

MARRIAGE WORKSHOP
Responding to Disasters During Your Marriage
Lesson # 4

I. INTRODUCTION

William Kennedy's novel *Ironweed* describes the life of Francis Phelan after he accidentally killed his infant son. Francis accidentally dropped his son while changing his diaper. He became distraught at the death of his son. He eventually finally left his wife over the pain. When he returns to the town years later, a lonely, alcoholic drifter, he finds himself suffering from hallucinations of the dead.

He sees the cemetery where infant son is buried. "Francis saw the pair of Phelan stones and turned his eyes elsewhere, fearful that his infant son, Gerald, might be under one of them. He had not confronted Gerald directly since the day he had let the child slip out of his diaper. He would not confront him now."

Absalom, the son of David, launched a rebellion against his father. He drove his father from Jerusalem, and then he went out after his father with an army. Absalom sought the very life of his own father. Absalom was killed in the battle which followed. Upon hearing of his son's death, David cries, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." 2 Sam. 18:33.

There are some griefs which are beyond counting in their pain. Griefs which hurt so badly, that fathers cannot think of them years later. Griefs which hurt so that one wishes for the life of a rebellious son over one's own life.

The death of children is not the only grief which one may suffer, but it is one of the greatest. It seems especially unnatural. It is painful enough to lose a parent, but we – after all – expect our parents to die first. We have years to prepare for such a fate. But the death of children comes early, too early. The sad fact of the Fall is too obvious in such a death.

The statistics relating to the death of children and divorce are difficult to find. One writer puts the figure at 90% of families suffering such a death end in divorce. Others dispute the figure. It would be difficult to lay that one event as the cause, when the death itself can contribute to and exasperate other causes.

If the death does not come suddenly, there are often tremendous financial strains. Even with health insurance, the parents' share of tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars are crushing. I worked for a bankruptcy attorney when I was in college: I noticed that bankruptcy petitions were almost always joined to divorce petitions. The weight of debt can crush a marriage.

The stress and sadness of an ill child overwhelm one's ability to cope. The smallest burdens become overwhelming burdens. Think of the difficulty to remain pleasant at the end of a painfully long day, when you are hungry and tired and thirsty and your head hurts and you have been struggling with the normal insults of life. Sin takes advantage of the flesh and it is easy to speak without patience and joy.

The pain of an ill child is weight which weakens one, it is an emotional exhaustion which haunts every moment. There is no steady relief. The weakness and

exhaustion make it easier to be angry about everything. One so wants the misery to end and yet does not want the child to die and there is the guilt about wanting to be freed from the weight of illness and the weight of sadness.

There are other pains which are similar: The pain of a spouse with cancer. And there are other pains, which even if not as crushing can still be overwhelming.

This brings us to a question: What do we do when we are faced with overwhelming pain? How does a marriage survive when it is saddled with such a pain?

II. A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

When my wife and I had been married 11 months, I became quite ill. I woke up my wife, late in the evening and told her that I felt like I was dying. I was feverish and shaky and hurt. She took me to the emergency room. The doctor said that my appendix had burst. He did not know how bad the infection had become. He did not know if I would survive the surgery. He told me to say goodbye to my wife and he left to start preparation for surgery.

I lay on the table and told my wife of 11 months, who was pregnant with our first son, goodbye. We had only recently seen the ultrasound of our little baby hopping about in the way that such tiny children do. I remember the amazement at the sight.

Well, obviously, I did not die. But I did spend a week in the hospital.

Soon after I got out of the hospital, my wife got the results of her AFP screening. It seems that our child had a one in seventy some chance to suffer from some sort of genetic problem. I remember sitting with her in the waiting room of the genetics counselor. I knew that it couldn't be true. One in seventy was like one in a million. The seventy was so much larger than the one, there was nothing to be worried about.

We went into a room with a high resolution ultrasound – it was quite a bit different than the ultrasound in the doctor's office. This ultrasound looked at the blood flow inside the heart and the development of the brain and the shape of the kidneys. I could not understand a thing which was happening.

The doctor stopped and told us that the baby had Trisomy 18. My wife could only lay there. I stood up. The doctor told me to sit down so that I wouldn't hurt myself if I passed out. He said that he had to tell us that we could get an abortion if we wanted, but that we should be quick about it if we did. We told him that we would not do that. He reminded us that the baby was still a baby, he wasn't going to be a monster.

The doctor performed another test to confirm the diagnosis. Our baby had Edwards' Syndrome, Trisomy 18. Rather than having merely a pair of 18th chromosomes, he had three. It is similar to Downs Syndrome, where the child has three 21st chromosomes. However, the condition is more serious, affects more parts of the body and has a much higher death rate.

Boys with the condition rarely live to term. If they do, they often die within a few days. As the medical literature puts it, Trisomy 18 is *incompatible with life*.

We prepared as well as we could. Our friends were remarkable. My wife held a baby shower in our home. So many people came you couldn't get inside the door.

Our son was delivered by c-section late in the evening. There were many people who came to be with us that evening. Some of them are here with us at CBC, others are still at Calvary Chapel or elsewhere. If any of you hear this, I want to tell you again, thank you.

Our son was born alive. That was more than we had dared to hope. We gave him my name, because neither Kelley nor I ever wanted anyone to think that we did not love him. We did.

He spent quite a long time in the hospital. He was first at Glendale Adventist and then at Children's Hospital, where he had open heart surgery at 8 weeks of age. I remember looking down into his bed and thinking that I would literally do anything to save him, I would have happily given my life for his.

It was there I first understood John 3:16: I had often thought of the Son's love in giving himself. But the love of the Father in giving his Son for an enemy: That was unbelievable. I could understand giving my life to save my son. But I could not and I cannot understand giving my son for another. I would have destroyed the world to save my son. I could not imagine destroying my son to save the world.

After months which were indescribable, my son came home. Our son was in and out of doctor visits. But he continually did better. He became well enough that the doctor determined he could have a hernia repaired, and have a feeding tube inserted into his stomach so that would take him off of the long tube going down his throat.

The night after the surgery, Kelley stayed with the baby and I went home with Cassie. At about 2 in the morning Kelley called to tell me that Eddie's lungs had collapsed and that he was going to die.

I took Cassie to my mother and drove down the hill to Children's Hospital. I had become exhausted by the strain of my son's illness. I had become exhausted by thinking that every day my son might die. I was plain tired. I had spent the day at the hospital where I knew many doctors and nurses by first name. Now, I was going back to watch my son die – if only I could get back in time.

I was tired. I was angry. I was very angry with God. I cried and I yelled at God. I demanded to know how he could do such a thing. He was God and let us live in a world where children die. He could not know what that was like. I yelled at Him because He did not know what it was like to have a son die.

I wanted to be distracted so I grabbed a random cassette tape on the front seat of my car. It happened to be the Bible on tape at the part of the crucifixion. And so I realized that God did know very well what it was to watch a son die.

Even now, when I think of this, it breaks my heart.

My son lived that night, but he did die shortly thereafter. He died at home. His night nurse – he could not be left unattended – came to wake up my wife and I. Our son had had a slight seizure. She gave Eddie to his mother. We talked for a bit and then Kelley noticed that Eddie had stopped breathing. The fire department came. They tried to start his heart, but it would not start. He was dead, utterly dead.

The paramedic, another man we had also come to know through our son, came and told us that he had never seen anyone take a death so well, so peacefully. We told him that we were looking to the resurrection. Where else could we look?

Early in the morning, just before it was light, the mortician came and went upstairs to Eddie's room. He spread a sheet on the floor, and placed my son in the middle of the sheet. He folded the cover over his face, tucked the package under his arm and brought him out to the van parked on the street. The earliest sunlight was coming up behind the mountains, the streets were still dark when he drove away. It reminded me of another early morning, when it was still dark.

Then, three months later, my father learned that he contracted cancer. He died three months after that. So, in about 20 months, I nearly died, we had a son who had a severe genetic disorder, who underwent months of hospitalization and then died; and then a father who contracted cancer and died.

III. **HOW DOES A MARRIAGE SURVIVE SUCH A THING?**

I must confess that Kelley and I often did not live with each other in perfect godliness. We had only been married a short while when this series of burdens piled up. We were stressed and scared. We spent entire days sitting together in the emergency room of Children's Hospital. We woke up in the middle of the night to visit our baby in the intensive care room. I held my finger against a hole in the side of my infant son's chest. Kelley never got to hold her child the way a mother hopes to hold her baby at birth. Our son was on a ventilator for the first two months. She could not even see him until the second day.

We easily crossed one-another. We were just learning how to be married and we found ourselves learning how to be married under tremendous stress. I remember one day in particular when we snapped at one another near Eddie and saw him look up from his bed at us and it broke our hearts.

So in telling you what can be done, I am not relying upon my own wisdom. I am relying solely upon what God has done.

- A. Here is the secret as to why our marriage did not fall apart:
 - 1. Before we were married, we determined that we would not divorce. We married with the intent of making a vow *to God* which we intended to keep.
 - 2. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

IV. A VOW TO GOD

A. Marriage is a God-Governed Institution

- 1. **God determines the fact and terms of marriage:** "Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." (Genesis 2:18-25, NASB95)
- 2. **God does the joining in marriage:** "And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ***What therefore God has joined together***, let no man separate."" (Matthew 19:4-6, NASB95)
- 3. **God is a witness in the marriage:** ""This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. "Yet you say, 'For what reason?' ***Because the***

Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. "But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. ***“For I hate divorce,”*** says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.'" (Malachi 2:13-16, NASB95)

B. The Relationship in the Family Affects One's Relationship With God

1. **The prayers of a bitter husband are hindered:** "You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered." (1 Peter 3:7, NASB95)
2. **The relationship to one's family affects one's relationship to God:** "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8, NASB95)

C. The Marriage Relationship is to be Performed as to God

1. **The submission of the wife to her husband is ultimately submission to Christ:** "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." (Ephesians 5:22-24, NASB95)
2. **The husband's care for his wife is ultimately submission to Christ:** "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body." (Ephesians 5:25-30,

NASB95)

D. Conclusion

1. The marriage relationship is ultimately a relationship created and governed by God. God demands certain things of the spouses based upon their relationship to him. When either a husband or a wife fails in their relationship to their spouse, they fail in their relationship with God in Christ: You cannot have a bitter, unloving relationship with your spouse and a right relationship with God.
2. When stresses come upon a marriage, it is easy to fall into bitterness. Indeed, it is very difficult to be anything other than unhappy in such circumstances. Unhappy people, discontent people are sinful people.
3. However, when one sees their relationship to their spouse as intimately tied to their relationship to God, it becomes self-defeating to persist in bitterness. Since, as Christians, we must see our need for Christ, we are turned by that need to be careful with our spouse.
4. Thus, cultivation of a relationship with Christ, is crucial to maintaining a successful relationship with one's spouse during a crisis.

V. CONFIDENCE IN THE RESURRECTION

A. A relationship with Christ is centered on the resurrection:

1. As shown above, a strong relationship with Christ is crucial to a successful relationship with one's spouse. The burdens imposed by disaster are simply too great for a spouse to bear. Matters of life and death are bigger than any one person. Your husband or wife cannot solve problems of death: They are going to die, just like you. They cannot be of help. You need to have someone who can solve life and death problems.
2. All of our agonies are ultimately agonies of sin. Death is a problem of sin. Unkindness to your wife, disrespect of your husband – no matter what they did to “provoke” you – are all matters of sin. If you cannot forgive your wife or husband – no matter what they did – you are in sin. I do not doubt that forgiveness may take supernatural help – but we claim to have supernatural help. I do not doubt that forgiveness and reconciliation may be difficult, but God is greater. So,

when we are unkind, we must seek reconciliation. And, when we are *sinned* against, we must be no more stingy than God when reconciliation is sought. We absolutely must remember that ungodly conduct in our marriage is sin – no matter what the provocation for that conduct.

3. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God dealt with sin. Therefore, God has already dealt with the stress, strains and trials of your marriage. You need only avail yourself of that benefit purchased by the blood of Christ.
4. In short, we must aim to never sin, and yet confess that we do sin and confess our sin: confident that we will receive forgiveness in confession. 1 John 1:8-2:2. We must also forgive others remembering that if we “do not forgive others, then [our] Father will not forgive [our] transgressions.” Matt. 6:15.

B. Peter’s Explanation of This Process

1. **Duty owed to God:** In the third chapter of 1 Peter, Peter gives very painful commands to husbands and wives: He says that irrespective of whether your spouse is godly toward you, you must be godly toward them. Peter’s directions to the wife specifically contemplate a wife living with a non-believing husband. The husband’s commands are independent of what his wife has done toward him. Both husband and wife are directed to act in a godly manner in the midst of trials.
2. **The commands come with hope:** Fortunately, Peter’s letter is not limited to such commands. In fact, the commands to husbands and wives comes after detailed instruction centered on the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection.
3. **Peter first sees himself only in relationship to Christ:** “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” 1 Peter 1:1. Note that Peter does not refer to himself in any manner independent of Jesus Christ. Rather, Peter is someone who is in relation to Jesus Christ. We need to think of ourselves primarily as we are in relationship to Jesus Christ.
4. **Believers are strangers in this world:** Peter repeatedly refers to the believers on the basis that they are strangers, aliens, pilgrims in this world. In fact, the very first thing he says to the believers is that they are not at home: “To those who reside as aliens”. 1 Pet. 1:1. Thus, we are related to Christ and strangers to this world.

5. **Our life, hope and joy is in Jesus Christ:** "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9, NASB95) If my hope is satisfied in the work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, I am overwhelmed with joy. Nothing, even the death of my son, can overwhelm the joy of Jesus Christ's resurrection and my salvation. In fact, the death of my son is a powerful motive to seek the resurrection, because I want to see my son and I want to see the one who saved my son.

6. **The return of Jesus Christ as a basis for hope which keeps me from sin:** "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ." (1 Peter 1:13-19, NASB95)

7. **See ourselves as a royal priesthood:** One great way to encourage people is to remind them that sinful conduct is *beneath them*. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved,

I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul." (1 Peter 2:9-11, NASB95)

8. **Live with Christ as our example:** "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." (1 Peter 2:21-25, NASB95)
9. **All this instruction comes before the instruction to the family:** This point must be seen: The instruction on how one is to avoid sin in the marriage (and all unkind, unloving conduct in the marriage is sin) comes after serious meditation on Jesus Christ: His death, resurrection and return. We are to see what we are in Jesus and because of Jesus. As Paul writes in another place we are to "reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to Christ". If we try to fulfill these commands without Jesus Christ, our efforts will result in self-will and failure.
10. **Remember the temptation:** There is a great temptation in stressful times to rely upon ourselves. When tried with disaster, we have a tendency to close into ourselves and "look deep within" and "find our inner strength". Peter counsels the opposite: He says look to Christ, think about Christ, set your hope firmly on Christ. And why can we have confidence in Christ? Because he rose from the dead.

C. 1 Corinthians 15

1. **There is no problem that couldn't be solved by Christ's return:** Think about that often. There is no problem that can't be solved by the return of Jesus. When Jesus comes back, I no longer wait to see my son or father. There is no longer a temptation to sin against my family. There is no longer a temptation to love a world which is fading away.
2. **All our problems are lesser bits of death, which Christ has overcome.** Of all the enemies brought by sin, death is the greatest. When that enemy is overcome our struggle is at end.

3. **Jesus has overcome death:** " Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:50-58, NASB95)