



HOPE FOR A DIFFICULT OR ABUSIVE MARRIAGE

Marriage brings its share of challenges, as Paul reminded the Corinthians: "Those who marry will have worldly troubles," (1 Corinthians 7:28). Even the strongest couples can face struggles that test their commitment to each other. But what happens when these challenges feel overwhelming? Is there a point where ending a marriage seems like the only answer? Or could there be hope for renewal and healing, even in difficult times?

Perhaps someone finds themselves in this challenging place, uncertain about what to do next. Consider taking the following steps as one prayerfully reflects on the situation and seeks God's guidance for the path ahead.

STEP ONE: Discern Minor From Major Trouble

Many marriages today end over issues that, with effort, could be overcome. Research by Norval Glenn at the University of Texas indicates that common reasons for divorce, such as "lack of commitment," "too much conflict and arguing," "unrealistic expectations," and "lack of preparation," are all challenges that a committed couple can address together. Despite what friends, family, or society might suggest, these problems alone are not valid reasons to give up on marriage, especially considering the long-term impact divorce can have on individuals and children.

In Genesis, and in Jesus' teachings, marriage is described as the two becoming "one flesh," a process that doesn't fully happen at the wedding. Achieving "oneness" takes a lifetime and can be challenging, as each person gradually gives up parts of their individual identity. This process can cause friction, like sandpaper smoothing rough edges, eventually creating something strong and refined. However, if both people are not

working toward the same goals, this friction can become toxic, producing conflict that can damage the relationship rather than strengthen it. This is the purpose behind Paul's writing: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). It's true that in some marriages, one spouse may come to faith before the other or grow spiritually at a different pace. This is one reason the Bible emphasizes the importance of spiritual leadership within the family, particularly calling the husband to lead spiritually (Ephesians 5:23). When the husband embraces this role with love and humility, he provides a stabilizing influence, encouraging spiritual growth for both himself and his family.

In such a partnership, even if spiritual growth is uneven or takes time, the relationship can remain strong. The husband's leadership can help the couple maintain unity and shared purpose, fostering patience and understanding. When both partners support each other, respecting the stages of each person's faith journey, spiritual growth doesn't need to lead to division but can be an opportunity for deeper connection.

In *The Case for Marriage*, Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite discuss how many couples believe their only options are to either divorce or remain in misery. However, they found that couples who persevere often experience significant improvements. Remarkably, nearly eighty percent of husbands and wives who described themselves as very unhappy in their marriages but chose to stay together later reported being very happy just five years later.

While this may offer hope for those struggling through difficult but non-abusive seasons, it is essential to clarify that this is not appropriate advice for individuals in abusive relationships. Abuse, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, creates a toxic environment that can cause lasting harm to the victim and their children. In such cases, safety and well-being should be prioritized, and seeking appropriate support and guidance is crucial. Everyone may not define emotional or psychological abuse the same way. If abuse is suspected in a marriage, sharing that concern with a trusted pastor is an important step. Abuse can look different in each situation, and what may be abusive in one relationship might not appear the same in another. Abuse varies widely, and each person's experience is unique.

STEP TWO: Anticipate the Hope After the Trouble

Serious issues arise in marriage when one spouse abuses or abandons their role, breaking faith and violating their vows. Although God expresses His dislike for divorce (Malachi 2:16), He does allow it in cases of marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:1–8). However, divorce is not always the only

answer. God's grace is powerful and can transform hearts, making forgiveness possible even in the face of deep betrayal. Christians are encouraged to consider forgiveness if it's possible, allowing space for God to work in ways beyond our natural ability to reconcile. Many couples have experienced serious hurt yet found a path to healing and restoration.

That said, some may try to move past the hurt but find it impossible to let go of the pain. In these cases, staying in the relationship may not be healthy, as it continually reopens wounds and prevents true healing. For each couple, it's important to prayerfully consider what will lead to genuine wholeness and peace, seeking wise counsel and God's guidance along the way. These decisions should be evaluated through trusted godly friends and pastors.

Not all marital struggles stem from betrayal; often, they arise from differences in personality, habits, background, or even shifting life stages. Marriage goes through seasons, and sometimes one spouse enters a new season before the other. Patience is crucial during these times, allowing room for growth and unity to develop naturally. Difficulty isn't necessarily a sign that divorce is needed—it may indicate that something else is missing, such as prayer, time with God, communication, selflessness, respect, or love.

Many times, pastors, resources, and guided conversations can help move marriage from merely "surviving" to truly "thriving." God specializes in redeeming situations that might seem hopeless to us. Choosing to give up on a marriage can sometimes be a choice to give up on God's ability to change hearts; He can transform not only a spouse's heart but also one's own. Hardship in marriage is not a free pass to walk away; rather, it can be an opportunity to deepen one's understanding of God's character and to grow through the challenges.

STEP THREE: If Needed, Protect Yourself and Children

If a relationship is marked by physical abuse, one may find themselves confused, frightened, and unsure about what to do. The most important step is to protect oneself and any children from harm. Even when someone wants to save their marriage, they should not risk the safety of their children or themselves. A period of structured and therapeutic separation may be needed and can make it possible to get the help the marriage needs while making the family less vulnerable. Trusted pastors and counselors are able to help steer through these difficult decisions.

STEP FOUR: Seek Guidance—Don't Go It Alone

Whatever one's situation, do not struggle through a difficult marriage alone. Now more than ever, the support of the church is needed, for

perspective, wise counsel, encouragement, and hope for God's power to redeem. Be mindful, however, of where advice is sought. While friends who have "been through the same thing" may mean well, they might not offer the guidance that aligns with God's will and could unintentionally steer one away from a path where God wants to work.

Seek advice from experienced Christian counselors and caregivers who will offer encouragement according to God's wisdom. Lean on the Going Further resources available to help couples in similar situations. Remember, God can restore and bless even the most challenging relationships when we rely on His guidance and the support of a godly community.

GOING FURTHER: RESOURCES

Love and Respect by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs

Breaking the Cycle of Divorce by Dr. John Trent

Boundaries in Marriage by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

Love Must Be Tough by Dr. James Dobson

The Meaning of Marriage by Timothy Keller

Sacred Marriage by Gary Thomas

The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman

His Needs, Her Needs by Dr. Willard F. Harley Jr.

Hope for the Separated by Gary Chapman

Love & War by John and Stasi Eldredge

A Lasting Promise: The Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage
by Scott M. Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan

I Still Do: Growing Closer and Stronger through Life's Defining Moments
by Dave Harvey

Intimate Allies by Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III



Download more resources at
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