

HOW DID I GET HERE?

I rounded the corner leading to the women's rest room to check the prayer request boxes placed there for the weekend marriage conference. The young woman was standing alone in the rest room, crying softly.

As I slowly walked toward her, I glanced at her name tag. I knew immediately who she was. Earlier in the day we received a written prayer request from her husband. He wrote that she had left him and was living with another man. He had convinced her to attend the conference in the hope that she would be persuaded to come home to him and their three children.

Her arms were folded defensively across her body. She was very pretty, with long, brown hair that fell in soft curls below her shoulders. I asked if she was all right. She said in a quiet but firm voice, "No. I don't want to be here." I asked if I could talk to her or pray with her. She shook her head. "I can't do this," she said. I thought if I kept

trying to reach out to her, she might soften. I asked if she had children. “Three. Two boys and a girl.”

After a minute, she sobbed, “I *just* can’t do this!” I knew I had only a moment to impact her in a positive way, so I gently touched her folded arms and said, “Why don’t you spend the rest of the day with me and we’ll talk about it?”

Even though I had never met her before, I could say those words because I *knew* her—her heart, her mind, and her thoughts. She was me nearly 20 years earlier. I also had three children—two boys and a girl. I had abandoned my marriage because of bitterness, frustration, and anger. I felt totally justified in my feelings and just as unmovable as this young wife and mother. My heart sank. She didn’t come with me. We continued to pray for this couple and their marriage throughout the weekend, but I never saw her again.

Of course, not every woman considering separation or divorce is having an affair or even considering one. But for one reason or another she feels bitter, isolated, angry, and wants out. If that is where you find yourself today, this book can offer you a fresh approach to your marriage and hope for the satisfaction and fulfillment you anticipated on your wedding day.

However, if you are in a marriage where there is physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, this book is not for you. It is your responsibility to preserve your own safety and that of your children by removing yourself from the situation. Anyone who advises you to stay in an abusive situation does not have your best interest at heart.

### Your Heart Condition

As Dr. Randy Carlson points out in his book *Starved for Affection*, many couples live what Henry David Thoreau described so poignantly in his book *Walden* as “lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>1</sup>

In the past, my husband, Dayne, and I served in youth ministry. I often counseled and prayed with teenaged girls troubled by personal problems and family difficulties. Some girls were so distraught they were crying and I couldn't always understand what they were saying. One evening while straining to hear the anguished words of a young girl, God gave me a picture of her heart. I saw a real, beating, flesh-and-blood human heart—not like a Valentine heart. And wrapped around her heart was barbed wire like the concertina wire coiled across the top of prison fences. It was wound tight-

ly and digging into her heart. It was a picture of what was happening in her life, and I felt I understood her circumstances even though I'd never met her before. That picture gave me a focus of how to pray for her.

So let me ask you, what does your heart look like right now? Let's look at several examples of the heart condition of a woman who is considering separation or divorce.

*A Cold Heart.* You've been hurt, disappointed, and shamed. Maybe you don't even care about your marriage anymore. To protect yourself and maintain the appearance of routine and normalcy, you have allowed your heart to grow cold.

*A Starving Heart.* Your heart is shriveled, dehydrated, and shrunken due to lack of care, attention, and affection. You've tried to tell him how you feel, but you get a blank stare in return. Or worse, he pats you on the head and says, "Every marriage has problems. You're making too much of this."

*A Bitter Heart.* Because of sarcasm or constant arguing, your heart has built up scar tissue. Maybe you dish out cutting words yourself. Or perhaps you've become antagonistic in an effort to get even. You always want the last word—anything to win the argument.

*A Divided Heart.* You've sectioned off part of your heart and have begun to fantasize about a different life, a different marriage, a different man.

It is important to remind you again at this point that if you are in a marriage where the physical or emotional safety of you or your children is in jeopardy, you must remove yourself and your children from your home immediately. This book is not for you.

No matter what your heart looks and feels like right now, there is hope. I wrote in my prayer journal:

*My heart's desire is to see scarred marriages healed (the scar tissue and excess baggage to be taken away). Teach them, Lord, to do it your way.*

When I was thinking of separating during my first marriage, my pastor's wife asked me to make a list of all the things I wanted to see change in my husband. That was the easy part. I easily ticked off a laundry list! Then she asked me "Now, what if he *never* changes?" Of course, you are not responsible for all the changes that must take place in order for your marriage to be restored, but change can begin with you.

## It's Not About Him

This book is about a journey of discovery that will allow you to move from a disappointing or unfulfilling marriage to a place where God will give you new hope and a new focus. We won't be looking at magic formulas for changing your husband because I can't tell you what or what not to do to transform him.

Whisper this prayer to your Heavenly Father:

*Lord, let all bitterness, anger, confusion, chaos, rebellion, slander, and malice be put away. Help me be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. I pray for emotional balance and that I won't be tossed about by wrong attitudes or moodiness.*

Maybe you feel your husband has been dishonest with you or perhaps there is no communication between the two of you. Maybe he is overly critical of you or too judgmental. It could be that you've been arguing about the same issues for so long you can't imagine how to break the cycle short of leaving him.

Ask the Lord to help you overcome your anger and indignation.

*Lord, let me see a miracle in my marriage. Help me create a climate of righteousness, grace, and mercy in my home. Help me*

*overcome discouragement and disappointment. Help me give and receive forgiveness.*

It's hard sometimes to remember what being in love felt like and why we married this person in the first place. We find ourselves in a place where we're focused on our hurts, the slights, and the stinging words that have damaged the love that was once fresh and new. There may be a total lack of care and consideration—the feeling of not even wanting to try to regain the deep longings, close friendship, and caring companionship we once knew.

Unfortunately, you don't get to choose how your husband acts or feels. But you can go to the Lord and ask Him to help you take your eyes off yourself, your husband, your circumstances, and your troubles. The Lord can soften your heart and give you a teachable, willing spirit.

Second Cor. 4:8-9 says: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (NIV).

Are these the thoughts and longings of your heart? Are these the words you pray? Can you even think of praying for yourself and your marriage right now? If not, I understand. Believe me, I've been there.

It's hard to look at where you are and what your marriage has become. There are strong emotions of anger, bitterness, loneliness, and isolation—the feeling that no one could possibly understand what you're dealing with. But God does.

### A Picture of Clinging to God

As I prayed for the couples who came to the Weekend to Remember marriage conference sponsored by FamilyLife, God sometimes gave me a picture of what some of the women were experiencing in their marriages. Here's one of the pictures the Lord showed me:

*The picture of clinging to God on a rocky, high place above the crashing waves. A stronghold for the oppressed—a picture of crawling up into God's arms for safety and protection—even as the storm rages.*

Maybe you're feeling angry at God for the condition of your marriage. Remember, God is the Great Physician who can work in you to change your heart, your life, and your marriage. Spend time with Him and allow Him to overrule your emotions as you are still before Him.

If you didn't have an earthly father with godly characteristics to run to and trust in, it may be hard to stop, be still, and listen for

God's whisper. Rest assured that God wants to tell you that you *are* loved, honored, and cherished—even if you aren't experiencing that in your marriage right now.

My dad abandoned me, and I felt my stepfather was distant and unaffectionate. I didn't understand how to ask for what I needed in my first marriage, so when I felt my needs weren't being met, I wasn't willing to stick around and wait for things to change. In my second marriage, I still have a hard time accepting and receiving the love and attention my husband, Dayne, shows me. I'm becoming aware of my tendency to withdraw, isolate myself, and feel unworthy. But with God's help, I look to my Heavenly Father to soothe those fears so I can freely accept the love, attention, and affection I truly want and need.

Maybe you haven't cried in months, even though you have felt desperately unhappy for a long time. Right now, the Holy Spirit is kneeling before you and quietly saying "I'm here—I want to come beside you and begin to help you look to the Father for the things you long for in your life." It's OK to cry and mourn the condition of your marriage today.

And then, when you are able, lay aside

your feelings and begin to consider doing some or all of the following:

1. Ask God to show you the condition of your heart and to give you a word or a picture that describes your feelings right now. Be willing to look honestly at your attitude with a genuine perspective of understanding how you really feel—even if it seems ugly, unloving, or sinful.
2. Look back through this chapter to find and write down one or more passages that touched you. When you find something that captures where you are right now, make it a prayer—an offering to God. Even if it's just one word.
3. Consider keeping a journal. This is a suggestion I will repeat throughout the book, especially later as we begin to look at praying Scripture. Right now the idea of putting your thoughts and feelings in writing may seem out of the question. I have found, though, that as I write things down, I can put them aside and trust that God sees and hears my cries and my prayers. I close the journal knowing that my problem or

concern is no longer in my hands, but in God's. Just consider it.

4. Allow yourself to see a glimpse of what God can do for your marriage and allow yourself to be just a little hopeful that He can bring resolution and reconciliation to your marriage.

God wants to help you find hope and restoration. He loves you and wants to give you hope and a future. That is a paraphrase of the passage from Jer. 29:11 that has been my "life verse" for many years now.

When I was discouraged and without hope that God saw my pain and heard my cries for my marriage, He brought this verse to mind to remind me that He does have a plan that is full of hope, as He does for you—even if you can't see it yet.

### Scripture Meditations

"The revelation of GOD is whole and pulls our lives together. The signposts of GOD are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of GOD are right, showing the way to joy. The directions of GOD are plain and easy on the eyes" (Ps. 19:7-8).

"From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to GOD. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before him. GOD has

taken charge; from now on he has the last word” (22:27-28).

“Love and Truth meet in the street, Right Living and Whole Living embrace and kiss! Truth sprouts green from the ground, Right Living pours down from the skies! Oh yes! GOD gives Goodness and Beauty; our land responds with Bounty and Blessing. Right Living strides out before him, and clears a path for his passage” (85:10-13).

“My theme song is God’s love and justice, and I’m singing it right to you, GOD. I’m finding my way down the road of right living, but how long before you show up? I’m doing the very best I can, and I’m doing it at home, where it counts. I refuse to take a second look at corrupting people and degrading things” (101:1-3).



