

HOPE FOR TROUBLED MARRIAGES

Ken Sande, President, RW360

I have counseled many people who felt like their marriage had died and there was no point in going on. In response, I always remind them that we serve a God who resurrected his dead Son from the grave, and who promises to make that same resurrection power available to those who trust Him (Ephesians 1:18-20).

Although many cases have still ended in divorce, I have personally witnessed God giving new life to countless marriages that seemed utterly beyond repair. So even if your marriage seems beyond repair today, put your hope in God, depend on his grace, make every reasonable effort to reconcile, and trust God to work things out according to his plan.

Although many things can cause divorce, hopelessness is often the factor that pushes people over the edge. They have often endured years of frustration and disappointment, hoping that things might somehow improve. Then one day something happens, and they just give up hope. "Why should I go on being miserable," they say, "when there is no hope of things ever getting better?"

A hundred years ago, people stayed in hopeless marriages out of commitment, societal pressure or financial limitations, but today even among Christians commitment is often not sufficient to see them through tough times. Therefore, one of the most important steps in turning a divorce around is to **rebuild hope as quickly as possible**. Hope is like a transfusion for someone who has lost a great deal of blood. Unless this essential element is quickly restored, the patient (or the marriage) will die, and there will be nothing left to work on.

One way to return hope to a marriage is by understanding what *genuine confession* looks like. For example, assume a wife has decided to leave her husband. When she told him of her plans, he was crushed. Trying to get her to change her mind, he said, "I know I haven't been a very good husband. I'm really going to work hard to change. Please stay!"

The wife responded, "I've heard your promises before. You've said this again and again, but you never change. I'm not going to stay in a hopeless marriage the rest of my life."

The husband's bland confession indicates that he doesn't have a clue as to how he needs to change. Empty promises and broad generalizations will not turn things around. The best way he can persuade her to give him another chance is to clearly demonstrate that he has truly come to grips with his sins and is earnest about making concrete changes to be the kind of husband God wants him to be.

This change in the husband will be neither simple nor painless. Through the prayerful application of God's Word and the working of the Holy Spirit, the husband needs to see how his own selfish desires have ruled his heart and destroyed his marriage (see Matt. 15:19; Jas. 4:1-3). He needs to be truly broken before God. He needs to clearly identify his sinful desires and habit patterns – the self-centeredness, the idolatry, the laziness, the pride – that contributed to the disintegration of their relationship. And he needs to do this without trying to diminish his guilt by focusing on the ways his wife contributed to their problems as well.

As he comes to grips with his own sin, he needs to plan how to confess them to his wife in a thorough and specific way. He should understand that the purpose of his confession is not to manipulate her or force her to come back. He needs to confess because he is guilty before God, and God commands him to confess and repent regardless of how his wife responds (1 John 1:8-9). One way to do this is to use what I call the [“Seven A’s of Confession.”](#)

If his heart has truly been broken before God, and if he has properly prepared, he will give a very different confession to his wife than he did before. Instead of the bland "I haven't been a very good husband," he will say,

"Connie, I've sinned against God and you. I haven't lived up to the beautiful standard God gives me as a husband. He says I'm supposed to love you as Christ loved the church. I haven't even come close to that. I've loved myself and my own desires far more than I've loved you or God. I've made my job into an idol, and I gave myself to it. I've neglected you, and I've broken my word again and again. I have not kept my vows to you. I have left you with the whole burden of raising the kids because I'm too selfish to turn off my phone or the TV and help. I can understand why you are so hurt and disappointed and why you feel like you can never be happy with me. I have wronged you in more ways than I can describe."

Time after time when I've heard a husband make such a confession, I've seen the color comes back into the wife's face. In many cases, the cold hopeless look is replaced by a softer expression. As she hears her husband's words, the Holy Spirit uses them to put hope back into her heart. She begins to realize that something really is different and to believe that things might truly change. And she may be humbled herself and feel led to give her own heartfelt confession. The seeds of reconciliation may begin to grow.

As hope is rekindled, the disillusioned spouse will often be willing to postpone the divorce and to try to work out the problems that have plagued their marriage. This is seldom a quick process. The sinful desires and behavior patterns that led people to the point of divorce usually require weeks or months of counseling to understand and change. But at least they are moving in the right direction, and as God works through

the church or a Christian counselor, many couples can experience a genuine reconciliation and steady improvement in their relationship.

Couples often find it extremely difficult to identify and work through the root causes of marital conflict alone. In these cases, it is appropriate to seek help from others. It is not a sign of weakness or failure – all of us struggle in relationships and need help from time to time. There are many skilled and qualified people in the body of Christ, and we should not hesitate to reach out to the church for assistance – whether it is a pastor, church leader, wise and trusted friend, or trained biblical counselor.

As you think about getting help with your marriage, consider these specific suggestions:

- Seek counsel for yourself first – We all have blind spots and habits that are difficult to see and change. It may be that a counselor can help you see your contributions to the problem more clearly and find ways to change.
- Gently appeal to your spouse to join you, but don't pressure him or her. Let God be one who brings about a willingness to give your marriage another chance.
- Choose the right counselor – Seek counseling from people who will offer you sound *biblical* advice and who are willing to say difficult but necessary things to you.
- Follow these *Keys to Counseling Success*:
 - Focus on your own responsibilities rather than your spouse's.
 - Deal with the heart of your problems – not just the surface issues.
 - Remember the gospel of grace!
 - Ask for prayer support and accountability from your church.
 - Persevere – commit to keep working as long as it takes to overcome the problems that threaten your marriage.
- Take full advantage of the relational and peacemaking training available through the RW Academy, including:
 - [Discovering Relational Wisdom](#)
 - [Relational Peacemaking](#)

Invite your spouse to join you in this type of training so you can grow together. But if he or she is yet willing to do so, pursue the training yourself as a way to demonstrate your sincerity in wanting to change and to begin developing the relational skills that can bring healing to your relationship.

Many times, involving others can relieve some of the burdens on your own shoulders and can help bring about change in both you and your spouse. But even if things do not go as you plan, remember that ultimately you are responsible only for what you do, not for what others do (Romans 12:18). Continually look to Jesus for your hope, follow what He commands, and leave the results to him.

August 9, 2023
