or married Christian leaders. She created an atmosphere of warmth, hospitality, and spiritual richness in the home, even when Jonathan was emotionally unavailable or absent due to ministry obligations. Her writings and letters reveal a deep personal faith, joy in God, and quiet service to her family.

From a letter Sarah wrote to one of her daughters: "The Lord has carried me through many trials and dark hours, but I have found Him faithful ... I delight in my duty to your father, for I know in doing so, I am serving the Lord."²⁷ This statement captures her spirit of joy and fruitful character. She didn't serve for applause or emotional validation. Her ability to endure was a direct result of seeing her service as not unto man, but as unto the Lord.

Historians credit Sarah as a key influence in preserving the emotional health of Jonathan Edwards and shaping the spiritual climate of their children and home. Despite little recognition in her lifetime, her faithfulness bore fruit in generations to come. Her descendants include missionaries, college presidents, judges, and even a U.S. Vice President. Sarah Edwards exemplifies how God's pruning process in a difficult marriage can leave lasting fruit for generations to come.

HOPE

In the list of qualities that suffering produces—endurance, character, hope—it is hope, I believe, that is most difficult to grasp. It’s easier to accept that God is teaching us to endure through suffering, or that He’s developing our character in some way, but hope? What exactly are we hoping for if things never change? Holding onto hope is difficult because it’s the weightiness of hopeful expectation that causes the heart to break, again and again. Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick ...” I’ve counseled many women who struggle with physical illnesses because their hope has been dashed to pieces like a broken record. Scripture assures us, though, that we *can* have hope through our suffering. Here are four aspects of hope to consider.

1. Transformational Hope. God is using this difficult marriage to refine and transform us for His glory, and nothing so pleases the Lord as when He looks at us and sees the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29).

In the book of Jeremiah, God instructs the prophet Jeremiah to go to the potter’s house to observe how the potter fashioned clay upon the wheel. “So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, ‘Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel’” (Jer. 18:2-6).

It may often feel like we’re spinning uncontrollably like a piece of clay on God’s pottery wheel, but He is working in us for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Though it may seem things are out of control when other people hurt us, God is sovereign over every wounding word and action (Ps. 135:6; 115:3; Dan. 4:35). Nothing with God is wasted, and He is using those hurts to transform us on the spinning wheel of life. Isaiah 45:9 says, “Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘The potter has no hands?’”

God has ordered our lives in the way He knows is best (Ps. 139:13-16; Ex. 4:11) and it is our highest joy to yield to the plan which brings Him glory—even when it’s not what we expected. Whether laughter and joy, or suffering and sorrow, we will find our greatest fulfillment on the wheel. The Westminster Catechism puts it this way: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Just as the clay finds its chief purpose when it remains pliable in the hands of the potter, so our lives fulfill their highest purpose when we let our Potter have His way with us.

2. Testimonial Hope. Our patient endurance in suffering is a witness and encouragement to others, and our testimony through trial is a powerful tool that points others to Christ. It’s easy to remain a faithful Christian when the marriage is good, there’s money in the bank, and blessings seem to abound. Serving God during trials, though, has a way of highlighting our Christ-centered actions, peace, and joy that can only be supernatural in origin (Rom. 14:17). God is glorified when others see our abiding joy, especially in the contrast of suffering. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation ... our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Paul is saying here at God may put our suffering on display that others might be comforted. Though it may feel paradoxical, our testimony encourages others to look to Jesus to help endure their trials also.

My sister, Amy, became a widow at the age of 22 after her husband was killed in an accident. A few months later, Hurricane Rita roared through Southwest Louisiana, causing a tree to fall on her home. It was destroyed, and she was uninsured. When she returned from evacuating to find the devastation, she ripped her mailbox out of the ground and lay in the road weeping, wracked with grief. There were few comforts in the long, dark months that followed. But the years passed, she trusted the Lord and hope eventually returned. She remarried a good Christian man, had two beautiful children, and became a successful businesswoman. You’ll find her on most Sundays serving at her church, and she and her husband host regular Bible studies at their home and business. Amy’s pain has had a transformational purpose in the lives of

many who have heard her story, been encouraged by her testimony, and challenged by her faith.

3. Eternal Hope. Our greatest hope is that we will be with Christ in heaven and one day experience eternal joy with Him. Titus 2:13 says we are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Life is fleeting, and marriage is a temporary institution. In Matthew 22:30, Jesus said, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage ...” There will be no marriage in heaven. If your motivation is, *I must endure in this marriage so God will change my husband*, you may be ultimately disappointed. Your motivation to endure is not for the improvement of a temporary relationship, but for greater Christlikeness and an eternal reward in heaven.

I heard a pastor describe life as a metaphor of driving your car to the bank to inherit a quintillion dollars (that’s 1 followed by 18 zeros). As you drive, you’re ecstatic about the prospect of receiving more money than you can ever imagine; but a mile from the bank, your car breaks down. In a fit of rage, you jump out of the vehicle, yelling and crying over your mechanical failure. You kick the tires, slam the hood, and become angry and depressed, instead of joyfully walking the rest of the way to the bank! Sure, a mile seems like a long way, especially in the hot sun, but if your focus is your inheritance, the journey isn’t nearly so difficult.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:7-8, NIV)

Paul reiterated these words to the Corinthians: “Run in such a way as to take the prize” (1 Cor. 9:24). This life can feel like a grueling marathon. To keep running, our focus must remain on the Prize at the end—Christ Himself. Even if we experience hardships in marriage, we still must run in such a way to please Him. The words, “I can do all things through Christ who

strengthens me,” our motivating mantra with every step until we reach the finish line (Phil. 4:13).

4. Active Present Hope. God is present and working now, even if we don’t see it (Romans 15:13; Ps. 27:13–14). I had a client tell me he felt like he was in a desert season of his life, and that God felt very far away. He had betrayed his wife, and she was threatening divorce. He had also lost his job and was on the verge of losing his family because of his actions. My response to him was that God is still very much active in desert places.

As we talked, I reminded him of the many desert experience stories from the Bible: Moses and the burning bush, Hagar and Ishmael being banished, the Israelite wanderings, Elijah at the brook Cherith, David running for his life from Saul, Jesus tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and Paul going into the Arabian desert for ministry preparation. Each of those stories demonstrates a person can receive special strength, and powerful revelations, in desolate places. The wilderness is never wasted with God; it becomes a classroom of dependence, where faith is tested and intimacy with Him is deepened. What seems barren to the eye often proves to be the very ground where God plants the seeds of calling, character, and deep heart change.

A verse that carried me through two very turbulent and lonely desert years after my divorce was Psalm 27:13, “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” More than a decade later, I could write a book detailing all the good things God did during those dark days, which I didn’t recognize until later. I’ll share an amazing example.

One of the many disruptions that a person often experiences upon the breakup of a marriage is the loss of his or her church family. Even close friends are forced to choose sides, and an ex-husband or ex-wife may feel the need to find another church to avoid controversy. Such was my case, and I soon embraced a wonderful new church family who walked me through the crucible of my life. After regularly attending for over a year, I noticed a young Latino man I’d never seen before and introduced myself. “Rodrigo” told me that he was in town working a construction job and looking for a church home. He was only nineteen and had traveled far from south Texas to Louisiana, by himself, in hopes of bettering his life and making a career in the local Petrochem

industries. I welcomed him to the church, and he went on his way. The next Sunday, Rodrigo was again in service. I was leading the men's ministry at the time, and we exchanged numbers. "Let's have lunch soon," I said.

A few days later, I got a late-night phone call. Rodrigo had a flat tire and no spare. He needed help and had no one else to call. Coincidentally, my spare tire fit on his car, and we were able to get him back to where he was staying. After seeing his less-than-ideal living conditions, I started praying about inviting Rodrigo to be my roommate. I had shared custody of my children and was often home alone, and I thought it might do both of us good to have some camaraderie.

My children and I immediately bonded with Rodrigo (now "Rigo"), and we unofficially adopted him into our family. From vacations to family photos, Rigo was with us wherever we went, and he became a tremendous blessing. He began calling my daughters his "sisters," and he and my son would play games together for hours, like any big brother, little brother would. Rigo's relationship with his father was strained, and I soon became his new father figure. Rigo was the Lord's encouragement to me during many hard days as we laughed about his broken English and ate many, many fajitas together. Even after four years, little did I know my story with Rigo had only just begun.

Being a Latino with a penchant for salsa dancing, Rigo took up dance lessons. After a few weeks, he came home excited, "I met a girl at dance class!" Her name was aptly suited to her spirit, "Grace," and they were soon married. Tragedy would strike, though, when her father was diagnosed with Covid-19 and died a few days after she and Rigo were married. But God was still at work through suffering. Through Rigo and Grace, I was introduced to Grace's mother, Jess, who is now my wife.

I could have never imagined that God would use my divorce, my suffering, my tragedy, my mistakes, to bring Rigo into my life, who then brought my most precious gift—my wife! I didn't always see God present and active in my desert, but He was silently, patiently, and methodically working to get me (and Jess) to the place we needed to be!

And this is where my story meets yours. Wife, you may not be walking through divorce, but you may feel the ache of

disappointment, rejection, or loneliness within your marriage. You may wonder if God hears your prayers or if your tears matter. My encouragement to you is this: The same God who wove redemption out of my broken story is more than able to redeem the pain in yours. His ways may be hidden, His timing may feel delayed, but His heart toward you is always for good!

Difficult moments in marriage, ultimately, are not so much between husband and wife; it's more about self, surrender, and God remaking the heart through those challenges. If you feel frustrated that your heart change is too slow, remember that God values process as much as outcome. Your unseen prayers, your choice to forgive, your decision to cling to hope when despair presses in—these are the quiet stones that build a new foundation. Trust that when you cannot trace His hand, He is still at work reshaping your heart (Ezek. 36:26). God wastes nothing—not your tears, not your waiting, not your wrestling. In His hands, every fragment of your story becomes material for God's glory. As you yield to His quiet work in your heart, you will one day look back and see that He was writing a masterpiece all along.



Reflection Questions

Can you identify any “walls” you've built in response to pain, like Eve withdrawing from Adam? How have those walls protected you—and how might they be keeping you from healing?

How does understanding God's process of quietly remaking your heart through suffering reshape the way you view your marriage and personal disappointments?

In what area of your life are you most resisting forgiveness right now? What might change if you released that burden into God's hands, even if your husband never apologizes?

Prayer

“God, You see the parts of my heart that are still hurting, guarded, and hard. I ask You to soften me where I’ve grown bitter and give me strength to forgive even when it feels impossible. Quietly remake me, Lord, and let my heart reflect more of You. Amen.”

Six

Appointment Through Sorrow

*“And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, ‘God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.’”
(Genesis 4:25)*

ap·point·ment
/ə'pointmənt/
noun

1. an arrangement to meet someone at a particular time and place.
2. an act of appointing; assigning a job or position to someone.
3. a God ordained encounter.

As I was writing this chapter, “coincidentally” Jess and I had to find a broken hinge piece for our hauling trailer. It had been a long day for both of us, and the evening was getting late, but we decided to go to our local hardware store

to get what we needed. We found what we thought was the right part only to come home to discover that it was too big for the hinge. Jess wanted to go back to the store, but I was exasperated. “Let’s do this later,” I complained. “It’s late and I’m tired.”

She looked at me with a quiet smile and said, “God has a reason.” I let out a sigh and internally rolled my eyes. I was exhausted and not looking forward to the long drive back to the hardware store. The hour for the store closing was near, and I was unsure if we would even make it on time. I reluctantly got in the truck, and we headed back. We quickly found the part and stood in the checkout line. The lady in front of us was comparing dog collars with the cashier for what felt like an eternity; my frustration mounted. After about five minutes of her chatting away, the store manager walked up to Jess with a beautiful, ornate keepsake box. “Would you like to have this?” he asked her. “Someone left it here and I don’t want to throw it away. It has a broken hinge.” My wife’s eyes lit up. She loved the box and could easily fix it! What felt like delays were actually God bringing my wife a beautiful gift through *two* broken hinges.

God often uses brokenness to bring us into divine appointments.

By the time of Genesis 4, Eve had experienced a depth of brokenness which had fundamentally changed her. The murder of Abel and the loss of Cain had taken their toll, but she found hope again in God’s provision. In verse 25, she names her third son “Seth,” saying “for God has appointed for me another offspring in place of Abel.” The root verb translated “has appointed” (“shiyth”) means deliberately placing or setting something in position; it implies *purposeful establishment*. The same word appears in Genesis 3:15 when God says to the serpent, “I will put [will appoint] enmity between you and the woman,” noting an intentional decree. So, when Eve says, “God has appointed for me another offspring” it conveys God’s active, intentional provision of a child in Abel’s place. The use of *shiyth* shows us that God deliberately intervened to provide hope despite Eve’s broken condition. An even larger plan, unbeknownst to Eve, was that Seth would be the first in a new bloodline to save humanity.

Seth’s name is a play on words, meaning “to set.” Eve’s choice of words implies she viewed this child not as a random birth but as

being specifically set in Abel's place by divine appointment. Some commentators go as far as to describe Seth as "the compensation" for Abel.²⁸ Eve adds, "... instead of Abel, for Cain slew him," underscoring that Seth is a God-given replacement for her murdered son. God Himself had now *set in place* a new child to carry on where Abel left off, and Eve knew, somehow, that Seth's birth was significant.

God's ways far surpass our understanding, and Seth's name gives us a glimpse of that truth. His naming is a puzzle piece in a greater prophecy, one that sheds light on both Adam and Eve's curse and God's unfolding plan of redemption. Incredibly, when we trace the genealogy from Adam to Noah, each name carries a hidden meaning that, together, tells a remarkable story.

Adam means "man"
 Seth means "appointed"
 Enosh means "mortal"
 Kenan means "sorrow"
 Mahalalel means "blessed God"
 Jared means "shall come down"
 Enoch means "teaching"
 Methusaleh means "his death shall bring"
 Lamech means "despairing"
 Noah means "comfort or rest"

The first ten generations of first-born sons from Adam make an astonishing promise and heralds the Gospel message:

"Man is appointed mortal sorrow; but the blessed God shall come down teaching that His death shall bring the despairing comfort and rest."

Mind-blowing, isn't it? Christ's death is clearly foreshadowed here in man's early lineage. From the very beginning, God had *set a plan* in motion for Jesus' divine appointment with the cross, bringing merciful redemption to man's curse. Seth was more than a baby who replaced Abel—Seth's birth foretold Christ's propitiation and atonement! Oh, how great is the love of God! This hidden prophecy contains two appointments for humanity: An

appointment to mortal sorrow, and an appointment to comfort and rest in our despair. Let's examine each of these promises in light of the curse of *original sin* and marital disappointment.

APPOINTMENT TO MORTAL SORROW

The fact of the matter is that hardship is inescapable in this life. Every one of us—from the least of us, to the greatest of us—will have sorrow. Deep, gut-wrenching, soul-quaking sorrow. Not only is it inescapable, it is *appointed*; we will all have a *divine appointment* with pain. There's nowhere to run, hide, or escape its reach. It is inevitable.

This sorrow is often in the context of relationships, even in what should be a holy marital union. The spouse we love the most will hurt us the most, and sinful, corrupted man will sometimes seek self above others. The truth is that your husband is by nature a sinner, just as you are, and you live in a fallen world. Sorrow is an appointment, not because God is unjust, but because sin affects all of us because of the Fall.

There should be some solace in acceptance that all mankind is appointed mortal sorrow, but somehow, we feel this shouldn't apply to marriages. We have an idealized view of relationships which social media and popular entertainment only reinforce; the façade of Instagram reels adding to our discontentment. Men have skewed notions of unfettered sexual fulfillment, and women of romanticized relationship goals. Even for those of us who hold to a Biblical worldview, the temptation of unrealistic expectations is a dangerous allurement.

Again, we are pricked by our faith. Shouldn't a supposedly Christian couple do better? Love deeper? Show greater kindness? Where is redemption in relationship? Why is there still this detestable sin between us?

Job understood well the seemingly unfairness of it all and faced a devastating disappointment in his marriage. In the beginning of the book of Job, he's given stellar qualifications as being "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Job served the Lord passionately, and God's blessing and favor was on him. Job had a wife, ten children, and was a man of great wealth; but he also had an appointment with sorrow.

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. (Job 1:8-9)

This was the beginning of Job's sorrowful appointment as his servants and livestock were slaughtered by marauding armies, his property taken, and his children killed in a terrible storm—all on the same day. Such tragedy is almost inconceivable, yet Scripture says, "Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:20-22, NKJV).

Incredibly, his faith remained firm; that is, until God allowed Satan to afflict Job with a terrible sickness of "severe boils from the sole of his foot to the top of his head." Scripture says, "Job took a piece of pottery to scrape himself while he was sitting in the ashes" (Job 2:7-8). His wife, understandably grieving herself, was

no consolation and raged against God in her anguish, “Curse God and die!” she told him.

You’ll notice a subtle turn in Job’s tone as he is abandoned by his wife in grief. “May the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:20) melts into “Let the day of my birth be erased, and the night I was conceived” (Job 3:3, NLT). One of the greatest pains of all is the pain of loneliness in marriage. In deep losses, it should be our spouse to whom we turn for reassurance. Job and his wife were supposed to be in this together, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, till death did them part. Shared sorrow should have brought shared comfort in each other’s embrace. In Job’s story, the opposite was true—she only made things worse. His wife provided no support whatsoever, and Job was left alone in his anguish. Receiving no comfort from his wife, still “Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:10).

Job was struck in every way imaginable—physically, emotionally, financially, maritally, and spiritually. He sat in ashes mourning—the broken pieces of pottery mirroring the broken pieces of his life. Job was such a shattered man that when his friends finally came to comfort him, he was unrecognizable to them (Job 2:12). There were no words for the magnitude of his loss, and they were dumbstruck, staying silent together for seven days. As Job and his friends sat around the flickering fire, he would reflect upon the universal truth that sorrow is inevitable: “Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7).

Job wrestled with God’s appointment with pain, especially considering his righteous actions. “How many wrongs and sins have I committed?” he asks. “Show me my offense and my sin. Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?” (Job 13:23–24). Job explicitly pleads for God to identify his wrongdoing, if any. How many times have you thought to yourself, *I don’t deserve this marriage? What wrong have I done? God, show me my offense and my sin? I’m doing everything right!*

When God finally spoke in chapters 38–41, He didn’t address the *why* behind Job’s suffering. Instead, He asserted His absolute sovereignty through a series of rhetorical questions and poetic descriptions of creation, natural forces, and powerful creatures. His point is clear: “I am God. You are not.” The implication of this

dialog is that we cannot grasp God's justice or methods. Job's need for an answer was a *moot point* because of God's infinite understanding beyond Job's. His friend, Zophar, tried to bring clarity, "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea" (Job 11:7-9).

God challenges Job's right to question Him, underscoring that Job lacks the wisdom and knowledge to grasp God's governance in appointing a season of suffering.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." (Job 38:1-4)

I remember when my children were infants, I would take them to the pediatrician to get their periodic immunizations. Walking into the exam room with my innocent baby, I'd brace myself for what I knew would be a difficult process. The child, wild eyed with fear, away from familiar comforts, would often begin whimpering in the cold and sterile room. Laying her down on the table, I would hold her steady as the nurse injected two, three, or sometimes even four shots into her plumpy little legs. She'd scream in terror as she looked up at me, *Daddy, why are you letting this happen?*

The meaning of the painful vaccinations was a great mystery to my children. There was no possible way I could explain the reasons behind the why. My thoughts were much higher than their infantile understanding, and I knew a little pain now would potentially protect them from a lifetime of debilitating disease.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9, NIV)

It’s human nature to yearn for answers, but we often only find more questions. That’s why God says, “Be still, daughter, it is for your *benefit*” (Ps. 46:10). In moments of appointed hardship and hopelessness, what can bring peace is the recognition of God as our Father and we the children He loves (Ps. 103:13). We can worship through trial because, even though it doesn’t make sense, our Father knows best, and we can trust His provision, care, and directives in our lives. This was Job’s ultimate conclusion: “What He desires, that He does. For He will complete what He appoints for me, and many such things are in His mind” (Job 23:13–14).

What He desires, that He does in *completed appointments*. He has many things in His mind for us—good things—but the key to it all is surrender, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,” Job ultimately concluded (Job 13:15). The more we attempt to understand, or wrestle for control, the more frustrated we become. The kingdom of God must be embraced with the simplicity of child-like faith (Matt. 18:2) and trials endured while believing that, somehow, all things will work together for our good and God’s glory.

Though the appointment of sorrow is enigmatic, we are given several key insights into Job’s suffering (and ours) through his story which may be of help.

1. Appointed sorrow has spiritual implications.

Job’s earthly trials were heavenly in origin. His appointment with sorrow had nothing to do with his (or others’) actions; they were decreed from above. Satan was given power to inflict grief, though he was always on a very short leash (Job 1:12). The reasons behind this satanic attack are not clearly understood, other than putting Job’s faithfulness on display in the supernatural realm. Paul alludes to this spiritual witnessing in Ephesians 3:10, “... so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

“Rulers and authorities in heavenly places” refer to angelic and possibly demonic beings. We the church, through our endurance, become a demonstration of God’s wisdom to these spiritual

entities. The mind-boggling implication is that God is using our testimony to somehow teach spiritual truth to unseen observers. Remember, we don't always "wrestle against flesh and blood ... but against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

2. Appointed sorrow may be a test.

Job clearly recognized a testing process in his sorrow, "But he knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come out as gold" (Job 23:10, NKJV). He wondered, "What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment?" (Job 17:17-18)

Job understood that being tested was part of God's refining process. His trials were not meaningless punishments, but a furnace through which his faith was purified and deepened. 2 Timothy 2:20-21 affirms: "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." The gold and silver vessels, used for special purposes, are those which have endured the fire and been refined until the impurities are removed. In the same way, God uses testing to shape His people into instruments of greater worth and usefulness. Marriage, undoubtedly, is one of His primary tools for this refining.

3. Appointed sorrow may be discipline from the Lord.

Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He wounds, but He also binds up; He injures, but His hands also heal. (Job 5:17)

The Bible speaks frequently of God's discipline, portraying it as a sign of His love, Fatherly care, and desire for our growth. "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you" (Deut. 8:5). Hebrews 12:5-11 clearly tells us, "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives ... He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness ... Later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Marriage is one of God's primary tools for discipline leading to sanctification. Sanctification is the process by which God sets a person apart for Himself and progressively transforms their character, desires, and actions to reflect Christ's likeness. There was a book written years ago, *Men Are From Mars And Women Are From Venus*. That title speaks volumes! God brings man and woman together, who think as differently as night and day, with differing backgrounds, opinions, personalities, and ways of doing things. Through conflict, they are sanctified together, learn how to live in harmony with each other, and forgive when offended. It's in the daily grind, the miscommunications, the disappointments, and unmet expectations that God shines a light on our pride, selfishness, and impatience to refine us. The tensions in marriage can serve as disciplinary mirrors showing us what He intends to prune and purify.

4. Faithfulness through appointed sorrow brings reward.

Despite Job's lack of understanding and his deep frustration with suffering, he never sinned or cursed God. His words were raw, and his heart anguished, yet he refused to renounce his faith or let go of the One he knew was sovereign. There were moments his trust wavered, and he despaired even of his life, but his perseverance in faith was not in vain. In the end, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.

*All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring.
(Job 42:10–11)*

Notice the subtle correlation between the silver and gold ring in Job's reward and the silver and gold vessels in 2 Timothy 2:20—objects of honor that have been tested and refined. While the central emphasis of Job's story is often placed on his material restoration, his greater reward was inward. Job emerged from the crucible as a man whose faith was purified like gold and whose testimony brought glory to God which we're still reading thousands of years later. His greatest gain was not twofold wealth,

but a deeper revelation of God’s majesty and transformed character, making him an instrument “useful to the Master” (2 Tim. 2:21) in ways far beyond material blessing.

As happy as we’d like to leave the story, what’s not often talked about is Job’s pain post-restoration. Though he was given ten more children to “replace” the ten who died, I’m sure he still felt the sting of their loss. Did he and his wife ever recover from her emotional abandonment during his trials? What’s certain is their relationship remained strained for a season. The only clue the Bible gives us about the state of Job’s life at his end is the last verse of his book, “And so Job died, an old man and full of years” (Job 42:17). This benediction is used in Scripture to signify Job lived a blessed, meaningful, and honorable life despite the immense suffering he endured. He finished well—faithful, fruitful, and fulfilled—and came to embrace the life he had been given.

Though our sufferings may not be as extreme as Job’s, we are all appointed a measure of sorrow. We can find some peace in acceptance that our troubles in life, including marriage problems, are byproducts of our fallen condition and are allowed by God for our refinement. But we can also hope in our appointed sorrow because, thankfully, God also appoints “comfort and rest” to the despairing through godly relationships.

APPOINTMENT TO COMFORT AND REST

Through Eve’s eyes, we see a fundamental Biblical truth: Even after the Fall, Adam’s disloyalty, and all the calamity she suffered, God’s grace appointed a path forward for her through the birth of her third son, Seth. Eve said, “God has appointed *for me* ...” Her use of “for me” personalizes God’s care as she recognized His strong and gentle hand working in her life and healing her heart. Seth was much more than a baby in whom Eve found a comforting distraction. Eve’s phrase is read as her realizing the magnitude of the promise which now lay with Seth. His birth altered the view of her suffering and instilled renewed hope. Seth would not only carry the future of her family, but he would continue Adam’s righteous bloodline, leading to Christ. Despite her sin and the catastrophe in her family, Eve experienced God’s favor “for me” in the birth of Seth and he foreshadowed the comfort God gives us all in godly relationships. Yes, Eve had one family destroyed, but

through Seth, God promised another family—a family pointing to Christ.

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock
I will build My church, and the gates of hell
shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18,
KJV)*

Maybe you're facing the gates of hell in your marriage. The Church, the family of God, is one of your greatest helps, and part of your appointed comfort and rest in trial. Just as "appointed" ("shiyth") in the Old Testament Hebrew shows deliberate intention, so "I will build" in the Greek carries similar overtones to "establish or edify" ("oikodomēsō"). While the words are different languages, they share a conceptual and theological link. Both imply intentionality, continuity, and purposeful establishment of something that God ordains to carry forward His covenant plans. Eve says, "God has appointed me another offspring" showing God purposefully preserving a righteous remnant after Abel's death. Jesus says, "I will build My church" showing He is purposefully sustaining that remnant in a household of faith.

Our appointment with comfort and rest, through the Church, is even better than Eve's. Though Seth was her child of promise and pointed to Messiah, her assurance was finite. She had a solitary individual in whom she placed all her hope. We, on the other hand, have a body of believers from every nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev. 7:9) in whom we can find strength and comfort across the globe. Eve and the other Old Testament figures of Hebrews 11 "did not receive what was promised" (v. 39) because Christ had yet to be revealed. The Apostle Paul said, "... the mystery hidden for ages and generations" has "now been revealed to His saints" (Col. 1:26). That mystery is Christ dwelling in believers, the Church (Eph. 5:32). Christ is the Head of this body with its members being His hands and feet, ministering to each other and bringing hope in times of crisis (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

I am very much a relationship-oriented therapist. Of course, I talk to my clients about coping skills, boundaries, and the power of positivity; but I'd rather my clients have one caring and supportive relationship than a hundred coping skills. Coping skills are

sometimes needed, but they are usually cover-ups for wounds inflicted upon us by hurtful relationships. The real solution? We have been wounded by negative relationships, but we can be healed by positive relationships. The Body of Christ presents an opportunity for healing as the true disciples of Jesus minister comfort and rest to our souls.

If you've ever been on a boat in the open ocean, you've probably experienced the feeling of smallness, and maybe fear, as you looked out into the vastness of the deep blue sea. Let's imagine that you're sailing with friends and for some reason you fall overboard. No one saw you fall and, as you spit, sputter, and wipe the burning seawater from your eyes, you watch the boat slowly sail away. What's the first thing you need to do? You'll need to yell, of course!

"Help! I'm drowning! Throw me a line!"

Our darkest days are like falling into the ocean depths. We are completely alone, sinking deeper into the despair of the dark water. We're tired from paddling—there might even be a shark or two circling us. If we don't get help, we will surely drown. But God has appointed for us a lifeline, in the context of godly relationships, through the Church of Jesus Christ.

Seth was Eve's lifeline, her present comfort and future hope. When overwhelmed with the enormity of her troubles, God appointed Seth to be her saving grace through his comforting presence in her life. Maybe your husband is distant and unconcerned, maybe you are depressed and dissatisfied, but you have a family of faith who will love, support, and care for you in your deepest ocean of despair.

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for My sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29–30)

Jesus is speaking here in terms of religious persecution, but the core idea is that He has appointed the Church to be a sustaining influence in the lives of believers when the going gets tough. If your biological brother, sister, mother, father, children, or even husband, rejects you, there is a *family of faith* who will embrace you. The community of believers can become a new extended family, meeting the physical, emotional, and relational needs of its members. This verse is one of the clearest affirmations that the Church functions as a real, tangible family, here and now, not just spiritually or metaphorically.

There are several passages in the New Testament that refer to believers caring for one another, the hallmark of Christ's disciples being their love for one another (John 13:35). The New Testament church in the book of Acts was even selling their possessions and pooling their money to care for each other (Acts 2:44-45). The true Church has a history, past and present, of deep and abiding love for one another, especially in troubled times. For a struggling spouse, the Church can help tremendously in four areas.

1. Encouragement. I remember many Sunday mornings post-divorce I felt depressed and didn't want to get out of bed. As I forced myself to go to church and fellowship with other believers, without fail, I was always encouraged! There was something about seeing the smiling faces of my family of faith greeting me at the door which brought much comfort and joy. No matter how much I read the Bible or how often I listened to YouTube preachers, sitting with other Christians under uplifting Biblical teaching was life-giving. When the service was over, I would always leave strengthened, having a faith-boost to make it through another week.

2. Fellowship. Unfortunately, many people live in emotional isolation, even when they're married. The Church provides opportunities for fellowship and emotional connection which keep us grounded. As we grow godly relationships, we are afforded moments to express our woundedness and find healing through supportive friends. Small groups, women's Bible studies, discipleship classes, etc., are places to learn, grow, and connect. Women who are struggling with loneliness can find in the Church a sisterhood that lasts a lifetime. It goes without saying that

relationships should be strictly with the same gender to avoid unhealthy emotional attachments.

3. Safety. Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20) and we can find protection within His sheepfold. When a predator wants to attack, it will separate the animal from the rest of the group because it is more vulnerable. Satan comes to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10) but the likelihood of his success is greatly mitigated when we are together in community, under the care of His under-shepherds (pastors) and other leaders who have spiritual insight into our lives. Not only do they bring encouragement, but also oversight and correction, to help keep us safe (1 Peter 5:2).

4. Ministry. When life is overwhelming, it’s easy to hold a narrow focus on our own problems leading to anxiety and depression; but when we are focused on the needs of others, we change perspective and step outside of our world into the world of another. This altruism is incredibly powerful in giving a sense of purpose, and a broader view of the world and our problems. Whether it’s serving as a door greeter, working in the nursery, or praying for someone at the altar, ministry opportunities fundamentally change us as we love and minister to others from the heart.

Let me briefly address two reasons many people fail to find a church family: Past hurt and hypocrisy. Church hurt is real and encounters with hypocrites can cut especially deep because they strike at the very place where we expect safety, love, and authenticity. Many women have walked away from church disillusioned after being wounded by gossip, judgment, or the failings of leaders and fellow believers. Yet Scripture never paints the church as a perfect gathering, but as a family of redeemed sinners in process “being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). The “building” is still under construction, and to abandon fellowship because of hurt is to forfeit one of God’s greatest means of healing and growth. The imperfections of others do not nullify God’s design for His people; instead, they remind us that the church is a hospital for the broken, not a showcase for the flawless. In fact, hypocrisy itself underscores the need for genuine fellowship. Without community, sin hides and festers; but within the family of faith, truth and

grace can confront hypocrisy and bring restoration. Hebrews 10:24–25 calls believers not to neglect meeting together, but to “stir one another up toward love and good works.” A healthy church family, though imperfect, provides encouragement, accountability, and belonging that cannot be replicated in isolation. Even through disappointment, God calls His people to press into fellowship, where His Spirit works to refine, comfort, and knit hearts together in a bond potentially deeper than any earthly family.

In the fourth century, a woman named Monica lived in North Africa. She was a devout Christian, but her marriage to a man named Patricius was far from ideal. He was a pagan, quick-tempered, and often unfaithful. His spiritual detachment left Monica to carry the weight of faith in the household alone. She prayed at church while he scoffed. She raised her children in the Lord while he chased after worldly pleasures.

Many women in Monica’s position might have grown bitter or hopeless, but she leaned heavily on her church family. Older women in her congregation encouraged her, teaching her how to respond with patience instead of resentment. They prayed with her when Patricius raged and reminded her that her suffering was not unseen by God. In their fellowship, she found the strength to endure what she could not bear on her own.

The support of her congregation gave Monica courage to persevere. She prayed for her husband without ceasing, and little by little, the hardness in his heart began to soften. Before his death, Patricius came to faith in Christ—the miracle Monica had longed for! But her prayers did not stop there. Her son Augustine, brilliant yet rebellious, rejected the faith of his mother. He pursued philosophy, pleasure, and ambition, causing her endless tears. Still, Monica clung to hope, strengthened by the encouragement of fellow believers who reminded her that no one is beyond God’s reach. She often wept in prayer at the church altar, and one bishop famously told her, “The child of those tears shall never perish.”²⁹

Years later, Augustine surrendered to Christ and went on to become one of the most influential voices in church history. He served as bishop of Hippo in North Africa and wrote extensively, shaping theology for centuries to come. His works, such as

Confessions and *The City of God*, explored deep questions of faith, grace, sin, and the nature of the Church. Augustine helped clarify doctrines like Original Sin and God's grace in salvation, leaving a legacy that shaped both Catholic and Protestant thought. Looking back, Augustine honored his mother's steadfast faith and the prayers that never ceased which led to his conversion.

Monica's story is not just one of personal endurance but also of communal support. The church carried her through the loneliness of a detached marriage and sustained her when her family seemed beyond hope. Her legacy reminds us that when a husband is distant, the family of God can stand in the gap, offering strength, encouragement, and the assurance that God is still writing the story.

I've known many married believers through the years who had less-than-ideal relationships. Often, they would go to church alone; sometimes together, but as they immersed themselves in their faith community, they found hope, encouragement, purpose, and eternal perspective. We are not meant to live life unaided. Thankfully, God has appointed comfort and rest for us in the Church of Jesus Christ.

"Thomas" and "Andrea" had one of the messiest marriages I had ever seen. Together for seven years with a young daughter, they both had a history of cheating on each other multiple times. He was critical and aloof, and she was angry and resentful. Compounding their relationship were deep issues from their childhood traumas, and the sudden death of her infant son a few years earlier. They were both wounded and bleeding all over each other. "I've been terrible to her," Thomas admitted. "Sometimes, I've even hated her."

Andrea was in a similar state of exasperation. "He's treated me like a narcissist since day one. I've felt lower than a dog," she complained. "He's delusional. I'm tired from the years of him wearing me down." On my intake form, I ask couples if they would like to use Christian counseling principles. They checked the "no" box, so I was limited in being able to integrate matters of faith. I guided the conversations towards general couples' skills, focusing particularly on forgiveness, but how does one truly forgive without God's help? After several sessions, she was still at her wit's end, "We're worse, not better. He's absolutely destroyed any security

that was left in me,” she said. “I don’t feel emotionally secure at all.”

Thomas and Andrea experienced every type of marital dysfunction imaginable. Their communication was terrible, their finances were precarious, their sex life full of tension, their quality time nil, their supports practically non-existent. Instead of affection and warmth, detachment and coldness permeated nearly every aspect of their relationship. But God loves an underdog story, and this was one of the best I’d seen.

About eighteen months into marriage therapy, they casually mentioned they were thinking about going to a local church. I could barely keep my enthusiasm contained. “Absolutely,” I said. “That would be one of the best things you could do for your relationship.” I emphasized the importance of a faith community and the positive support they could receive, encouraging them to follow through with their plans. Their lives were extremely chaotic, so I wasn’t very hopeful they would start attending. But I was soon pleasantly (and thankfully) surprised.

“We’re doing a little better,” she said in our next session. “Our daughter enjoyed going to church, and we like it too.” The first seeds had been planted, watered, and God would soon bring the harvest (1 Cor. 3:6). Over the next few months, Thomas and Andrea were like sponges in their newfound congregation and began soaking up the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26). They started attending Bible studies, joined small groups, became involved in outreach ministries, and were soon baptized. Our counseling session focus shifted dramatically from complaints about each other to matters of faith and Christian marriage. I challenged Thomas to be a godly leader and for them to extend forgiveness to one another, in following Christ’s example (Eph. 4:32).

Over the next two years, I watched their transformation in amazement as the *mustard seed* of the Kingdom of God grew into a beautiful fruit bearing tree (Matt. 13:31). The Gospel began to impact and infiltrate every area of their lives and marriage, even down to the elimination of F-bombs in their counseling sessions with me. Though the fruit was still young, they began showing love, extending forgiveness, and speaking kindness to each other, in places where there had previously been angry words. Thomas was becoming a true leader at home, and he was even nominated

to be a deacon at their church! They both received promotions at work, and I was overjoyed when they came into my office one day happily announcing, “We’re pregnant!” Truly, God healed the hurt in their marriage, and their lives are a beautiful encouragement about what embracing a family of faith can do!

Thomas and Andrea’s journey is a reminder that despite the painful appointments in life, no marriage is beyond the reach of God’s grace. Christ appoints His comfort and rest through His Body, the Church. For couples who feel like all hope is gone, their testimony stands as proof that when faith takes root, forgiveness can flourish, love can bloom, and even the most fractured marriages can grow to become beautiful witnesses of the redeeming power of the Gospel.



Reflection Questions

How does recognizing sorrow as an “appointment” rather than an accident reshape your view of suffering in relationships, especially in marriage? Consider Eve’s perspective in naming Seth, Job’s endurance, and the story about the keepsake box. What does it say about God’s sovereignty in our broken moments?

What role has the Church—or a specific Christian relationship—played in your healing during seasons of sorrow? How can we be more intentional about leaning into godly community when our spouse feels emotionally unavailable?

Job wrestled with God’s silence and still chose to trust Him. What are practical ways we can cultivate that same trust when we’re in the middle of our own unanswered questions, especially when we feel alone or misunderstood?

Prayer

“Father God, I thank You for being present in both my joy and our sorrow. Help me to recognize that even my deepest pain is not wasted, but part of Your divine appointment for my growth, my refinement, and ultimately, for Your glory. Amen.”

Seven

The Last Adam

“And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:20)

There is no greater feeling of vulnerability than nudity, especially for women. The gynecologist, women’s locker room, mammogram screenings, and the birthing table are moments of fear and dread. Nudity feels defenseless, helpless, exposed, and cold. Chalk it up to societal expectations of body image, comments from others about weight or breast size, or fear from past sexual abuse, feelings of shame regarding nudity are commonplace among women. Even in the context of a loving relationship with their husbands, many women are uncomfortable with him seeing their naked bodies.

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, “... the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). We tend to think that opened eyes signified some sort of spiritual awakening, but the structure of the Hebrew sentence suggests that the *immediate consequence* of their eyes being opened was the realization of their nakedness. It reveals sequential immediacy.

There's no indication of deeper revelation or new knowledge before this. In fact, the first thing they become aware of is their vulnerability, embodied in the sense of being exposed.

They eat. Their eyes are opened. They realize they are naked.

The shame of Adam and Eve's nakedness was so pressing, so disgraceful, the immediate next sentence says, "They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths." They didn't run to kill the serpent, nor seek God out to tell Him what had happened. The weight of their shame drove them immediately to cover themselves with fig leaves.

Renaissance painters rather enjoyed the concept of the fig leaf. Perhaps it was a sort of *sanctified titillation*—a tiny piece of foliage strategically placed to cover the genitals. It looks sensual and romantic, but can you imagine the reality of sewing fig leaves together? I don't know if you've ever examined a fig leaf, but it has a very distinct texture. Fig leaves are coarse, leathery, and scratchy to the touch. The top and underside are covered in tiny hairs, causing skin irritation. The leaves are relatively thick and stiff, not delicate like flower petals or grass. This gives fig leaves a structure that makes them difficult to drape or shape comfortably.

In their first act of human problem-solving, Adam and Eve choose one of the most uncomfortable and impractical leaves to cover their most sensitive areas. This wasn't accidental—it's a vivid picture of our inadequacies in hiding our shame. Our manmade solutions chafe, irritate, and easily fall apart.

Have you ever tried to bury your pain in something that only deepened it—throwing yourself into endless busyness, chasing after fleeting romantic ideals, numbing the ache with entertainment or indulgence, or putting on a mask of strength so no one could see how fragile you really felt inside? Those efforts may temporarily dull the sting, but they cannot heal the heart. The sorrow lingers beneath the surface, festering in hidden places, and the weight grows heavier with every attempt to cover it. Instead of bringing relief, these false remedies leave us more weary, more isolated, and still vulnerably exposed.

"They sewed fig leaves together..."

The word here for “sewed” in the Hebrew means “to produce” or “create” (“tāphar”). Adam and Eve are not turning to God, but trying to mimic His role, creating without guidance. They are trying to solve their own problems using their own means. Their action is self-focused: no turning to God, no confession of sin, no asking for help. This is hiding, managing, trying to control the outcomes of their mistake with a poor and prickly substitute.

What are you trying to sew together? What have you created to manage pain? No matter how cleverly crafted, God sees through the cracks—you’re still exposed. The fig leaves tear easily and the covering is uncomfortable, unmanageable, cold and awkward.

From the account given to us in Genesis 3, it seems that God allowed Adam and Eve to struggle with their fig leaves for a time. They played hide-and-seek with God in the garden, “Where are you?” God asked. After Adam discloses their sin, God takes time to severely discipline the serpent, invoking a curse, “... on your belly you shall go ...” (Gen. 3:14, KJV). And then something interesting happens. We see a pivot-point in the story, a verse completely out of place.

*And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.
(Genesis 3:20)*

Wayward, rebellious children they (we) were. Disobedient to one simple command: Do not eat. How easy is that? Yet, we were deceived and did not obey. The punishment was apocalyptic: Hardship, pain and death for you and your descendants forever! Still, we see the fatherhood of God toward His misbehaving children. The fig leaves aren’t working, our shame is still exposed, so an animal is killed, blood is shed, and skins are made. This is a typology of Christ Himself, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Christ alone “has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

Adam in his ineptitude could only offer Eve cold and brittle fig leaves. His effort symbolized the best that human striving can do: Temporary, fragile, and ultimately insufficient. Eve’s shame and sorrow remained despite Adam’s best efforts. God alone could

bring warmth and hope back into Eve's life—but it required more than leaves. It required death. In Eden's garden, the first death in history took place when an innocent lamb was slain to provide a covering for Adam and Eve's nakedness. Its blood whispered of a future sacrifice, a foreshadowing of the Lamb of God.

That moment pointed beyond to Jesus Christ, the true and final covering. Where Adam failed to protect and provide, Christ would succeed. Where fig leaves only hid shame, Christ's sacrifice removed it entirely. Eve's story reminds us that every shallow attempt to cover our brokenness will collapse under the weight of sin. Only Christ, through His appointed death, can clothe us in righteousness, restore intimacy, and bring lasting hope into our sorrow.

The solution, then, to Adam's deficiencies, passivity, betrayals, disloyalties, and weakness is simple. Eve must look to Another who provides a better covering! No more fig leaves! It's the Lamb alone who provides warmth and comfort. Eve can no longer look to the first Adam; she must look to the Last Adam. She must look to Christ!

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22, NKJV)

'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [Christ] is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:45-49, NKJV)

Encounters with the Last Adam change everything.

In John 4, we read a story about a woman broken by life and relationships. It's fitting that she is unnamed, as her story could be easily transposed onto many women with similar struggles. We don't know much about her, but we do know that she is a Samaritan and looked down upon by the Jews as an unclean outsider due to her mixed heritage (see 2 Kings 17). This woman felt excluded and rejected, and the fact that she arrives at the well at noon, rather than in the cooler morning hours, suggests she was an outcast—either because of her moral reputation or as a woman divorced or abandoned, discouraged from gathering with others.

She is distrustful of men. Jesus is sitting by Himself at the well and asks her for a drink. You can almost hear the sarcasm in her voice, “How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9). She's been burned by men before, and we soon learn that she has been married five times. Women in that culture could not initiate divorce, so she had been repeatedly abandoned or widowed, reinforcing her rejection even further.

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? (John 4:10-11)

As she converses with this Man, she knows something is different about Him, her spiritual hunger overriding her fear. He's conversing with a woman—a Samaritan, no less—and He immediately turns the topic to faith. She's skeptical. Living water? Her daily burden has been heavy. Women carried water jars on their heads or shoulders, often walking long distances; the jar she was carrying weighed at least 20 or 30 pounds when full. Every trip was a laborious and exhausting task, especially during the heat of the day.

You can feel her cynicism—more empty promises from another Man. She doesn't want to be disappointed again. She asks, “Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock” (v. 12). Her

statement is a wall shielding her from further disappointment. The woman doesn't know what to believe, but Jesus keeps on undeterred in His pursuit of her heart.

Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (v. 13-14).

There it is—she's captivated in that moment! It's something about His words, something about His voice—His eyes peering into the deepest recesses of her soul. She fumbles, her heart beating fast as a spark of hope ignites, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water" (v. 15).

Jesus needs to address an issue first. Her fig leaves are showing, and He puts His finger on the point of pain: "Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here'" (v. 16). She's exposed, raw, vulnerable; she has no real covering, her husbands have failed her. "The woman answered Him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true'" (v. 17-18).

I can see her eyes widen as she looks at Jesus in amazement. He's right—she's had five marriages and now living with a paramour. She's familiar with shame, but strangely, she feels only peace. The inflection in Jesus' tone encourages her to know more, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but You say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (v. 19-20). She can't miss this invitation; she is thirsty for spiritual truth. Her growing realization that Jesus is a Prophet keeps her spellbound.

Jesus continues, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship

Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (v. 21-24).

Jesus speaks directly to each issue of the woman’s heart. She understands the futility of going through religious motions, she wants to be loved and sought out by God, and she longs for salvation from her unsatisfying way of living. She’s hooked. “The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am He’” (v. 25-26). This moment is so climatic, she can hardly believe it. Messiah? She is speaking with Him? He is reaching to her? This reality is beyond her wildest imagination.

The disciples interrupt the story, shocked to find Jesus speaking with a Samaritan woman; but it doesn’t matter—she’s already been transformed. She leaves her water jar, representing her burdened life, and goes back home exclaiming, “Come, see a Man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (v. 30). Her shame is gone, and she breathlessly re-emerges from isolation to tell others about this Man who has changed her life. What five husbands couldn’t do over decades, Jesus does in minutes. Because of her testimony, the Samaritans ask Jesus to stay with them for two days, and “... many more believed because of His word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world’” (v. 41-42). No longer is she invalidated and delegitimized by her community; she has been changed by the Last Adam.

Herein lies the story of the Great Romance. Flawed man cannot do what Jesus does in captivating our eyes with His beauty and igniting our hearts with His love. The Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha (John 11-12), the woman with the alabaster box (Luke 7:36), Mary Magdelene (Mark 16), the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) and many others, past and present, have encountered Jesus and have been forever changed by Him. They have embraced the love of the Last Adam who far excels the first.

If the first Adam leaves us despairing at his weakness, the Last Adam lifts our eyes to hope in His victory. Adam’s failure in the

garden serves as a solemn reminder of human frailty, how easily sin corrodes trust, love, and responsibility. But where the first husband faltered, the greater Bridegroom triumphed. Christ, the Last Adam, entered into our brokenness, bore the full weight of sin, and arose victorious, securing redemption for His bride. Hebrews 12 urges us not to stare at man's failures, but to "look unto Jesus," instead of looking to flawed and fallen man.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also **lay aside every weight, and sin** which clings so closely, and let us **run with endurance** the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider Him** who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.
(Hebrews 12:1-3)*

This astounding verse gives us four keys to enduring hardship in marriage and in life, with two of the four framing the Last Adam squarely in view: "Lay aside weight and sin," "Run with endurance," "Looking to Jesus," and "Consider Him."

LAY ASIDE WEIGHT AND SIN

If we want to see Jesus more clearly, the writer of Hebrews starts with examination of our own hearts: "Lay aside every weight and sin." "Weight" here in the Greek ("ogkos") means "heaviness" or "a burden or encumbrance." Weights are not necessarily sinful and refer to anything that slows you down, distracts, or keeps you from running the race efficiently. This could be habits, relationships, fears, ambitions—morally neutral things that still hinder spiritual progress. A weight could be a friend who is constantly criticizing your husband; or a bad habit, like smoking, which creates tension in your marriage. Distractions in entertainment choices or unproductive hobbies can be weights

which may need to be put aside to focus more on our relationship with Christ. A good rule of thumb is 1 Corinthians 10:23 (CSB), “Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial.” Is this uncertain *thing* beneficial for me and my walk with the Lord? If it’s not building up, then maybe it needs to be torn down?

Secondly, the word for “sin” here gives us a picture of tangled ropes around a person’s legs; if not cut loose, you will trip and fall. It’s nearly impossible to see Christ clearly and have a proper attitude towards your husband, if sin is clouding your view. Galatians 5:19-21 gives us a good list of sins to watch out for: “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Susanna Wesley shared godly wisdom with her twenty-two-year-old son, John, when he was student at Oxford in 1725. Young John had evidently asked his mother for guidance on how to discern whether a particular activity or pleasure was lawful or sinful. Her reply included this now-famous passage: “Would you judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasure? Take this rule: Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes away your desire for spiritual things; whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind—that that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.”

God never intended us to stay tangled. As Hebrews 12 urges us to “lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles,” we are called to recognize these snares for what they are and cast them off with Christ’s help. Repentance is not about wallowing in guilt; it’s about cutting loose the ropes that trip us so we can run the race with endurance. When the heart is freed through repentance, vision clears, hope rises, and we see Jesus more clearly. He is our greatest help at seeing our marriages through the lens of grace rather than the haze of sin.

RUN WITH ENDURANCE

For decades, the four-minute mile was a barrier no one could break through. Coaches, doctors, and sportswriters all agreed the human body simply wasn't built to run a mile in less than four minutes. The heart couldn't pump fast enough. The lungs couldn't take in enough oxygen. The legs couldn't exert themselves enough. Even if someone managed to do it, they claimed it might be deadly.

Then on May 6, 1954, in Oxford, England, Roger Bannister, a Christian medical student training between shifts at the hospital, did the impossible by running a mile in 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds. Bannister had shattered not just a record, but a belief. Then something crazy happened. In the weeks and months that followed, other runners—men who had trained for years without crossing that threshold—suddenly began breaking it too. Forty-six days later, Australian runner John Landy set a new record at 3:57.9. Currently, over 2000 men have joined them, each one redefining what had once been called “impossible.”

Hebrews 12:1 reminds us to contemplate the “great cloud of witnesses”—those who have gone before us and were successful—and remember those saints are cheering us on. You're not the only wife who has ever had to navigate a difficult relationship. There are millions of women who have tribulations daily in marriage, and with Christ's help, are still running a good race of faith. Instead of thinking, “this is impossible,” our attitude, like Roger Bannister, should be “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

Revelation 12:11 says, “They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony ...” Testimonies are powerful and tremendous tools to help us run with endurance. I encourage my clients to consider reading Christian biographies of women who have endured hardship and yet clung to Christ, especially in navigating difficult marriages. Their lives shine as beacons of hope, showing that victory is not found in changed circumstances alone, but in hearts transformed by trust in the Lord.

Another thing I remind wives in counseling to consider is the example they are setting for their children. The likelihood that one day your adult son or daughter will come to you in marital crisis is

very high, “Mom, what should I do?” they’ll ask. The testimony of your endurance and faith, trusting God to make the impossible possible, will be inspirational to those who see it—especially those who have seen it behind closed doors. What a wonderful thing to be able to confidently say, “Honey, if your dad and I made it, so can you!”

LOOKING TO JESUS

There’s a strange story in Numbers 21:4-9 about snakes biting God’s people.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Numbers 21:4-9, NKJV)

The backstory is the children of Israel had been wandering in the desert for nearly 40 years. They were tired, discouraged, and at their wit’s end. A journey that should have taken less than a month had been extended to almost four decades due to their disobedience. Can you imagine their frustration of walking around the same mountain over and over again? The Bible says they were

becoming “impatient” which, in Hebrew, can translated they were “losing endurance.” They started complaining and God punished them by allowing poisonous snakes to bite and kill many of the people. There are meaningful metaphors here: Snakes biting people leading to death, sin biting us leading to death; but the greatest metaphor is the snake on the pole leading to life.

God told Moses, “Make a bronze serpent, lift it high on a pole, and anyone who looks at it will live” (Num. 21:8). The snakes of that region had venom that could cause immediate, agonizing, burning pain, and prove fatal. Death would occur in a matter of hours. But God’s antivenom was simple: Behold the snake, lifted high on the pole, to receive immediate and lasting healing!

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

The remedy for Eve’s curse, snake bites, sin’s poison, and marriage problems is the same: Look to Jesus and live! Can it really be that simple? Yes, it is! Many women struggle with their faith and marriages because they are trying to figure it out on their own. Medicines of manipulation, preoccupied potions, or coping concoctions will ultimately fail. Looking to Christ alone is the path to healing.

What does that mean exactly to “look to Jesus”? The Greek word here is “*aphoraō*” meaning “to look away from all else and fix one’s gaze on.” It’s not just looking at Jesus; it’s also turning your eyes away from every other distraction and locking them solely on Him. The idea is exclusive focus and deliberate attention. Your gaze is aimed toward Him as your goal. In the race metaphor of Hebrews 12, just as a runner in a stadium ignores the crowd, fatigue, and pain, fixing on the finish line, the believer must set aside sin and distraction to focus only on Christ. Jesus must be all-encompassing. He’s the “Founder” of our faith and also the “Perfecter.” He is Alpha and Omega (Rev. 22:13) and everything in-between. From start to finish, Jesus alone must be our vision and our prize.

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:14)

In a practical sense, “looking to Jesus” means turning away from lesser hopes by removing your spiritual gaze from other people, circumstances, or self-reliance, and singularly focusing on who Christ is. Removing all preconceived ideas about Jesus, and religious man-made views, is a good place to start. I encourage my clients to start in the Gospels, especially with the Book of John, and ask the Lord to reveal more of Jesus to them. It’s the Spirit’s work, igniting a fresh vision of the Savior, so just like the early disciples, “our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road” (Luke 24:32).

The more we see Him, the more we want to see. Like a sunrise peaking over the ocean, when it first comes into view, it’s already beautiful—streaks of pink and gold spilling across the water. But as you watch, the colors shift, deepen, and glow in new ways. Every passing moment makes you lean in more, not less. The more you see, the more you *want* to keep seeing, because you know something even more beautiful is about to happen. Focusing on Jesus is like that. He doesn’t grow dull with familiarity; His beauty and depth only pull you in further until your heart is completely overtaken.

CONSIDER HIM

Finally, Hebrews 12 tells us to “consider Him” through Christ’s tribulations which help keep our trials in focus and spurs us to gratitude. Consider that Jesus was whipped and beaten to a bloody pulp for you until He was no longer recognizable (Isa. 52:14). Consider He was forsaken and betrayed by all His disciples, so you’d never have to be alone (Heb. 13:5). Consider the long night in the Garden of Gethsemane where He sweated “great drops of blood” as He prayed for you in His agony (Luke 22:44). Consider that His beard was pulled out and a crown of thorns was beaten into His head so that you could wear a crown of righteousness (Matt. 27:29; 2 Tim. 4:8). Consider His excruciating pain as nails were driven into His hands and feet and a spear was thrust into

His side (John 19). Consider that He suffered naked on a cross as He was mocked and spat upon (Matt. 27).

Also consider that He was buried and raised to newness of life, so that our past could also be buried and we could be raised into newness with Him (Romans 6:4). Consider that, because of the cross, our sins are forgiven and our healing secured (Col. 2:13-14). Consider that He has gone to prepare a place for us, and He will come again to receive us unto Himself (John 14:3). Consider that He has opened heaven for us with joy unimaginable and unspeakable (1 Peter 1:8). Consider that He sees all your tears (Ps. 56:8) and one day He will wipe away every tear from every eye and there will be no more sorrow (Rev. 21:4).

And consider that He sees you, in every moment and in every pain (Matt. 10:29-31). Consider that He has been tempted and tried, just like you, but without sin (Heb. 4:15). Consider that He's a Good Shepherd and brings us into overflowing life (John 10). And consider that He will one day balance the scales of justice and make every right wrong (2 Thess. 1:6). Consider Jesus, Hebrews reminds us, so that we will not grow weary and lose heart in embracing life's moments and marriage which we did not anticipate.

Helen Howarth Lemmel had always been a woman of music. Born in 1863 in England, she moved with her family to America as a girl, carrying with her a love for singing and the discipline of practice. Over the years she became a celebrated soloist, a music teacher, and even toured Europe to study voice. She seemed to have a perfect life—a successful career, a happy marriage, and a future filled with the things she loved.

But life's melodies can change in an instant. In her middle years, Helen was struck by a rare illness that gradually stole her sight. The bright world she had known dimmed into darkness. Her husband, unable to cope with her blindness, abandoned her. Suddenly, the woman who had filled halls with song found herself alone in a quiet room, the piano keys blurred from her eyes.

One day in 1918, a friend handed her a thin missionary booklet by Liliias Trotter titled *Focused*. As she ran her fingers over the braille and listened to a friend read aloud, one line leapt into her heart: "So then, turn your eyes upon Him, look full into His face,

and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness.”

Helen said it was as if the words were alive—a direct invitation from God Himself! She sat in stillness for a moment, then, almost without effort, a melody and refrain formed in her mind: *Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face ...* The verses followed soon after—a song treasured by millions, born not from ease, but from deep dependence.

Though her physical sight never returned, Helen’s spiritual vision only grew sharper. She went on to write more than 500 hymns and poems, many composed on her small, hand-played organ in her modest apartment. Neighbors said they could often hear her singing late into the night, joy in her voice as if she were seeing something, or Someone, more real than the darkness around her.

Helen never remarried and lived into her 90s, blind but given new sight, her eyes set toward the One she sang about. For her, “looking to Jesus” wasn’t just a lyric—it was the way she survived every day. And in singing it, she helped millions find the same focus.

O soul, are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see?

There’s light for a look at the Savior, And life more abundant and free.

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.*

Through death into life everlasting He passed, and we follow Him there;

O’er us sin no more hath dominion For more than conqu’rors we are!

His Word shall not fail you, He promised; Believe Him and all will be well; Then go to a world that is dying, His perfect salvation to tell!³⁰

**Reflection Questions**

In what ways have you tried to “sew fig leaves” in your own life using control, self-reliance, or other coping mechanisms, instead of looking to Jesus for covering and healing?

How does the story of the Samaritan woman show the difference between flawed human relationships and the love and acceptance of the “Last Adam”?

Hebrews 12:2 describes “looking to Jesus” as turning away from all else and fixing our gaze on Him. What are some practical ways you can daily redirect your focus from distractions and burdens back to Christ?

Prayer

“Lord Jesus, You are my true covering and my life-giving hope. Forgive me for the times I’ve tried to protect myself with my own “fig leaves” instead of trusting You. Teach me to turn my eyes from every distraction and fix them on You alone. May Your beauty and love captivate me more each day until my heart overflows with Your joy and peace. Amen.”

Eight

*Redemption in**Relationship*

*“At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.”
(Gen. 4:26)*

As sunset fell across the fields, touching the tops of the grain with a soft orange light, Eve stood at the doorway of her tent, hands resting on the wooden frame worn smooth by the years. Her hair, once thick and black, had been silvered by time, and the lines on her face told of laughter and tears in equal measure. Behind her, she could hear the faint voice of Seth, her youngest son, humming a song he had learned from Adam, and somewhere in the distance the laughter of her grandson, Enosh, drifted on the breeze.

It had been a long road to this place.

The memory of Eden was still clear. In those early days in the garden, when unspeakable delights abounded, she had never imagined such a life. There had been no sin, no thorn, no dread in

her heart. Adam's voice had been warm then, his eyes gentle when they met hers. She could also remember the serpent's slanted eyes, the lure of his words, and the way Adam's face fell after he took the fruit from her hand. That moment had shattered something between them. She had felt the sting of his betrayal afterward, and remembered the way he avoided her gaze, as though she was the source of his shame.

When the Lord's voice thundered in the garden, everything had changed. Driven from Eden, she felt fear for the first time—heart-pounding, chest-tightening, weakness-inducing fear. It wouldn't be the first time, nor the last. They had to forge a new life for themselves, and oh, how difficult it had been! Labor, sweat, physical pain, hunger, sickness, and most of all, emotional distance. At night Adam would lie beside her, but the closeness they once knew had been replaced with unspoken tension. The warmth of the garden was gone, and so was its innocence.

When Cain was born, she thought hope had returned. And then Abel, sweet and quiet, whose heart was drawn to the Lord. But then the day arrived when the earth drank Abel's blood, and Cain's eyes were cold and unrepentant. In a single afternoon, she lost them both—one to death, the other to exile. That day was like opening her eyes again for the first time, but instead of encountering wonder, she awoke to a nightmare.

Gripped with pain and wrestling through so many emotions, she and Adam hardly spoke. Eve remembered working the ground together, tears streaking down her dust-covered face. Did Adam ever notice? The nights were long, and the ache in her chest was a weight she learned to carry without thinking. There were years like that—silent, gray years.

But then ... the slow turning.

She remembered the evening Adam brought her water from the well and sat beside her. They spoke of Abel for the first time since his death. He wept, and she let herself weep with him. In time, their conversations returned—so did his affection. It wasn't the carefree rapture as in the beginning, but a measure of Adam's tenderness finally revived.

When Seth was born, Eve felt something stir that she thought had died. "God has appointed me another offspring instead of Abel," she whispered, "for Cain killed him." The boy grew in

wisdom and gentleness. She watched Adam take him to the altar to teach him about offerings to the Lord. And then came Enosh, Seth's son. Eve felt her heart enliven even more with the child's every laugh, quickening her with joy.

It was during those days that she noticed something new, or perhaps something ancient returning. People began to call on the name of the Lord. Not with hurried words or ritualistic motions, but with voices full of longing and gratitude. Around the evening fires, prayers rose. Songs were sung. Not to idols. Not to the pride of men. But to the Creator who had clothed her with skins when fig leaves failed, the God who had not abandoned them in their exile.

Now, standing in the evening firelight, Eve breathed in deeply. She had known betrayal and loss, the cold ache of separation from her husband, the shattering of her family, and pain beyond pain. But she had also known reconciliation, the warmth of love restored, and the quiet joy of her appointed promise with renewed faith. Her life would never again be idyllic Eden, but for the first time, she felt contented and whole.

As the laughter of Enosh rang across the fields, Eve whispered to herself the truth she had learned in the hardest way: *The curse had fallen, but grace had followed close behind.* And somewhere in the distance, the voices of her people were rising, calling on the name of the Lord.

The Bible doesn't say if Eve was happy at the end of her life. Undoubtedly, if we defined happiness by the ease of her Edenic perfection, Eve was probably less-than-happy with the fallen state of her world and the losses she suffered; but she was content. Through the trials and hardships she endured, she had grown, changed, become stronger in some ways, weaker in others. Assuredly, there was a certain satisfaction in knowing she had fulfilled her purpose, seeing God's marvelous grace manifested in her life and family.

Most people desire happiness and envision their own gardens of perfection. The "American Dream" reinforces this cultural idea; it's something we've grown up with since grade school. Our Declaration of Independence proclaims, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” We *deserve* to be happy, don’t we?

The pursuit of happiness, really, is mostly “vanity of vanities” (Eccl. 3:1) and largely an exercise in futility—a fantastical mirage made even more tantalizing in the desert places of our lives. Just when we feel it’s in our reach, it suddenly vanishes, like “grasping for the wind” (Eccl. 1:14). We think we *deserve* to be happy, like our seemingly happy friends. Adrien is happy on Instagram with her fabulous vacations and perfect children. And then there’s McKenzie, who takes glamorous selfies at fancy restaurants with her handsome, happy husband. Others may seem to be living their best lives now, but it’s all a dream reinforced by YOLO (You Only Live Once), FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), and especially FOBO (Fear Of Better Options).

How often do we whisper in our hearts, *If I just had this thing, I’d be happy?* It might be a more attentive husband, a bigger home, financial security, or even a sense of freedom from daily pressures. But that longing for *something else* to finally make us whole is a subtle lie. The truth is, no earthly gift—no possession, achievement, or even the perfect marriage—can satisfy the deepest ache of the soul. As Puritan preacher Thomas Watson wrote, “Many have shot wide of the mark in seeking blessedness. It cannot be found in worldly things, but how ready is man to place happiness in them. The tree of blessedness does not grow in an earthly paradise. God cursed the ground for sin, yet many are digging for happiness there and seeking a blessing out of a curse. You may as well seek fire out of water. Earthly things are transitory and not adapted to the soul.”³¹

But why would God want anyone to live an unhappy life, much less be in an unhappy relationship? Shouldn’t we be happy in marriage? It sounds reasonable, but what if God’s intention is that marriage make us *holy* more than *happy*?

When we speak of marriage as God’s tool for holiness rather than happiness, perhaps no Biblical example is more striking than the prophet Hosea and his wife, Gomer. Their story is recorded in the Old Testament book of Hosea, and it begins with a shocking command from God: “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hos. 1:2). Hosea was called to marry

Gomer, a woman who would be unfaithful to him and cause much pain for years. From the very start, this was not a marriage designed to make Hosea happy. Instead, it was a calling that would break his heart, stretch his faith, and sanctify him through suffering.

Have you ever considered marriage a calling? A calling is not based on convenience or comfort; it's a divine imperative from God to live out His purposes in our lives. A calling from God sets us apart for His work, in both who we are and what we do. We are often called to do hard things: Give beyond our means, minister to someone different than us, speak the truth with boldness, love the unlovable.

Your marriage is not simply about companionship or personal happiness—it's infinitely more meaningful than that! Your marriage is designed to show Christ to your husband, as a witness both to him and to the world, causing you to grow in holiness through the daily demands of dying to self. To see marriage as a calling reframes every trial as part of God's sanctifying work in your life in ministering to your husband as part of sacrificial love.

I knew a woman once who felt God speak to her heart in prayer about her difficult spouse, "You are my gift to him." She admitted to me that few women would have been able to bear the weight of his trying temperament, but because of God's calling, she endured. "Others would have left," she said. "I stayed because I knew he needed me." Viewing her husband as her ministry helped her remain steadfast through decades of trials.

Gomer was also Hosea's ministry—a living parable of God's redemption in relationship. As their story unfolds, Gomer betrays Hosea, chasing after other lovers. She abandons her home and children, exchanging the security of the marriage covenant for fleeting pleasure and false promises. Humanly speaking, Hosea had every reason to cut ties, to declare himself done, to walk away from the pain. But God commanded Hosea to again do the unthinkable: "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel" (Hos. 3:1). Hosea sought Gomer out and paid a price to redeem her. Some commentators believe Gomer had sunk so far into sin that she was literally sold in a slave market, possibly as a debt slave tied to sexual slavery. Others argue she was not literally

enslaved but that the purchase price symbolizes what Hosea gave up to win her back from her adulterous attachments. Either way, Hosea paid a heavy price to bring her back home.

What is staying in this marriage costing you? What price have you paid? For Hosea, it cost his pride, his reputation, his happiness. It cost him peace and security. It cost many tears and many late nights looking for a rebellious spouse in the arms of other lovers. It cost him everything. But in return, he received a prophet's anointing as he became the mouthpiece of God to a wayward nation. He received a legacy of faith which still inspires 3000 years later, read by millions. He received the blessing of character refinement and growth in holiness, which are the greatest blessings he could ever receive. And, most importantly, he received a saint's ultimate reward in hearing the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:23) for being obedient to a hard calling.

Come, let us return to the Lord; for He has torn us to pieces, but He will heal us; He has injured us, but He will bind up our wounds ... let us press on to know the Lord. (Hosea 6:1, 3)

Hosea pressed on to know the Lord through the pain of his calling, despite being torn, despite being injured, despite being unhappy. His story still speaks of God's redemption today, both in human relationships and in His relationship with us, and few stories in Scripture offer such a vivid portrait of God's relentless love. Hosea's life reminds us that God uses marriage to make us holy, and in that process, to display His steadfast love in redemptive relationships.

Just as Hosea was called to see beyond betrayal and heartache to the bigger picture of God's redemptive plan, we too are invited to shift our perspective. Redemption often appears in unlikely places—sometimes in the middle of suffering, sometimes in the midst of the ordinary—if only we have eyes to see it.

Jess and I went to a new Mexican restaurant a few months ago. The food was excellent, but the entire place needed a refresh. The floors and fixtures were outdated, several lightbulbs were out, dust clung in piles on exposed electrical wiring, and I had a brief thought about potential fire hazards while we were eating. We

were sitting next to a wall and as we waited for our food, I looked up to see a large painted mural of a woman dancing in traditional Mexican regalia. I was close enough to see the brush strokes, and I was amazed at the artist's creativity. The dancer, adorned in the vivid colors of tradition, moved with elegance and joy. Her swirling skirt of reds, blues, and golds captured the rhythm of celebration, while her broad sombrero crowned her with dignity and pride. Abode colored brick buildings stood stately in the background. The painting was obviously decades old, but its beauty captivated me as if it had been painted just yesterday.

The contrast was striking! What a beautiful painting in the middle of a dark and drab restaurant! I took several minutes to study the mural, and the more I looked, the more beautiful it became. I could have focused on the condition of the unhappy little restaurant, but I chose to turn my attention to the beauty right next to me. We choose to see what we look at, and it is very much a choice! Similarly, our marriages may have plenty of flaws, but if we fix our gaze on what is good, lovely, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8), we'll find beauty in unexpected places. Choosing where to look is choosing how to live.

A friend of mine, "Gwen," has been in a very dysfunctional marriage for over forty years. If you were to look up "stick in the mud" in the dictionary, you'd probably see a picture of her husband beside the definition. I'm not exaggerating when I say this man doesn't even take her to McDonald's! No cards, no gifts, no flowers, no vacations, no romantic gestures, nothing. Maybe those absolutes are a little extreme; I'm sure there have been occasional gestures of love and affection, but saying they have been rare is an understatement.

Gwen's husband has never abused her, he's never cheated, and he has been a good provider financially. He went to church and gave some stability to their family, but as far as I can tell, there has never really been a strong emotional connection between them. They have mostly lived their lives in separate worlds, in separate orbits, and even separate solar systems. Ships passing in the night, roommates going about their individual routines, distance and detachment marking most of their lives and marriage together.

A more mismatched couple you will probably never meet. Gwen is whimsical and intellectual, optimistic and outgoing. She

loves to explore ideas, laugh, and engage her creativity. He's the quintessential definition of an introverted pessimist, never seeing very far beyond himself and his own needs. And yet—my friend is one of the most joy-filled women you'll ever meet. But her joy is not derived from her relationship with her husband. Her joy comes from her relationship with her God.

There were tears, of course, for Gwen through the years with disappointments and arguments with her husband. The pain of emotional distance was often present. She missed out, in a way, on what others might have had in their marriages. I'm sure she thought at times what *might have been* if she had married another man. But she didn't allow those thoughts to control or depress her, for she had married another—and His name was Jesus!

With her faith at the center, she poured herself into her children, her writing, her poetry, her learning, her books. She immersed herself in church, in teaching, in encouraging, in fellowshiping, and (in her older years) in blogging. Due to age and sickness, she slowed down quite a bit, but modern technology made the internet her new ministry, sending small encouragements to all corners of the globe. Did she still get discouraged sometimes? You bet. Did she encourage herself in the Lord (1 Sam. 30:6)? Always.

And somehow, she found joy.

I asked her how she did it, and this was her reply: "I think of my husband's good points. We tend to forget about those things when we are upset. Is he dependable? Does he work and support the family? Is he kind to the kids? Does he help around the house? Does he mow grass and keep things fixed and running? Does he go to church with you? Stuff like that. The love language thing is true, and these people love, but not in ways we always understand. Also, I think it might have been *Dear Abby* who said, 'Before you leave somebody, ask yourself, "Will your life truly be better without them?"' There's more to think about them than moonlight and roses. You have to learn to be content and trust God."

Gwen found the path to contentment begins with understanding that happiness and joy are not mutually exclusive. Happiness rises and falls with the good or bad events happening around us. We vacillate in varying degrees of happiness in response to how we perceive our lives are going. If our car breaks

down on the way to work, that's going to make us unhappy—so is a negative health diagnosis, fussy children, or a fight with our spouse. Everyone experiences some level of unhappiness daily.

Joy, though, runs much deeper and is not dependent on outward situations. It is a settled state of contemplative contentment, focused on Jesus, rooted in trust around God's providential care, and fortified by thankfulness. We can be unhappy and still overflow with joy by focusing on the goodness of God in our lives. True joy in Christ is a supernatural state, originating from God, that can endure through difficulty or pain. Paul wrote from a prison cell about rejoicing in the Lord, demonstrating that joy can remain even when happiness is absent. Does your marriage feel like a prison? You can have abiding joy despite your chains.

... always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy ... (Philippians 1:4)

... Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice ... (Philippians 1:18)

... I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. (Philippians 2:17-18)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake ... (Colossians 1:24)

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love ... (Philemon 1:7)

Life is not going to be easy. The road will be long, the days will feel exhausting, the marriage will be hard; but we can *still* find peace and joy, complete, overflowing, and fully realized. It isn't a fleeting or partial joy, either—it's the measure of full joy, filled to capacity because it comes from above. I heard a pastor call it, "inappropriate joy." It's an inopportune joy, in unfitting moments, that doesn't make sense because it isn't derived from this earth—it has supernatural origins!

In Philippians 4:4-9, 11-13, Paul writes under house arrest awaiting trial. If you're going through a trial of a marriage, he gives some words of wisdom we can apply to husbands. I've added my thoughts in parentheses for emphasis:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. **(Not just when things are going well in your marriage).** I will say it again: Rejoice! **(Even when your husband is angry, irritated, or dismissive of your feelings.)** Let your gentleness be evident to all. **(Especially to your hard-headed spouse.)** The Lord is near. **(And He sees and rewards your actions and attitude.)** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **(Don't worry—God's got this!)** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **(Supernatural peace is a guarantee!)** ... Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. **(Don't look at what you see but set your mind on things above.)** Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. **(Remember, Paul was rejoicing in chains!)** And the God of peace will be with you. **(There's another guarantee!)** ... I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. **(Your circumstances don't have to dictate your level of contentment.)** I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **(Your contentment is not measured by the happiness of your situation.)** I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.” **(Jesus is the One who can help you be content and give you joy in a difficult marriage.)**

Paul reminds believers that joy, gentleness, peace, and contentment are not dependent on ideal circumstances but on our relationship with Christ. We are called to rejoice in the Lord in every situation showing gentleness to our spouse, trusting that God sees and rewards our heart, and relying upon His sustaining

grace. Instead of giving in to anxiety, we are to pray with thanksgiving, knowing God's supernatural peace will guard our hearts and minds. By fixing our thoughts on things above (Col. 3:1-2), we can rise above what we see and experience. Paul's example of rejoicing in chains teaches us that contentment can be cultivated, in both abundance and need, because our strength to endure comes from Christ alone.

The story of Susanna Wesley (1669-1742) gives us an inspiring example of perseverance, godly motherhood, and spiritual strength amid constant marital hardship. She is often called the "Mother of Methodism" because of her influence on her sons, John and Charles Wesley, who became key figures in the Methodist revival. John was the founder of the Methodist church, and Charles wrote thousands of hymns, many of which are still sung today, including "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Born Susanna Annesley, the 25th child in a Puritan minister's family, she married Samuel Wesley, an Anglican minister, at age 19. Susanna gave birth to 19 children, including four sets of twins. Infant death was a common occurrence in those days, and Susanna suffered the deaths of nine of her children, one of whom died tragically after being accidentally smothered by a nurse. She also endured long periods of illness, extreme poverty, and social pressure due to the unpopularity of her husband's ministry to his local congregation.

Samuel and Susanna were both strong-willed, and Susanna's marriage to Samuel was marked by conflict and neglect. Samuel was often gone for long periods, leaving Susanna to raise the children and manage the household alone. At one point, he left her for five months after they disagreed over politics (Susanna refused to say "Amen" to a prayer for King William III after King James was deposed). She later wrote of her husband, "I am more easy in the thoughts of parting because I think we are not likely to be happy together."³² During his absence, she continued family devotions and even held public Bible studies that grew so large, they rivaled the official church attendance. This, too, created tension between Susanna and Samuel.

Samuel was terrible with money and spent much of their marriage in debt. He was imprisoned twice for financial liabilities, leaving the family destitute. To survive, Susanna managed the

family's meager resources with strict discipline, stretching food and supplies to their limits. She relied on help from friends and parishioners, and sold or bartered household goods to keep the family going. Their home in Epworth was in poor repair due to finances and burned down twice—their young son nearly lost in one of the fires.

Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, Susanna remained deeply committed to her faith. She carved out one hour every day for personal prayer and Scripture, pulling her apron over her head to signal to the children that she was meeting with God. She wrote spiritual meditations and letters full of theological depth and gave each child individual attention weekly to discuss their spiritual growth. She personally taught them reading, writing, and Scripture as she homeschooled six hours a day, six days each week.

The storms of Samuel and Susanna Wesley's early years had mostly passed by the 1730's. The quarrels over politics, the long absences, the humiliating months when Samuel sat in debtor's prison were now past. Age had slowed him, and illness kept him often in his chair by the hearth. The once-controversial rector found himself leaning more and more on the woman who had so often been left to manage without him.

Susanna, whose back had long borne the weight of a large family and a poor parish, now took on the quieter work of caring for her husband, preparing his meals, minding his comfort, and tending to him when gout and weakness confined him indoors. Their children, now grown, were making their way in the world. John and Charles were sending letters and, when they could, a bit of money. The parsonage, so often a place of clamor and need, had become a gentler space, the sound of voices replaced by the scratching of a quill or the low murmur of prayer.

When Samuel's final illness came in the summer of 1735, Susanna was there at his side. Whatever sharp words or long silences had once divided the Wesleys, there were no traces of them now. She had remained—through the disputes, the poverty, the separations—and in those last days, she embodied the steadfastness she had always taught her children. As Samuel breathed his last, his wife was near, her hand perhaps resting on his, her gaze steady. It was not a romance of ease, but of

endurance—a union tempered in hardship and crowned with quiet faithfulness. When Samuel was gone, Susanna would live on in the homes of her children, her mind and prayers still shaping the work that would carry the Wesley name far beyond the parish fields they had once walked together.

One biographer summed up her life by saying, “For decades ... [Samuel] worked on his scholarly treatise ... while his living, breathing wife was enduring real pain and hardship, largely on her own.”³³ Another commentator wrote, “She did not have a man who was her soul mate ... She had Jesus.”³⁴

Susanna Wesley’s story is both disastrous and divine; and truly that is how we know God was at work. Her deep faith anchored her through the tsunamis that life brought. Though her life was different than yours, the calling for wives in difficult marriages is the same—reliance on Christ’s power perfected in the weakest of moments, bringing God the most glory (2 Cor. 12:9).

Here are four lessons we can learn from Susanna’s difficult marriage:

1. She didn’t wait for ideal conditions to be faithful.

Some people serve God only when life feels calm and comfortable, but faithfulness often matters most in seasons of chaos. Raising children in a noisy home, struggling with limited income, or arguments with an oppositional spouse may feel messy but God is still in the mix. Instead of waiting for perfect quiet or an easier relationship, Susanna weaved prayer and service into the rhythms of her daily life, talking about God during meals, reading Scripture before bed, and modeling patience when tensions rose. Faith is nurtured in the small, consistent acts of obedience, even when everything around us feels far from ideal.

2. She respected her husband but didn’t compromise her conscience.

While she loved and honored Samuel, Susanna was not a silent bystander when it came to matters of truth. Honoring a spouse doesn’t mean setting aside personal convictions. Consider a couple who deeply love one another but disagree on a matter of integrity—perhaps a business decision, a moral issue, or even a political allegiance. One spouse chooses to remain respectful and kind yet refuses to affirm what they believe is wrong before God. Such a stand may introduce tension for a season, but it reflects a deeper

truth: Real unity cannot rest on the compromise of conscience. This kind of courage reveals that submission in marriage is not blind compliance, but a balance of honor and integrity.

3. She turned her suffering into spiritual formation.

Life inevitably brings loss—whether it’s financial hardship, the death of a loved one, or a devastating personal setback. Some allow these experiences to breed resentment, but others choose to see hardship as God’s refining fire. Susanna viewed hardship as a means of refinement, not punishment. In her private writings and letters, she spoke often of God’s sovereignty and the shaping of her soul through affliction. Her faith was not a fragile sentiment that dissolved under pressure—it was tested, proven, and matured in the furnace of adversity. By the time her children were grown, they not only knew the Gospel from her words but had seen it lived out in her life.

4. She understood her role as eternally significant.

Not every calling comes with a microphone. Susanna never held a pulpit, led a congregation, or published a theological work, but she recognized that the ministry of a mother is no less sacred than the ministry of a preacher. Through consistent discipleship at home, she raised John and Charles Wesley, whose preaching and hymn-writing sparked revival across continents. Her legacy was not in her own public accomplishments but in deeply impacting the children she shaped. She taught them to pray, to love Scripture, to think critically about their faith, and to live disciplined lives. And in her latter days, her ministry to her ailing husband continued in humble service. This eternal perspective kept her steady when the daily grind seemed small and thankless. She understood that her influence would extend far beyond her lifetime, and history has proved her right.

Susanna Wesley’s life reminds us that faithfulness in marriage is not about waiting for perfect circumstances, winning every argument, escaping suffering, or seeking recognition. It is about steady obedience to God in the ordinary and often trying moments of daily life. She modeled how prayer can be woven into chaos, how respect can coexist with conviction, how suffering can become a classroom for holiness, and how unseen labor can affect generations. Her story shows us that redemption in relationship is

not found in ideal conditions but in obedience to God as we daily walk by faith, one small moment at a time.

If Eve could look back and say, “Grace followed close behind,” if Gwen could find joy in the middle of distance, if Susanna could remain faithful through hardship, then you can hold to the same promise: Christ redeems. Sometimes He redeems our marriages, sometimes He redeems us *in* our marriages, but always He redeems.

It was theologian, J.I. Packer, who said, “If you ask, ‘Why is this happening?’ no light may come, but if you ask, ‘How am I to glorify God now?’ there will always be an answer.” How things will change when we ask ourselves, *How can I glorify God in this marriage?* Oh, how peace, hope, joy, and great redemption will be found! Beauty for ashes! Joy for pain!

In the introduction of this book, I wrote about my friend, Julie, who came to see me with the heavy weight of a dysfunctional marriage pulling her down. She texted me a few days after our counseling session to thank me for my help and said her husband had “stepped up his game.” She seemed to be encouraged and affirmed she was seeking God’s continued help in their relationship. Her social media included a recently posted picture of Julie and her husband enjoying time together outdoors. She also shared Psalms 27:14: “Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!”

This is the hope for every struggling wife—that God is not absent in the hard places. He is the One who can breathe life into weary hearts, soften what has grown calloused, and restore what seems too broken to repair. Though stories may be different, the Author is the same. Trust Him with your marriage, lean on His promises, and believe that even in the darkest seasons, He is able to write a new chapter of redemption in your marriage story.



Reflection Questions

In what ways have you confused happiness with joy in your own life or marriage? How does Scripture help you distinguish between the two?

Gwen and Susanna Wesley both found contentment in Christ despite unmet expectations in their marriages. What practical steps can you take to anchor your joy in God rather than in your spouse's behavior?

When circumstances in your marriage or life feel unchanging, how can focusing on God's faithfulness help you persevere with joy rather than despair? Where do you need to invite Christ's redemptive power into your own marriage or family?

Prayer

“Lord Jesus, You are my Redeemer and my Joy. I confess that I’ve often chased after happiness and forgot that true joy comes only from You. Teach me to find contentment in Your presence even when circumstances are hard. Help me to honor my spouse while holding fast to my convictions, and to see every trial as an opportunity for Your grace to shine. Amen.”

APPENDIX I: A BIBLICAL COUNSELING APPROACH TO GREIVING A DIFFICULT MARRIAGE

Over the years in my work as a licensed professional counselor, I have sat with many Christian women in the tender space between grieving the loss of unrealized expectations in marriage and coming to acceptance and healing. Grief is not a straight path; it bends and twists with each person's unique story, often revisiting us when we least expect it. This appendix is designed to walk you through the process of grieving the loss of your dream marriage with both honesty and hope, drawing from my counseling experience and a distinctly Biblical perspective.

While modern psychology offers valuable insights into grief's emotional and physiological impact, Scripture speaks to the heart's deepest needs during loss. God has given us language for lament, promises for comfort, and the assurance that He is near to the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18). Here you will find guidance for understanding the stages and expressions of grief, along with practical steps for letting go and moving on into a more contented and joy-filled life. This is not a formula for "getting over" grief, but a framework for moving through it—embracing God's comfort, wrestling honestly with pain, and ultimately finding rest, peace and a way forward.

"It must hurt if it's to heal," the saying goes. Perhaps this is why many people don't heal from their pain and carry the weight of woundedness for a lifetime? A true, deep, and healing grieving process involves entering into the pain, facing it, and letting go of it. Grief cannot be bypassed or ignored; it must be embraced if it is to be fully processed. When sorrow is stuffed down or numbed away, it festers in hidden places, resurfacing as bitterness, anxiety, or broken relationships. But when we allow ourselves to sit with grief, to feel its sting in the presence of God, it begins to loosen its grip. Though it is a process, it can be expedited by deliberate actions.

Research has given credibility to the DABDA grief model.³⁵ DABDA stands for the stages of grief a person experiences after a physical or emotional loss: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. In my years of working with people struggling with loss, I've found this systematic method of working through grief to be applicable to most people. It's valid not just with death but also with other losses, as well. For example, when a woman discovers her husband's affair, she's initially shocked—in **Denial** and has trouble believing the man she loved could do this to her. Then she moves into the **Anger** stage. She's angry with him, angry at the affair partner, angry at herself, maybe angry at God. She then begins **Bargaining**. If only she had done this-or-that, or had seen the signs, or left him sooner? Then she usually falls into the hardest stage—deep **Depression** which can last for months or years. Many women stay stuck in the grieving process, alternating between the stages, unable to move to **Acceptance**. Acceptance is peace in knowing that, though we experienced a monumental loss, our lives can still be good and our emotions healthy.

Usually, it's a lack of finality which creates a barrier to acceptance. Undoubtedly, it takes time to reconcile deep losses in our lives; the problem occurs when there's no closure. It's hard to close, though, what is recurring. Despite how much a couple argues, the husband often slips back into old patterns. Promises made, promises broken. Each let down feels like another stab to the heart. How can a wife come to acceptance when the reminders are constant, even daily? Hope is a powerful thing, and she hopes against hope, *maybe this time he'll change*, and things will be different. Hope often keeps us hanging on much longer than we should, only prolonging grief.

It's said of Queen Victoria that after the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861, she wore black the next 40 years of her life until her death. She withdrew from public life and was called "the widow of Windsor." After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Mary Todd Lincoln fell into a deep depression. She also wore black for years, struggled with depression, and was eventually institutionalized due to her emotional instability. Countless clients of mine have found themselves in similar depths of despair due to death, betrayal, or deep unhappiness, and have trouble moving on.

Some losses in life are not marked by a funeral but still bury us under the weight of grief. Counselors once described this experience as *Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder*, a term used before Prolonged Grief Disorder became an official diagnosis.³⁶ While originally associated with death, it gave language to the kind of sorrow that lingers after other devastating losses as well. A woman may grieve the death of her marriage even if her husband is still alive or mourn the family she dreamed of but never had. This kind of prolonged sorrow resembles bereavement: It can leave her preoccupied with “what might have been,” struggling with meaning, and unable to re-engage with life fully. Though not always recognized with a formal diagnosis, this reality is genuine grief.

When grief is tied to a broken or deeply disappointing marriage, it can look and feel much like bereavement. This grief becomes “persistent” when it lingers for many months or even years, showing up as a constant preoccupation with the pain of the relationship or the longing for what has been lost. A wife may find herself replaying arguments, imagining a different life, or feeling a strong yearning for the marriage she hoped for. Along with this come other painful experiences: Difficulty accepting the reality of the relationship, bitterness or anger toward her spouse, avoidance of reminders of happier times, or a sense of emotional numbness. Over time, this unresolved sorrow may cause identity disruption—feeling like part of herself has died, struggling to trust others, losing interest in activities she once enjoyed, or believing that life feels meaningless without the love she longs for. The grief of a marriage that *isn't what it should be* can weigh as heavily as the grief of death. When it disrupts daily living and keeps a person from moving forward, it deserves to be named and addressed as real, ongoing grief.

In counseling, my goal is to help my clients process grief to facilitate resolution. Grief must be fully *experienced* to be fully *finished*. Many live with unresolved grief because they've never set aside the time to allow it to have a complete course. Understandably, pain hurts. We don't want to embrace pain, so we rush past it and try to move on with life as quickly as possible; this is often why we don't fully heal. But grief *does* have an ending. Maybe the pain never fully goes away, but it can most certainly

lessen. Yes, the pain may always be there to some extent, but it does have a tapering of its effect and loses control of our lives when it is properly handled.

One of the things I encourage my clients to do to help process grief is to thoroughly mourn the loss of what was, as well as the loss of the dream of what they wished to have been, and to do this through a “closing ceremony” of some sort. Counseling approaches like *Gestalt therapy* and *Psychodrama* can address this unfinished *emotional business* through experiential techniques, symbolic acts, rituals, or dramatic closing ceremonies. Research validates the efficacy of these techniques in improving emotional outcomes after relational losses.

Norton and Gino (2014) demonstrated that even outside of one-on-one time with a therapist, performing deliberate ceremonies after a loss can ease grief. In their study, participants who were assigned to perform a ritual after losing a loved one or experiencing a breakup reported significantly lower grief levels than those who did nothing special. The researchers found that ceremonies work by restoring a sense of control in the face of loss. Losses often make people feel helpless or chaotic, and enacting a structured ceremony, no matter how simple or private, helped individuals regain emotional control, which lessened their grief. The benefits were observed even in participants who didn’t initially believe in the effectiveness of ceremonies.³⁷

This suggests a fundamental psychological mechanism at play: Ceremonies provide a sense of agency and closure and give tangible expression to an internal process. They signal on a psychological level that “this chapter is ending, and a new one can begin.” Clients often report that after engaging in ceremonies, they feel a greater sense of acceptance, relief, and readiness to move on, as if a burden has been lifted or a loop finally closed.³⁸ While grief and heartbreak may not vanish overnight or ever go away completely, these experiential techniques facilitate the natural mourning process by providing a safe, structured way to process the emotions of unmet expectations and the death of dreams.

Ceremonies are markers of the beginning and ending of significant life events which we remember for a lifetime. Humans have observed ceremonial traditions for thousands of years. Weddings, funerals, anniversaries, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs,

Quinceañeras, confirmations, and even birthdays, are rituals and rites of passage that are meaningful because of the intense emotion they contain. Funeral ceremonies, especially, are important because they bring closure; but funerals aren't meant for the physically dead only.

In Judges 11, we read a story about a man named Jephthah and his only child, and how he foolishly left her vulnerable. Jephthah was a mighty warrior, and the elders of Gilead begged him to lead them in battle. He agreed and made a vow to God before going to war, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph ... will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30–31). This was a bargaining prayer with Jephthah selfishly trying to secure victory through a vow that reflected cultural influences of paganism, not the character of Israel's God.

Jephthah's daughter was living at home with her father when he made the vow, so the chances of her coming out to meet him after the battle were high. When he returned home in victory, his daughter did indeed come out to greet him with tambourines and dancing. She was thrilled to see him, but he was distressed, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break" (Judges 11:35). Scholars are divided as to whether he literally sacrificed her, or if she lived as a perpetual virgin in service and solitude as a "living sacrifice" at the tabernacle. Either way, faced with immense loss, Jephthah's daughter asked him for time to grieve:

"Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry." "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. (Gen. 11:37-28)

Jephthah's daughter needed two months of active grieving to accept her fate. Many cultures around the world still honor structured, intentional grieving periods, which are rooted in their religious or ancestral traditions. These seasons of lament—whether days of wearing certain garments, weeks of fasting, or months of

gathering with community—create sacred space for sorrow to be expressed fully and without shame. Ritualized mourning around physical and emotional loss is important because it offers a counterbalance to the often rushed or suppressed grief common in Western cultures. When space is carved out intentionally, grief can be honored rather than hidden, and healing can unfold in its proper rhythm. The fact is most of us don't thoroughly grieve because we simply don't have the time to do so, or we lack the cultural permission to let our mourning be seen.

One client who successfully navigated her grieving process was “Heather.” She came to see me in her mid-50s, primarily for depression and relationship problems. She was articulate, intelligent, and successful; but for some unknown reason, she had become distant from her husband and children with no real enthusiasm for life anymore. I diagnosed her as having Major Depressive Disorder.

In the first few sessions, I try to get a thorough background history of my client by discussing their family of origin and any major traumas they may have experienced. As we went through her timeline, she mentioned her mother had committed suicide by gunshot when she was nineteen years old. She quickly glossed over it and proceeded to her next major life event. I stopped her. “Wait a sec, you said your mother committed suicide when you were nineteen?” She nodded affirmatively. “Wow, that must have been tough for you. Do you ever go a visit her graveside?”

“No,” Heather said. “She’s in the back of my closet.”

My eyebrows raised. “What do you mean she’s in the back of your closet?” Heather went on to explain that her mother had been cremated and her ashes had remained in the back of her closet for nearly 30 years.

“I had to be the responsible one,” she said. “I was the oldest. I took charge and made all the funeral arrangements. I guess life went fast and I had to move on.” To make matters worse, her mother’s suicide had been precipitated by an argument with a family member, who was estranged from her mother at the time and had left his gun cabinet unlocked. Heather’s pain was deep and multi-layered.

I explained to Heather that pain and grief are like seeds, buried deep within us. We push them down and try to forget about them.

“Those seeds will eventually grow into weeds and overtake many areas of our lives. Though outwardly we may look okay; on the inside, our lives are being choked out,” I said. “We need to do something with those ashes.”

Over the next few sessions, Heather and I discussed a plan to create a powerful emotional experience through *ceremony* to help resolve her hidden grief. Heather hadn’t been able to fully process her mother’s death due to the shock of the suicide and being forced to be strong while making funeral arrangements. We needed to re-create a funeral, in a sense, to give Heather *a time, a place, and a space* to properly grieve.

Heather found a spot in her yard and planted a tree in her mom’s honor, and ever so meticulously, planted a garden of flowers around the tree. Then she took the urn from the back of the closet, with her husband and children quietly by her side, and placed it in the middle of the garden. And she wept. She also healed.

The next session after the ceremony, she came to my office overjoyed. “Joel, my husband is saying he’s got his wife back! My kids are saying they’ve got their mom back! I’m feeling so much better!” I smiled. Heather did a very hard thing, but it was one of the best things she could have done for herself and her family.

Jesus, Himself, modeled how to grieve in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-44). Knowing the crucifixion was to come, and how He would be abandoned and betrayed by His disciples, Jesus found *a time, a place, and a space* to process His grief and pour out His heart to the Father. The hours in the garden were excruciating, so much so that many scholars think He experienced a rare condition called *hematidrosis*, where capillaries in the head and face burst under extreme stress, causing blood to mix with sweat. This was extreme grief, but it was a needed preparatory time on His road to the cross. As Christ showed us, grief is not always about what has passed; sometimes we must grieve in advance for the trials we are still called to endure.

Have you felt despised and rejected as a wife? Jesus knows how you feel. He was “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ...” (Isa. 53:3). He understands the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain of separation and

rejection, and has made remedy for it through the comfort of His Word, the community of family and faith, and by the natural grieving process.

I have employed a method of ceremonial grieving with much success with a variety of clients. Ceremonial grieving allows a person to tangibly mark their loss, giving the sorrow a clear end rather than letting it linger undefined. By creating intentional space to lament and release, clients often find a sense of closure that talk therapy alone cannot always provide. For it to be most effective, I would suggest a few strategies.

1. Find a sacred space.

It's helpful to choose a space which you can reserve for this grieving process only, and the space should be filled with sacredness and solemnity. Ideally, it should be quiet, private, uninterrupted, and unhurried. This should be a place where you can get away for at least two or three days for process, rest and recovery. I advise my clients to find a cabin in the woods, a house by a lake, or a bungalow on a beach, with some connection to nature. Being immersed in God's natural beauty can provide a sense of comfort and peace during an emotionally tumultuous process. It's also good to connect with nature, pre-, during, and post-process. This space should have no other emotional attachments or familiarity; it will be a space solely for letting go.

2. The moment should be highly emotional.

In the days leading up to the ceremony, you should allow your thoughts to linger on the betrayal, the neglect, and the losses. As hard as this may be, it's essential to "prime the emotional pump" so you'll be ready to process upon arrival. It might be helpful to break out the photo albums of happier times and reminisce about significant events. It might also be helpful to bring along meaningful items that remind you of your husband, (i.e., a shirt scented with his cologne).

3. Be specific about what you're grieving and leaving.

Leading up to the ceremony, pray and ask God to show you places in your heart that have become inflamed due to your husband's specific actions. It's okay to have many things you're letting go of; make a list to help stay focused. It should include specific hurts which you find hard to forgive. You'll address these one-by-one during your grieving process.

4. Use an action that represents leaving, letting go, and forgiveness.

For the ceremony to be effective, the action must be deeply meaningful and tied in some way to your husband. It could involve a token that represents him or a wedding photo of the dream of marriage you are releasing. Here are some ideas:

- **Burn a Letter.** Write a letter to your husband, to yourself, or to God. Say everything you feel (love, hurt, blame, release). Read it aloud, then safely burn it to symbolize the release.

- **Shred or Tear Photos/Papers.** Rip up old notes, pictures, or journal entries tied to painful memories. As you shred them, say what you're letting go of ("I release this pain").

- **Break Something Symbolic.** Take a wedding plate or other item representing your marriage, write what you're releasing on it with a marker, and smash it (safely). This physical destruction can represent breaking ties or cycles.

- **Bury an Object.** Bury a ring, letter, or box of things that represent your marriage. You can even write a eulogy to the marriage you hoped you would have. This is a symbolic funeral that marks an ending.

- **Water-Based Release.** Write on dissolvable paper or plain paper and submerge it in water while you watch it disintegrate in a bowl, stream, or ocean as a visual of "letting it wash away."

- **Empty Chair Conversation.** Sit across from an empty chair and speak to your husband (or to your former self). Say everything you never got to say. End with a clear farewell.

- **Let-Go Walk.** Walk a trail or path while naming aloud the things you're letting go of with each step. At the end, touch a tree or place your hand on the ground and say, "It stays here."

- **Release Contract.** Write a formal contract: "I, [name], choose to release myself from the burden of _____. I no longer carry the responsibility to _____. This release is permanent. I am free because I chose to forgive." Sign and date it. Frame it, burn it, or bury it.

- **Message in a bottle.** Write your pain or a letter to your husband and put it into a bottle. Throw it into a river, lake, or ocean as far as you can. Say: "It's gone from me."

- **Balloon Letting Go.** Write a message on biodegradable paper, tie it to a helium balloon. Say goodbye and let it go.

5. Remind yourself you are leaving the emotional burden in this space.

It is not enough to simply perform an action of release; you must also seal the act with intentional awareness. The heart tends to pick back up the burdens it tries to set down, so this step reaffirms your choice and anchors it in your memory. As you conclude the ceremony, pause and take a moment of reflection. Speak aloud, “I leave this here. I do not carry it with me.” This verbal declaration helps cement the truth in your mind and spirit. The key is to resist the urge to rehash the pain in your mind later, as if you had carried it back with you. When memories resurface, remind yourself, “I laid that down already. It’s not mine anymore.” By mentally revisiting the sacred space where you left the burden, you reinforce the decision and the freedom you claimed in Christ.

6. Get support.

Some burdens are so emotionally heavy they can’t be borne alone. You may choose to have a close friend accompany you during the ceremony who acts as a type of *validating witness* of the process. She should be a solemn and supportive observer and understand the weightiness of what you are undertaking. The oversight of a trained pastor or Christian therapist might also be helpful.

7. Ask God to help you truly forgive.

Any ceremonial act must end with forgiveness—the ultimate expression of letting go. Scripture emphasizes the necessity of forgiveness and admonishes that “If you do not forgive others ... neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15). God is serious about our need to forgive others, though I realize this may seem impossible for some wives. I tell my clients that forgiveness isn’t an overnight process, and coming to forgiveness is a journey which requires God’s daily help. Forgiveness is a daily *choice* to look yourself in the mirror every day and make the statement, “With God’s help, I choose to forgive my husband today.” God will honor that confession and eventually your heart will change. The closing ceremony might be the first step towards forgiving your husband, but if forgiveness isn’t truly given, his offenses will be more easily picked up again.

Pastor John Piper writes, “At times, weep deeply over the life you hoped would be. Grieve the losses. Then wash your face, trust

God and embrace the life you have.” Taking time for ceremonial grieving does not erase the pain of loss, but it provides a sacred way to walk through it, giving shape to what often feels like chaos. It slows us down long enough to face our losses honestly, to speak them aloud, and to place them before the Lord. These steps provide structure, but the heart of the process is surrender—allowing ourselves to lament as Scripture teaches, while trusting that God sees every tear (Ps. 56:8). In doing so, grief becomes not only something endured, but something transformed, leading us from anguish to healing. When we dare to grieve in God’s presence, we discover that He meets us there with comfort, strength, and the promise that mourning can give way to joy (Ps. 30:11-12).

APPENDIX II: PRACTICAL QUESTIONS FROM A BIBLICAL COUNSELING PERSPECTIVE

This appendix is a distillation of conversations, tears, prayers, and Scriptural exploration regarding real-world marriage issues within a Biblical framework. It is not meant to replace the careful guidance of a pastor or counselor who knows your specific story, but rather to provide a Biblically grounded starting point to help you think, pray, and act with wisdom. Each topic reflects struggles that wives have brought into my counseling office regarding communication, emotional resilience, intimacy, boundaries, influence, and control.

QUESTION #1: HOW DO I MAINTAIN SPIRITUAL INTIMACY WITH GOD IN A LONELY MARRIAGE?

When the warmth of marriage fades, it can be tempting to let spiritual vitality fade with it. Discouragement and depression may be knocking at your door, but your relationship with God is not dependent on your spouse's spiritual temperature—it is sustained by the steadfast love of the Lord (Lamentations 3:22–23) and God's faithfulness (2 Tim. 2:13). In seasons of relational coldness, your walk with God can deepen by being intentional and your joy can remain full (John 16:24).

1. Anchor Yourself in Daily Communion with God

Make prayer and Scripture reading non-negotiable. Choose times and places that help you focus, even if your home feels tense. Read the Psalms aloud, letting the raw honesty of David's laments give voice to your own feelings while pointing you toward God's faithfulness.

2. Worship as an Act of Defiance Against Discouragement

Like Habakkuk (Hab. 3:17–19), choose to rejoice in the Lord even when circumstances are barren. Singing, journaling thankfulness,

or meditating on God's character can shift your heart from isolation to adoration.

3. Practice Spiritual Hospitality Toward Your Spouse

Even if he seems distant, pray regularly for him and ask God to soften your own heart. Look for small ways to show grace and be on guard against bitterness taking root which will hinder your ability to walk in love (Eph. 5:1).

4. Lean Into God's People

Seek fellowship with other believers who can pray for you, speak truth to you, and remind you that you're not alone. Hebrews 10:24-25 calls us to stir one another to love and good works, not only when life is easy, but especially when it is not.

5. Remember the Larger Story

God can use the loneliness of a difficult marriage to refine your faith, deepen your reliance on Him, and shape you into Christlikeness (James 1:2-4). Your marriage is important but temporary; your union with Christ is eternal; and your testimony is still in the making.

Spiritual intimacy with God in a cold marriage is cultivated by consistent private devotion, honest lament, joyful worship, and active engagement with God's people. You are never spiritually abandoned, even if you feel relationally alone.

QUESTION #2: HOW DO I RESPECTFULLY CONFRONT MY HUSBAND'S SIN OR MY HURT WITHOUT NAGGING OR SHAMING?

Addressing wrongdoing or relational wounds in marriage is a delicate balance, especially for a wife who wants to honor God, speak truth, and preserve unity. The goal is not to win an argument, but to invite your spouse toward restoration and growth.

1. Prepare Your Heart First

Spend time in prayer, asking God to purify your motives (Ps. 139:23-24). Make sure you are seeking your spouse's good, not venting frustration or "proving a point."

2. Choose the Right Moment

Timing can be as important as content. Avoid bringing up sensitive matters when emotions are running high or distractions are present (Proverbs 15:23). A calm, private setting communicates respect.

3. Use Gentle, Specific, “I” Statements

Avoid accusations like “You always ...” or “You never ...” Instead, say: “I felt hurt when ...” or “I need to share something that’s been weighing on me.” This reduces defensiveness (Proverbs 15:1).

4. Address One Issue at a Time

Bringing up a list of grievances can feel like an attack. Focus on the current matter so the conversation can move toward resolution rather than overwhelm.

5. Stay Anchored in Truth and Grace

Truth without grace can feel like condemnation; grace without truth can enable sin (John 1:14). Acknowledge any good you see in your spouse before addressing the hurt.

6. Invite Dialogue, Don’t Dictate

Ask open-ended questions like, “Can you help me understand...?” Allow space for your spouse to respond and clarify. This promotes mutual respect rather than a lecture.

7. Speak the Language of Respect

Respect is a man’s number one need (1 Peter 3:1). Do your best not to criticize or condemn and express thankfulness for the positive traits your husband does exhibit before addressing your concerns.

8. Release the Outcome to God

Your role is to speak truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Trust God to work in your spouse’s heart. Change is His work, not yours.

Respectful confrontation begins with humility, communicates with gentleness, and rests in God’s power to bring about change. The aim is restoration, not punishment; connection, not control.

QUESTION #3: HOW DO I NAVIGATE SEXUAL EXPECTATIONS WHEN I FEEL UNLOVED?

Sexual intimacy in marriage is designed by God to be an expression of mutual love, covenant faithfulness, and self-giving (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 7:3–5). But when a wife feels emotionally disconnected or unloved, those moments can feel

more like a burden than a blessing. The Bible recognizes that intimacy is not merely physical—it is deeply relational and spiritual.

1. Understanding God's Design

God's design for sexual intimacy includes both physical oneness and emotional safety. Song of Songs paints a picture of affection, delight, and mutual desire, not mere duty. When emotional intimacy is damaged, sexual intimacy can feel hollow, and that is worth addressing.

2. Speaking the Truth in Love

If you feel hurt, disconnected, or devalued, it's important to communicate this gently but clearly (Ephesians 4:15). Your spouse cannot address what he does not understand. Share your emotional needs and how they relate to physical closeness, avoiding accusatory language.

3. Biblical Perspective on Refusal

1 Corinthians 7:3-5 calls both husband and wife to mutual sexual availability, but it also makes two important points: (1) Intimacy is mutual, not one-sided. (2) Abstaining is permissible by mutual consent and for a time, especially for prayer and spiritual focus. This means there is a Biblical basis for occasionally postponing intimacy when:

- You need to address unresolved conflict first (Matthew 5:23–24).
- You are physically unwell or emotionally unsafe. You are seeking God in a focused way and agree together on a pause.

What it does *not* support is using sex as a weapon by punishing, manipulating, or controlling your spouse through refusal.

4. Pursuing Restoration, Not Avoidance

If emotional disconnection is ongoing, the answer isn't to permanently withdraw, but to work toward repairing the emotional bond. This may involve:

- Counseling together to address communication and conflict patterns.
- Inviting accountability and encouragement from trusted Christian mentors.

- Intentionally investing in nonsexual affection and shared activities.

5. Guarding Your Own Heart

Even if your spouse's love feels distant, your ultimate identity and value are anchored in Christ, not in his response. Lean on spiritual disciplines, Christian fellowship, and God's promises to guard against bitterness or hopelessness.

6. Find Alternatives for Sexual Satisfaction as a Last Resort

For deep woundings or prolonged emotional disconnections, a compromise in sexual activities may be an acceptable alternative for couples in crisis. Intercourse presents for women deep vulnerability, and sexual relations with a husband who feels like a stranger can bring further distance and resentment. Suggesting alternative sexual activities for the husband's fulfillment, while keeping a wife emotionally safe, can be a viable substitute. The goal, though, should be eventual continuation of mutually satisfying sexual intimacy.

Sexual intimacy is a gift meant to flow from emotional connection and covenant love. There may be valid times to delay physical intimacy, but the aim should always be to restore trust, affection, and unity—honoring both God's design and your spouse's heart.

QUESTION #4: WHAT DO I DO WHEN MY HUSBAND NEGLECTS HIS SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

A wife's desire for her husband to lead spiritually is good and God-given (Ephesians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 11:3). But when he seems indifferent, inconsistent, or absent in this role, it can leave her feeling both spiritually and relationally adrift. The challenge is to encourage him toward leadership without taking control or manipulating—trusting God to shape his heart.

1. Anchor Your Trust in God, Not in Your Husband's Performance

Spiritual leadership ultimately comes from Christ, the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18). God can sustain and grow you spiritually even if your husband is not leading as he should.

2. Lead by Example, Without Taking Over

Cultivate your own walk with the Lord through regular prayer, Bible reading, and service. Invite your husband into what you're already doing (e.g., "I'm reading this chapter in John—want to join me?") rather than assigning him tasks.

3. Use Encouragement Instead of Criticism

Notice and affirm even small steps toward leadership: "I appreciated when you prayed for us before dinner." Proverbs 16:24 reminds us that gracious words are like honey—sweet and healing.

4. Offer Opportunities, Not Ultimatums

Instead of, "You never lead devotions," try, "Would you be willing to read the passage tonight?" Give space for him to grow at his own pace; pressure can feel like judgment.

5. Pray for God to Work in His Heart

Prayer is not a last resort. It is the primary way to invite the Holy Spirit to stir conviction and desire for leadership. Ask God to give you patience, humility, and hope as you wait.

6. Guard Against Usurping His Role

Stepping in every time he doesn't lead may unintentionally train him to remain passive. Instead, focus on creating an atmosphere where his leadership is welcomed and valued.

7. Encourage Godly Relationships with Christian Men

Gently nudging your husband towards men's fellowships, Bible studies, or asking a pastor to reach out to him can bring the motivation and encouragement he needs. Men will often receive encouragement from other men before they receive it even from their wives.

Your role is to create a climate of encouragement and invitation, while trusting God to produce lasting change. A husband's spiritual leadership is best nurtured through respect, prayer, and gentle encouragement—not control or coercion.

QUESTION #5: HOW DO I DISTINGUISH NORMAL MARITAL CONFLICT FROM ABUSE?

In every marriage, disagreements and misunderstandings are inevitable. But for a Christian wife, it's important to recognize the difference between healthy conflict that can lead to growth and patterns of behavior that cross the line into abuse. God calls us to pursue peace, reconciliation, and mutual respect, but He does not condone harm, manipulation, or control.

Normal Marital Conflict

- (1) Involves disagreements or misunderstandings where both spouses feel free to express themselves. (2) May include hurt feelings or raised voices, but there is an underlying safety and mutual respect. (3) Both partners take responsibility for their part in conflict and are willing to work toward reconciliation (Ephesians 4:26–27).

Abuse

- (1) Is a pattern of behavior used to gain power and control over the other person. (2) May be physical (hitting, restraining, threatening with harm), emotional (manipulation, constant belittling, isolation from friends/family), sexual (coercion or forcing intimacy), or financial (controlling money to restrict freedom). (3) Creates fear, erodes safety, and often escalates over time. The abuser refuses to take responsibility, shifts blame or justifies harmful actions.

Biblical Steps for Protecting Herself and Her Children While Honoring God

1. Acknowledge the Reality of the Harm

God does not call His children to deny or minimize abuse (Proverbs 27:12). Naming abuse truthfully is not disrespect; on the contrary, it is walking in the light and speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15; 5:11).

2. Prioritize Safety

If in physical danger, leave the immediate environment and go to a safe place (Ps. 18:48). Involve trusted friends, family, church leadership, and, if necessary, civil authorities (Romans 13:1-4).

3. Seek Wise, God-Honoring Counsel

Work with a Biblically grounded counselor who understands both domestic abuse and Scripture. Involve mature church leaders who will uphold truth and justice, not simply urge quick reconciliation without real heart change.

4. Document and Prepare

Keep a record of incidents for legal protection. Have an emergency plan for yourself and your children.

5. Continue Abiding in Christ

Regular prayer, Scripture reading, and worship will keep your heart anchored in God's truth and compassion (Isaiah 41:10) while seeking Him for continued wisdom and direction.

QUESTION #6: WHEN IS SEPARATION BIBLICALLY PERMISSIBLE FOR SAFETY OR CONSCIENCE?

The Bible does not command a spouse to remain in physical danger, or in situations which might be defined as habitual emotional abuse. While divorce and separation are distinct, Scripture allows for separation in certain situations:

- **For Safety.** If there is ongoing physical or emotional abuse, credible threats, or sexual coercion, separation can be a protective measure while pursuing accountability and possible repentance from the abuser (Ps. 82:3-4).
- **For Conscience.** If living together requires enduring ongoing, unrepentant sin that endangers faith or the well-being of children, a wife may separate to preserve righteousness and conscience before God (Acts 5:29). 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 acknowledges that separation may occur, though the goal should be eventual reconciliation if the offending spouse repents and demonstrates change. Exodus 21:10-11 (in its cultural context) shows that neglect and harm can be grounds for release from the marriage covenant under God's law. 1 Corinthians 7:15 also hints at emotional abandonment (when a spouse refuses all intimacy, communication, or partnership for years) as

grounds for marital dissolution. This should be a decision of last resort predicated by much prayer and pastoral wisdom.

God values covenant faithfulness, but He also values the safety, dignity, and the well-being of His children. Protecting oneself and one's children from real harm is not rebellion. It can be an act of obedience to the God who loves justice and defends the oppressed.

QUESTION #7: HOW DO I COPE WITH UNMET EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN A GOD-HONORING WAY?

When emotional needs go unmet in marriage, the ache can be deep and persistent. Yet God calls us to seek comfort and satisfaction in Him first, rather than turning to unhealthy or sinful sources for relief (Jeremiah 2:13; Ps. 63:1-5). Coping in a way that honors Christ means acknowledging your need, directing it toward Him, and drawing from the healthy relationships and resources He provides.

1. Guarding Against Inappropriate Fulfillment

Recognize that loneliness can make you vulnerable to seeking validation from unsafe or non-Biblical sources, such as emotionally entangling with another man, overindulging in secular media, or numbing with substances. Even Christian romance novels, social media platforms, etc., can create a dissatisfaction in the heart. Proverbs 4:23 reminds us to guard our hearts, which means actively setting boundaries in thought, speech, and action. Regularly bring your longings before the Lord in prayer, asking Him to meet the deepest needs of your soul and give you wisdom to navigate the rest.

2. The Role of Friendships, Mentoring, and Church Community

Godly friends can provide companionship, perspective, and prayer support without threatening marital boundaries (Proverbs 27:9). A spiritually mature woman can offer mentoring and guidance, helping you process your emotions Biblically, and model Christlike endurance (Titus 2:3-5). Being rooted in a local body provides corporate worship, service opportunities, and a sense of belonging

that counters isolation (Hebrews 10:24-25). These relationships do not replace your husband's role, but they help sustain you when his emotional presence is lacking.

3. Avoiding the Idolization of Your Husband's Affection

It's easy to begin measuring your worth or joy by your husband's attentiveness, but Scripture calls us to find our ultimate identity in Christ, not in any human relationship (Colossians 3:3-4). Ask yourself: *If my husband never changes in this area, can I still find peace, purpose, and joy in God?* Cultivate gratitude for other blessings in your life and remember that God's love is constant, even when human love fluctuates.

Your heart's deepest thirst can only be quenched by Christ. Friendships, mentors, and church community are God's gracious provisions to help you endure seasons of unmet needs, while guarding your heart from sin and keeping your affection for God supreme.

QUESTION #8: HOW DO I TRUST GOD WHEN MY HUSBAND MAKES POOR DECISIONS?

When a husband's choices negatively affect the family, it's natural to feel anxious, frustrated, or fearful. But Proverbs 21:1 reminds us, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD ... He turns it wherever He will." Trusting God means believing that His sovereignty is greater than your spouse's missteps, and that He can work all things (even mistakes) for the good of those who love Him. This trust doesn't erase wise action, but it does guard your heart from panic and bitterness. Be mindful to exert wise influence rather than control.

Wise Influence

- (1) Speaks truth in love without manipulation (Ephesians 4:15).
- (2) Offers perspective, resources, and counsel while respecting your husband's agency.
- (3) Relies on prayer and God's timing rather than pressure or ultimatums.

Control

(1) Uses fear, guilt, or coercion to force a decision. (2) Takes over responsibilities that rightly belong to your spouse without necessity. (3) Treats your will as the final authority rather than God's.

Wise influence seeks to build your husband up in godliness; control seeks to secure your own sense of safety or desired outcome, often at the cost of the relationship's trust.

When to Step In and When to Step Back

Marriage often requires wisdom to know when to speak up and when to remain silent. A Christian wife's role includes offering support, counsel, and perspective, yet also trusting God to work in her husband's heart without overstepping. Stepping in at the right time can prevent harm or guide a wise decision; stepping back can foster growth, responsibility, and reliance on the Lord.

Step In When:

(1) The decision directly threatens safety, legality, or the family's basic well-being (Proverbs 31:8-9). (2) Your husband asks for help or input. (3) There is a clear Biblical principle at stake that requires intervention.

Step Back When:

(1) The issue is a matter of preference, style, or timing—not righteousness or safety. (2) You've expressed your perspective and prayed, but he chooses a different path. (3) Stepping in would rob him of the opportunity to grow through natural consequences.

Guiding Questions:

- Will my involvement help or hinder spiritual maturity in my husband?
 - Is my motivation fear-driven or faith-driven?
 - Have I prayed and sought wise counsel before acting?

Your ultimate security rests in God's wisdom, not your husband's perfection. By practicing wise influence, setting healthy boundaries, and discerning when to step in or step back, you can

honor God, protect your family when needed, and nurture respect in your marriage.

QUESTION #9: HOW DO I BECOME A GODLY INFLUENCE WITHOUT MANIPULATION?

Godly influence rests on trust in the Holy Spirit's work, not on subtle pressure or engineered outcomes. Manipulation seeks to change someone for your own benefit or comfort; godly influence seeks their good and God's glory. The difference is motive and method. Manipulation uses control, guilt, or withholding; godly influence uses truth, grace, prayer, and example (Ephesians 4:15, James 3:17). Your role is to sow seeds of righteousness and let God bring the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

The Power of Example and Consistent Character

1 Peter 3:1–2 points to the quiet strength of a godly life: "... they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct." A consistent pattern of respect, faithfulness, kindness, and integrity speaks louder than repeated pleas or corrections. This doesn't mean never speaking up; it means your words carry greater weight because they're backed by a life that matches them.

Your consistency will build credibility as your husband learns to trust that your faith is not circumstantial. And when he sees you honor God's Word and treat him with dignity, he's more likely to be open to your influence.

Shaping the Spiritual Environment of the Home When He Isn't Leading

If your husband is spiritually passive, you can still set a Christ-centered tone without taking over his role:

- 1. Model devotion:** Let prayer, worship, and Scripture reading be a natural part of your life.
- 2. Invite, don't impose:** Gently ask if he'd like to join you, but don't shame him if he declines.

3. **Create rhythms:** Play worship music, share Scripture at the dinner table, or pray with the children before bed—habits that keep God’s presence central.
4. **Keep your heart from bitterness:** Guard against resentment by continually entrusting your marriage to God (Colossians 3:23–24).

A wife’s most powerful influence comes from her own closeness to God, lived out daily. Manipulation forces outcomes; godly influence trusts God with the process. Even without formal leadership from her husband, a wife can nurture a home atmosphere that points to Christ without undermining his dignity or role.

QUESTION #10: HOW DO I HOLD ON TO HOPE AND REMAIN FAITHFUL EVEN IF THINGS NEVER CHANGE?

Hope is not wishful thinking—it’s confident expectation in the character and promises of God, not in a specific outcome (Romans 15:13). Remaining faithful in a marriage that seems unchanging requires shifting your anchor from your spouse’s deficiencies to God’s certainty.

1. Root Your Hope in God, Not Circumstances
Your ultimate security and joy come from Christ, not from a perfect marriage (Ps. 73:25-26). Even if your spouse never changes, God’s love, presence, and purposes for you remain unshaken.

2. Practice Faithfulness as an Offering to God
Colossians 3:23-24 reminds us to work “as for the Lord and not for men.” Acts of love, respect, and integrity become part of your worship, even if they are not reciprocated.

3. Nourish Your Inner Life with God
Spend time in His Word daily, meditate on His promises, and pray honestly about your hurts. Lament is Biblical (Ps. 13) and allows you to bring grief and disappointment into God’s healing presence.

4. Build a Support System
Surround yourself with believers who can pray with you, speak truth when you feel weary, and remind you of God’s perspective. A

mentor or small group can help you avoid isolation and discouragement (Hebrews 10:24-25).

5. Redefine “Victory”

Victory is not always a changed spouse; sometimes it’s a transformed heart that clings to God in all seasons. Faithfulness in trials shapes you into Christlikeness (James 1:2-4).

Hope that depends on a spouse’s change can be fragile and fleeting. Hope rooted in God’s promises is steady, because He is faithful even when people are not. Faithfulness in an unchanging marriage is not passivity—it’s active trust that God sees, God cares, and God will redeem your story in His time and way.

QUESTION #11: WHAT IF MY HUSBAND VIEWS PORNOGRAPHY?

Pornography, whether it’s a casual glance or a raging addiction, is one of the most painful and isolating struggles a wife can face. It feels like betrayal, rejection, and competition all at once. While the world normalizes porn, Scripture calls it lust (Matthew 5:28) and warns that it distorts intimacy, enslaves the heart, and destroys trust. For a wife, the challenge is to guard her own heart, confront sin with truth, and walk a path that honors Christ while seeking restoration.

1. Acknowledge the Reality of the Sin

Pretending it doesn’t exist will not make it go away. Pornography is not a “minor issue”—it is adultery of the heart (Matthew 5:27–28). Naming it for what it is helps remove secrecy and shame and creates a foundation for healing.

2. Guard Against Internalizing His Sin

His struggle is not a statement of your worth or attractiveness. Many wives feel “not enough” in the face of porn, but Scripture reminds us that our value rests in Christ (Ps. 139:14; Colossians 3:3).

3. Communicate with Grace and Truth

Pornography thrives in secret, so it must be brought into the light. Approach him with both gentleness and firmness (Ephesians

4:15). Express how his choices hurt you, the marriage, and his walk with God, while also affirming that you desire restoration.

4. Encourage Accountability and Repentance

True change requires accountability. This might mean involving a pastor, counselor, or trusted Christian mentor. Filtering software, men’s accountability groups, or recovery programs can provide needed structure, but lasting transformation comes through repentance and dependence on Christ (1 John 1:9).

5. Set Boundaries for Safety and Healing

Boundaries are not punishment—they are guardrails that protect your heart and the covenant of marriage. You may need to clarify what behaviors are unacceptable and what steps must be taken to rebuild trust. Boundaries can include counseling, accountability software, or temporary cessation of intimacy until progress is demonstrated.

6. Anchor Yourself in God’s Faithfulness

Even if your husband struggles, your ultimate hope is not in his victory but in Christ’s. Lean into Scripture, prayer, and godly friendships for strength. Remember that God sees your tears (Ps. 56:8) and promises wisdom and comfort for every trial (James 1:5; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

7. Understand that Porn Use is Not Grounds for Divorce

Many women assume that if their husband views pornography, they have biblical grounds to end the marriage. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, however, Jesus identifies *porneia* (πορνεία) as the sole ground for divorce—translated “sexual immorality.” In its first-century usage, *porneia* referred primarily to physical acts of illicit sexual union, such as adultery, prostitution, or fornication, rather than inward lust or fantasy. Pornography use is indeed a grievous sin, wounding both the man’s soul and the covenant intimacy of his marriage, and it calls for repentance, confession, and accountability. Yet strictly speaking, it does not fit the lexical scope of *porneia* as used in the divorce passages. The distinction is vital: Pornography represents spiritual and moral adultery of the heart, which Jesus condemns, but *porneia* in context denotes outward sexual betrayal—a physical violation of the marital bond that Scripture alone names as legitimate grounds for divorce.

A husband viewing pornography is devastating, but it does not define your worth or your future. Healing is possible when sin is exposed, repentance is pursued, and boundaries are honored. While you cannot fight the battle for him, you can cling to Christ, guard your heart, and walk in wisdom as you seek both truth and grace in your marriage.

QUESTION #12: HOW DO I HANDLE FINANCIAL DISAGREEMENTS IN A GOD-HONORING WAY?

Financial strain is one of the most common sources of marital conflict. Debt, unexpected expenses, or differences in spending priorities can leave a couple feeling anxious, divided, or resentful. Yet Scripture offers both wisdom and hope: Money is a tool for stewardship, not the measure of worth, and Christ calls couples to unity and trust in God's provision.

1. Seek God's Kingdom First

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Financial stress often magnifies fear of scarcity. Christ reminds us that provision flows from God's hand. He is our Father, and we are the children He loves and provides for (Matt. 7:11). Making decisions together with God's kingdom in view, rather than fear, shifts focus from worry to worship.

2. Cultivate Contentment

"But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). Discontentment fuels comparison and conflict. A posture of gratitude and simplicity guards the heart from envy and helps couples work as partners instead of opponents. When the comparison trap arises, recounting God's faithfulness and being thankful for a multitude of blessings is often the solution.

3. Avoid the Bondage of Debt

Debt can enslave couples to endless stress and arguments. Agreeing on wise boundaries and pursuing debt reduction together can restore peace and strengthen teamwork (Proverbs 22:7).

4. Communicate Honestly and Regularly

Silence or secrecy about money breeds mistrust. Regular, honest conversations about budgeting, priorities, and challenges build transparency and unity. Ideally, couples should have a monthly check-in with each other to evaluate budget goals and talk honestly about their finances.

5. Practice Generosity Even in Lack

Generosity is an act of faith. Even small, faithful giving keeps hearts from being mastered by money and reminds couples that all resources belong to God (2 Corinthians 9:7).

6. Trust God's Daily Provision

Financial stress tempts couples to demand control over the future. Christ teaches us to depend on God, day by day. This perspective releases anxiety and deepens faith (Matt. 6:11).

“The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Tim. 6:10) so couples must be careful money doesn't divide their hearts. Financial struggles can either fracture or fortify a marriage. When couples seek God's kingdom, practice contentment, communicate honestly, and trust His provision, money becomes a place of shared faith rather than division.

APPENDIX III: ADULTERY AND THE CONDITION OF THE HEART

Few wounds cut as deeply as adultery. It is not just a violation of trust; it is a tearing of the covenant God designed to reflect His faithfulness to His people. Proverbs 6:32 says, “He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself.” For the betrayed spouse, the destruction feels very real—shame, anger, confusion, and grief often arrive like an avalanche. Adultery, though, doesn’t necessarily mean the end of a marriage. Many couples have navigated their way through adulterous relationships with God’s help, Biblical wisdom, and good faith-filled supports.

When adultery has been committed, the most critical factor in moving toward healing is the husband’s heart condition of contrition. True contrition is more than regret over being caught; it is a deep, gut-wrenching grief over the sin itself and the devastation it has caused. Psalm 51 models this kind of brokenness in David’s repentance after his own sexual sin: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). A husband who is truly contrite will not defend, minimize, or shift blame. Instead, he will demonstrate a humble readiness to confess fully, to accept responsibility without excuses, and to pursue repentance through tangible actions: Accountability, real transparency, and a consistent pursuit of holiness. His heart is the first and most essential indicator that change is possible and that reconciliation has a real foundation. Without contrition, promises to change are hollow and cycles of betrayal often repeat.

The second heart condition belongs to the wife, in that she will not allow her heart to become hard-hearted towards her husband. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, He replied that Moses permitted it “because of your hardness of heart” (Matthew 19:8). Adultery, ultimately, does not lead to divorce; rather, the condition of the heart does. A hardened heart resists forgiveness, closes itself off to the possibility of restoration, and hides behind bitterness as a wall. This does not mean that a wife should rush quickly into reconciliation or overlook the severity of

adultery. Her hurt is real, and boundaries for healing are necessary. But Jesus' words remind us that an attitude of hardness will choke out any chance of renewal. If her heart remains open to God's leading, even in her pain, she positions herself to discern whether her husband's repentance is genuine and to respond with grace rather than divorce.

When these two heart conditions meet—his genuine contrition and her refusal to harden—there is ground for reconciliation, even in the wake of adultery. The husband's brokenness makes room for trust to be slowly rebuilt, while the wife's willingness to soften makes space for forgiveness to take root. Together, these heart conditions invite God's grace to do what human strength alone cannot and restore what was shattered. Reconciliation is never easy, and it cannot be presumed, but when a contrite spirit meets a softened heart, a marriage once marred by betrayal can become a testimony of God's redemptive power. Where there is humility, sorrow over sin, and fruits of repentance (Luke 3:8), divorce need not be the outcome. Instead, forgiveness and restoration can become living witnesses of Christ's power to redeem even the most broken covenant.

Another crucial difference must be made between habitual adultery and a one-time fall into sin followed by deep repentance. An ongoing pattern of unfaithfulness reveals a hardened heart and an unrepentant spirit. It is not merely weakness but willful rebellion, a repeated tearing of the marriage covenant that demonstrates no real fear of God or regard for the spouse who has been betrayed. In such cases, the husband's words of apology often ring hollow because they are not supported by sustained change. Scripture warns that "a man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy" (Proverbs 29:1). A pattern of deceit and repeated sexual betrayal corrodes the trust on which a marriage is built and often becomes a legitimate basis for divorce under Jesus' teaching on *porneia* (Matthew 19:9).

By contrast, a single act of adultery met with true, heartfelt repentance paints a different picture. When a husband is genuinely broken over his sin, deeply grieving the hurt he has caused, and demonstrates consistent repentance, there is reason to believe reconciliation is possible. Repentance here is not simply saying "I'm sorry," but walking humbly in confession, submitting

to accountability, and taking ongoing steps to rebuild trust. This kind of contrition reveals a man who, though he stumbled gravely, desires to honor God, restore his wife's trust, and guard his marriage moving forward. In these circumstances, many marriages have not only survived but grown stronger, transformed by God's grace into testimonies of redemption.

For a wife betrayed by adultery, forgiveness is not instant, and it should not be assumed that she can or should simply "move on" quickly. Forgiveness is a process, often messy and slow, and her heart must battle through waves of emotions that come and go in cycles. At first, she may feel rage, humiliation, and disbelief. Later, grief sets in, mingled with numbness or despair. She may oscillate between wanting to rebuild the marriage and wanting to walk away entirely. These emotions are not signs of failure; they are evidence that her soul is doing the hard work of grappling with profound hurt.

It's important to remember the timeline for forgiveness varies greatly. Some wives may find themselves softening after months of seeing genuine repentance from their husband. For others, it may take years of gradual healing before trust can be restored. The length of time and commitment needed for this process, from both the husband and wife, cannot be understated. The husband, especially, must be mentally prepared for a very long, arduous journey as he navigates months or years of his wife's tumultuous emotions. It would be highly advisable (if not essential) to have a Christian counselor or experienced pastor meet regularly with a couple touched by adultery to provide support and encouragement.

Though it is exhausting to wrestle through, many wives who press into this journey later look back with gratitude. They see how God met them in the valley of betrayal, how He refined their faith, and how He gave them a new measure of strength and compassion they would never have known otherwise. For some, the reward is a reconciled marriage, restored and stronger. For others, the gift is peace in their own soul, knowing they obeyed Christ's call to forgive, regardless of the outcome. Either way, the long road of forgiveness, though painful, becomes a testimony that bitterness did not have the final word, and that God can bring beauty even from the ashes of betrayal.

Here are a few keys to navigating the uncertain waters of an adulterous affair.

1. Acknowledge the Depth of the Sin

Scripture does not minimize adultery. It is consistently condemned as sin against God, a spouse, and one's own body (Exodus 20:14; 1 Corinthians 6:18). Jesus intensifies this teaching by pointing to the heart's condition, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Recognizing its seriousness prevents us from dismissing or excusing what God calls destructive.

2. Guard Against Bearing False Guilt

Wives often internalize their husband's infidelity, wondering, *What did I do wrong? Am I not enough?* But his sin is not your fault. God holds each person responsible for their own actions (Ezekiel 18:20). You may acknowledge areas where your marriage needed growth, but the decision to betray was his alone. Your worth, beauty, and dignity remain intact in Christ.

3. Respond with Truth and Grace

Truth requires naming the betrayal for what it is. Adultery is covenant-breaking, and pretending otherwise delays healing. Grace requires resisting the temptation to repay wound for wound. Romans 12:21 says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Speaking truth with love, setting clear boundaries, and refusing to sin in response allows you to stand firmly in Christ's strength during this season.

4. Consider Biblical Grounds and Forgiveness

Jesus acknowledged adultery as a legitimate ground for divorce (Matthew 19:9). While divorce is never commanded, it is permitted in cases of covenant-breaking unfaithfulness. Some wives, by God's grace, choose to forgive and rebuild; others choose to separate for conscience and safety. Both can honor God if approached with prayer, counsel, and a heart surrendered to His will. Forgiveness, whether or not reconciliation occurs, is still necessary—not to excuse the sin, but to release yourself from the poison of bitterness (Ephesians 4:31-32).

5. Establish Boundaries for Healing

If reconciliation is sought, healing requires accountability and evidence of repentance. Words alone are not enough. Repentance

is demonstrated through consistent transparency, confession, and the pursuit of holiness (2 Corinthians 7:10-11). Practical boundaries may include counseling, filtered electronic devices, no contact with the affair partner, changing jobs, and ongoing accountability. Rebuilding trust is slow, but possible.

6. Anchor Your Heart in God's Covenant Faithfulness

Adultery reminds us painfully of human frailty, but it also points us to the God who never breaks His covenant. In Hosea, God calls the prophet to love an unfaithful wife as a living picture of His relentless love for Israel. While we grieve human betrayal, we can rest in this: God will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He is the faithful Bridegroom who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds (Ps. 147:3).

Adultery is one of the deepest wounds a marriage can endure, cutting into the very heart of trust and covenant. Yet even here, God's Word and His grace hold out the possibility of healing.

Ultimately, reconciliation after adultery is not about ignoring the wound but about entering into it with honesty, repentance, and grace. It is a path that requires humility from the husband, patience from the wife, and divine strength from God. When both partners yield their hearts to the Lord, even the ashes of betrayal can become a testimony of His redeeming power, pointing to the One who makes all things new.

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