

one

ARE YOU READY FOR A NEW RELATIONSHIP?

After more than two decades of studying the post-divorce family, we are still learning new things. Our work as family counselors brings us a constant stream of adults who are divorced, plus adults who experienced divorce as children when they were growing up. We are constantly learning about divorce and its effects on family life, emotional development, spiritual formation, and more.

There is much more we still need to learn, but here is what we can tell you with absolute certainty: some of the most mature, wisest, most spiritually advanced people we know have experienced the end of a marriage. They are divorced, and they are also spiritual, mature, wise, and well-balanced.

This is an accurate description of the findings from our work with children, adolescents, university students, adults, and seniors in and out of all types of family environments and family situations.

Some of the most godly, most spiritually mature pastors and leaders we have encountered are divorced, and some of them have since remarried. Some of the most Spirit-filled

women we've met—and we've met many—have experienced divorce during their adult lifetimes. Day in and day out, some of the people who most impress us with their emotional stability, spiritual perspective, knowledge of God's Word, and service to God's kingdom are people who have been through the pain of a divorce during their adult lives. Divorce happened to them, yet they found a way to move forward to newfound depth and clarity in their personal lives and in their walks with God.

Are we suggesting that in order to grow and become mature, everyone should run out and get divorced? God forbid.

Every divorce is a tragedy. Even when someone's life improves as a result of a divorce—and candidly this is sometimes the case—divorce is still a tragedy. Divorce means a promise was made but broken. Divorce means a relationship was begun but a commitment was not kept. Divorce brings loss and pain and hardship and difficulty, and it's a gift that keeps on giving in those categories.

Yet somehow divorce also produces an environment that causes people to awaken more fully to the questions of sincere faith, to the journey of seeking after God, to the duties we all have to each other as we share this small planet. For whatever reason, even otherwise godly and mature adults can sometimes end up "going deeper" after they experience the trauma and heartache of divorce.

Once again, please understand what we are *not* saying. We are not recommending divorce. We work against it with all our strength, day after day. We often watch God repair completely impossible relationships—people and marriages that seem broken beyond all hope of redemption. In our daily work as marriage therapists, family counselors, and pastoral ministers, we

have watched God do amazing things in the midst of impossible pain.

God hates divorce, and so do we.

But God loves people who have experienced divorce, and so do we. We get to work with those people day after day in our office or our classrooms or at church. We get to learn with and learn from men and women who are going through the end of a marriage and coming out the other side wiser, more open to change, and realizing that growth brought on by that pain can be good.

We are incredibly grateful to the many divorced men and women who have shared their journeys with us, telling us the stories of their lives in the counseling office or around the table at a coffee shop. We have learned a lot, and we are still learning. Our work with divorced adults is constant and ongoing.

Within the context of this particular book we raise the question: how would a divorced person know if he or she were ready for a new relationship? What are the markers of emotional health, spiritual health, and other types of health that would let the person know that it's okay to move forward and be open to new beginnings?

That specific focus is at the core of this book. It is the main question we address, even though we look at it five different ways in five main chapters and also from many different perspectives and many different sources.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

This book is not a theology of marriage or a theology of divorce. There are some wonderful books you might consult if you love exploring theology; we'll list them among the recom-

mended reading at the back of the book. If you are hoping for a college-level or graduate-level textbook on the theology of marriage and divorce, this won't be the book for you.

About theology, let us simply say that God designed marriage to be a lifelong commitment between two persons—one man and one woman. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that a husband and wife belong to each other for as long as they both live. It is not until after death that the surviving spouse is free of his or her marriage and the term of the marriage has reached its conclusion. Marriage, as God designed it and intended it, lasts a lifetime. He never had anything else in mind.

Meanwhile, as human beings began living on earth and trying to fulfill God's good purposes, marriages somehow found ways to end. Way back in the earliest days of biblical history, adults were badgering the prophets to grant them a few loopholes in case marriage didn't work out. People wanted to dispose of a marriage but still be right in the sight of God. You might call this trying to have it both ways.

Jesus called it something else. He called it being stubborn and difficult to teach. As Jesus is teaching and preaching, the religious leaders of the day—in this case some Pharisees—raise the question of divorce with Him. Jesus responds with a strong defense of marriage, explaining that God always intended marriage to last a lifetime.

“Yes,” the Pharisees object, “but Moses granted us permission to get a divorce.” Here the devout religious leaders are accurate in their reading of Scripture. But what they are really doing in this discussion is trying to find out whether Jesus agrees or disagrees with Moses. Here's a hint: anyone who wishes to be orthodox in his or her faith had better agree with Moses.

Jesus firmly and wisely brings them back to the main issue.

“Moses gave you permission to divorce only because you are stubborn and hard to teach,” Jesus explains. “But it was not like that at the time of creation.” Jesus explains that God always intended for marriage to last a lifetime. Just in case there is any doubt, Jesus goes on to affirm that if a man divorces his wife for any reason other than her unfaithfulness, he commits adultery if he then goes out and marries someone else. (See Matthew 19:1-11 and Mark 10:1-12.)

That being said, there is no need for us to invent a theology of marriage or divorce. We can tell what God’s plan is, what His purposes are, and how He wants us to live. We have access to Scripture, and within its pages we find what Jesus had to say on the record regarding ending a marriage or starting over.

The primary issue we address in this book is that of *starting over*. How will you know when or if it is time to start over? When would it be wise to avoid any possible new relationships, and when might it be okay to consider exploring a friendship or a romance with someone?

- How much time needs to pass after a marriage ends?
- How much healing needs to be done in yourself or others?
- How much maturity needs to be achieved in you—and your potential new life partner?
- Do you need to be perfect, whole, and well balanced before you begin thinking about dating again, finding someone else, or getting remarried?

Here’s another disclaimer before you proceed through this book: we are not going to recommend that you date or remarry; we are not going to recommend that you remain single for life; and we are not going to take a position on those issues. Those

are decisions you will need to make, because, after all, it's your life. You are the one who must make those decision, and you are the one who will be affected by the decisions you make.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS

We've met hundreds of divorced adults who decided that the wisest and best thing for them would be to remain single. So they did, and they went on to become whole, mature, wise, well-balanced single adults who make important contributions to the Kingdom and society every day.

Where is it written that a person must be married in order to be wise? Where is it written that a person must be married to serve the Lord?

Our little planet needs more single-adult Christians to serve as role models. Our world needs to see that it is more than okay to be single—single people serve, help, achieve, contribute, go on to reach maturity, and honor God with their lives. Singles do all these things. Single men and women are not defective or deficient or “less than” anyone else.

What this book *is* includes a description of how and why some adults choose to remain single after a divorce and why their choice might make sense for you.

We've also met hundreds of divorced adults who decided that, for them, the way was clear to pursue a new relationship. Among these, we know many who have gone on to form second marriages—or third—that became God-honoring unions, holy and sacramental and inspiring to behold.

Some of the most inspiring marriages we have ever encountered and some of the marriages that most honor God and most reflect His purposes for a husband and wife are remar-

riages for one or both partners. Far from being a “second best” arrangement or an “inferior” outcome, some of these remarried couples have achieved levels of intimacy, commitment, service to God, and personal and spiritual wisdom that the rest of us would be blessed to duplicate.

While writing an earlier book, *Happily Remarried*, we sat down with a few of these couples to formulate key principles. We learned some healthy habits and best practices that define great marriages—including remarriages. We came away inspired and refreshed by these couples!

In one case, that of Fred and Verna Beffa of Rice Lake, Wisconsin, we were invited to the fiftieth anniversary celebration of a second marriage. It was a second marriage for Verna, and we were invited to help celebrate as that godly, inspiring, wonderful union reached the fifty-year mark. This marriage was meaningful and valuable not only for how long it had lasted but also for how well the marriage had been lived out by these two people!

Choosing to remarry after divorce can lead to a new union that is God-breathed, God-inspired, God-guided, and absolutely wonderful to behold. Just ask the children and grandchildren who were gathered in Rice Lake along with us. There was a lot to celebrate after half a century of watching two Christian adults live their marriage so very well.

This book, then, also includes a description of how and why some adults choose to remarry after a divorce and why their choice might make sense for you.

Are you starting to get the picture?

Intelligent, spiritual, God-seeking adults reach different conclusions as they explore their options after a divorce. This is because each person brings a different life history, a different

personality, a different family structure, and a whole different set of values and perspectives into any discussion of the days ahead.

In other words, please don't read this book looking for a definitive answer that instructs you, after a divorce, to stay single for life because it's your only hope.

And please don't read this book looking for a definitive answer that tells you, if you have experienced a divorce, that the best possible choice is to shop around for a new partner and get remarried.

This book is not going to drive you toward one of those two outcomes. We are not going to send you off to a monastery, nor are we going to point you to Facebook and explain how to update your profile to make you more attractive, more youthful, and more desirable to members of the opposite gender.

Your life is your own, and you get to live it.

This book can be an intelligent exploration of your options and possibilities coupled with inspiring examples of choices that other divorced adults have made while traveling the same difficult journey you are on. You will learn from their mistakes and perhaps also from their successes. They are sharing their stories with you for your benefit, for your assistance.

This is what we are doing as well—as authors and family counselors, as students and university professors, as pastors and leaders of ministries to divorced adults, single parents, remarried couples, blended families, and more.

We are reaching out to you to show you a broader, more fully optioned, more interesting world than you might have expected following a divorce. We pray the stories and examples and ideas in these pages will be used by God to help you process your own journey in wise and good ways.

As we were nearing completion of this book, we sat down with a woman who is recently going through divorce. No matter how many times we've done this—hundreds and probably thousands of times—the heartbreak of divorce is always new. The pain is fresh and real. The disappointment and disillusionment are shattering and hurtful. Although we've been through it countless times before, our hearts were freshly touched by this woman's journey and the many challenges she faces in trying to construct a new life.

How will she rebuild her finances? How will she reach out to her children? How will she interact with her family or the family of her ex-partner? Once upon a time these two were one flesh, a husband and wife, active in their church and examples to all of a happy, outgoing couple, filled with hospitality and grace.

Now, in the aftermath of divorce, here is a broken and hurting woman who has more questions than answers, more frustration than joy, more challenges than solutions. Her pain is real, and her situation is difficult.

As we reached out to her, offering comfort and prayer rather than admonishment and instruction, we were reminded of the many other women and men we have met in this exact situation. Now after more than two decades of working with these hurting people, we have had many chances to watch God work—in spite of the damage and destruction.

As we listened to her story, the metaphor of a tornado came to mind. If you are not in a tornado-prone part of the world, perhaps the metaphor of a hurricane would be more on target. Either way, maybe you can get the picture.

After a tornado or a hurricane, there is massive destruction in all directions. No matter where you look, all you see is

brokenness and pain. What used to be a beautiful home is now a pile of sticks and bricks, tumbled down and useless. What used to be trees, strong and full of life, are now twisted and uprooted and lying at odd angles and in jarring patterns as far as the eye can see.

Here and there are bits of blankets, or car parts, or clothing—reminders of a house and a family who lived here before the damage was done.

In this bleak landscape of desperation and pain, sometimes the only valid response is to weep and pray. What else can you do?

Yet after more than two decades of working in the aftermath of divorces—or tornados or hurricanes—we can testify that even after massive destruction is left behind, there is still a God, still a Heavenly Father who loves you, cares about you, and is with you even in the dark valleys of pain and suffering.

God stands ready and willing to help you rebuild the walls and replant the gardens and reestablish a sense of family and community life in the days and weeks and months ahead, even after the pain of such great loss.

Maybe life will never be exactly what it once was. Maybe you have lost something precious and valuable that will never be regained. Nonetheless, here you are. And more to the point—here is God as well.

Hand in hand with God you can move forward to a tomorrow that is not marred by fear, scarred by anger, or charred by ruin. Hand in hand with God, you can replant and rebuild and refashion and reconstruct. You can be renewed and revived. You can become new creations in Christ. All this and more is not only possible—it is also God's design for you in the aftermath of the storm.

Storms come, and divorce reminds us of this elemental and immutable fact of life on earth. When storms come, people suffer. But that isn't the whole story.

Grace follows, and grace reminds us that God's abiding love follows us all the days of our lives, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of divorce. God loves you, and He wants to be your Shepherd and care for your soul.

Within the context of these pages you can explore the contours of God's grace as the Heavenly Father works with divorced adults to create new beginnings, new families, and new hope.

This is what God does—after the storm has passed.