

Overcoming the Shame of Divorce

Divorce doesn't disqualify you from serving God. There is hope for those whose marriages have failed.

Slowly twisting the barstool back and forth, almost in rhythm to the jazz music playing softly in the background, Shelly Parker sipped an iced mocha at her favorite Starbucks. Staring out the plate glass window facing the busy avenue, she was the picture of human solitaire.

Actually, she did have places to go and important things to do, but for the last 20 minutes she just couldn't remember what they were. Her mind was preoccupied, surveying the vast mental mountains inside her head.

Mountains are supposed to be beautiful. Hers, however, were not.

Shelly Parker told her supervisor a small lie that morning so she could get to work later than usual. It was around 10:30 a.m., and the rain was still falling. It was the third straight year rain had fallen on the date her divorce was finalized. Fitting for such an anniversary.

Nearing the end of her drink, Shelly put her problems into three basic categories. First, how could she ever face God after failing Him like this? At 41, she was afraid of death and of what God might have to say to her.

Next, she desperately needed the friends from her former church. But she knew reconnecting was impossible.

And finally, how much longer could she hold on at work feeling so physically ill from the inner anxieties associated with her divorce? Each day, long before her morning makeup was in

place, the aching details of her failed marriage always found their way back into her mind.

Three years hadn't healed anything. It's not like she hadn't tried. She had spent the last six months of her marriage and the first six months after the breakup trying to find two pastors who would say the same thing about divorce. It made a difficult situation all the more confusing.

So Shelly scheduled an appointment with a preacher from a small church, hoping to find compassion and guidance. But he ended up having the warmth of a Marine drill-instructor, literally hollering his doctrine at her from across his desk.

Another pastor in the same town was so intimidated he began physically twitching when she asked a few sincere questions about divorce and the Bible. He mumbled on and on about his huge church mortgage and about not offending anyone.

Confused about truth, mad at the devil and scared of God, Shelly Parker gave up. The one place she thought she could run to—the church—apparently thought her problem was too big for God to handle.

Sally's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as she reached the bottom of her mocha. Forcing herself off the barstool, she exited the coffee shop and plodded onward.

Hindrances to Healing

Reaching people like Shelly Parker seems to be a lost art in the church. And at the root of the challenge are two words that impede Jesus from touching the divorced through the hands of His church: bitterness and legalism.

Although there are those in the "Christian divorce culture" who obstruct their healing by walking in resentment toward their past, restoration is often impeded by churches and ministry leaders who are bound by legalistic attitudes.

Marriage, even by the apostle Paul's definition, is a "mystery." The word Paul uses in Ephesians 5:32 is *mysterion*, which means "shut the mouth." What Paul is saying is that even for those who accept the framework of "leave, cleave and become one flesh" as the formula for a successful marriage, the success of that union is still mysterious, not scientific.

It's a secret so deep that no one is able to "open his mouth" and sufficiently explain how it really succeeds. When you take that mysterious union and cast it into the muddy waters of a painful divorce process, the issue becomes even more complex. And discerning the guilty from the innocent, or the responsible from the restorable, becomes an almost impossible task.

John the Baptist tragically encountered the high-powered emotions that a divorce can generate. Dressed in animal skins more fit for the wild than for the religious, his brazen attitude against sin led to his undoing.

Coming face to face with the blade of Herod's sword, John never made it out of his 30s. And the reason he lost his head was because he stuck his nose where someone thought it shouldn't be.

King Herod had conveniently taken his brother's wife as his own. There was no debating this remarriage; it was an unlawful union under any theological banner. Herod tossed John in prison because he didn't appreciate the prophet's righteous advice.

Soon Herodias, the cunning new bride of Herod, asked her daughter to dance before the king. When Herodias knew Herod had been seduced by her charm, she asked her new stepfather for a special favor.

Having been instructed by her mother to do so, the daughter asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter. The bitterness of one generation had reinvented itself through the next.

Herod shamelessly agreed, and John's life was quickly ended—all because he spoke out against an unholy marriage union.

Many preachers today feel caught in the same trap. They are afraid to speak the truth on certain tough issues, such as divorce, because they fear “losing their head.” But the freedom suffering people cry out for is found in the very thing many preachers are afraid to say.

The complications of a divorce will test our beliefs about God and people. It will tug at the loyalties of strong friendships. It will turn family conversations tense. And all along the way tiny little people bearing the family name watch to see how Mommy, Daddy and the church fix everything.

The true message of Christ is neither legalistic nor judgmental—it is always the invitation to something better. It's high time the church started giving those reeling from divorce the same invitation. It's time we recognize their pain.

If you are divorced, you might be asking yourself right now: “How could God hate divorce but still love me? I'm forever a divorced person. I'm identified on the forms I fill out by the very thing God despises.”

Yet all you've been given by the church are trite, incomplete answers. You've been told many times that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. And you know that simple answer doesn't change how you feel.

Your theology feels tired and worn out. The inner debates have lost their purpose. You used to fight for your classification within the divorce culture: “I was the one who tried to make it work; really I did!”

Now even that argument doesn't matter. You've accepted the “Scarlet D” around your neck as a way of life.

Divorce is like any other sin in that it stems from the same cause and needs the same remedy. But divorce is unlike other sins in that it breeds a stronger reaction from others because of two inescapable issues.

First, divorce involves other people, often children. Second, divorce weakens the primary illustration in Scripture of Christ and His love relationship with His church.

I know that for many, the very mention of “sin” and “divorce” in the same sentence brings a sense of great condemnation. Consequently, many ministries, in an attempt to be compassionate toward the divorced, minister healing at the emotional level alone.

Clearly, not everyone who is divorced has committed a great sin before God. There are people everywhere who get stuck paying the awful price tag for the sinful choices of someone else. But unquestionably, many are living at the opposite end of that spectrum, trying to live an outwardly Christian life under the dreadful weight of unconfessed sin.

If that is you, please hear the heart of God: He is able to forgive you no matter what you’ve chosen to do, even in the deep recesses of your heart, in that place where only you and God know what is true. But you need to turn to Him.

Aaron at Sinai. David at Jerusalem. Samson at Gaza. Saul at Damascus. All were individuals who were forgiven of great sin by an even greater God.

Maybe the devil has persuaded you, as he has so many, that God’s forgiveness is limited, or that your life is so far off course it’s hopeless. Those condemning thoughts are not from the Holy Spirit—they come straight from hell.

Jesus can give you freedom from the cycle of despair. And He can restore you—even after divorce.

The Road to Restoration

If you've gone through an ugly divorce and are having difficulty making sense of it all, here are three key principles—they're actually guarantees from God—that can set you on the road to restoration.

First, God's ear is as big as His heart.

I'm sure you remember Joshua. He was the commander who took leadership of Israel after the death of Moses. He too faced a defining moment of compassion: Would God's mercy reach all the way to his need?

After entering the Promised Land, Joshua experienced a horrible defeat at the hands of a small nation called Ai. The source of defeat was a deceitful man among the Israelites named Achan. When Achan was removed, Joshua moved the Israelites forward.

Wearied from the extra battles, Joshua looked up only to see another nation, Gibeon, waiting to fight him. It was a nation God wanted him to destroy.

But Joshua was deceived by their scheme of flattery. Their sweet words trapped him, and he signed a prayerless peace accord with them.

Soon after the agreement was signed, the Gibeonites were attacked and engaged in a fierce conflict. They quickly called on their new ally. Obligated to garner his troops, Joshua marched throughout the night to fight a battle that God had never wanted him to fight in the first place.

Miles off course, engaged in a war he never should have been fighting, Joshua pleaded for God's help. And from that place of miserable distraction, miles from the course God had originally planned, his cry was heard. In response, the mercy of the Lord stopped the sun for an entire day (see Joshua

9-10).

God's grace transcended the laws of the universe. He did whatever it took to put Joshua's life back on track.

Remind the devil of this the next time he tells you that you're too far from God for Him to hear your cry. Remember God's mercy in those moments when you say, "How did I ever get so far off course?" or "I'm so entangled and so far removed from the initial plan God had for my life."

Going through a divorce can make a person feel exactly this way. But look heavenward in the morning at the sun, and remember the day God made it stand still on behalf of a desperate man named Joshua. God can hear the cry of the humble from any location on earth. Even if you feel like you're only one inch from hell.

Second, God can help you forget what He has forgiven.

Paul sums up his "spiritual freedom plan" in one simple statement: You have to forget what God has forgiven. "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead" (Phil. 3:13, NKJV).

The word "forget" means "to lose by neglect." Failures such as divorce will always be a part of public history and personal memory. So how does our painful past lose its potency? Only through neglect.

I'm not advocating that you forsake the responsibilities that often follow a divorce. What you neglect is reliving all the wounds and words of yesterday.

Dissecting past events, playing to a new jury, revisiting questions that may never have answers. These are the disciplines of a bitter soul. If you give place to them, your

dark yesterdays will have a second chance at life.

Paul is saying that painful memories will live beyond their necessary life span when sustained by unhealthy thought patterns. But Jesus can empower you so that your thoughts don't trap you.

We cannot speak one thing while thinking another. Our mental dwelling places are directly influenced by the substance of our confession. Thoughts feed words, and words feed thoughts.

When King Saul failed, Samuel, who had anointed Saul as king, took it extremely hard and personally. The Lord finally had to shake Samuel free from the bondages of grief. "How long will you mourn for Saul?...Fill your horn with oil, and go [anoint David king of Israel]" (1 Sam. 16:1).

In other words, the Lord was saying to Samuel: "It's over. Get over it. We all had dreams for the success of this plan. We all lost something. But the sun is rising. My mercy is calling. Get up and move on."

Third, God will show you how to live in confidence that "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28).

Imagine for a moment that you are looking at a beautiful painting of an outdoor landscape. In your mind's eye, find four stones among the landscape. Now take a moment and remove everything else from the canvas except those four stones.

Before you now is a white canvas with four disconnected stones. Those four stones represent the major failures of your life. A painting like that would be valueless in the eyes of anyone but you.

The Word of God promises that when we love God, He will cause "all things to work together for good." Loving God releases the Master painter to begin His artwork of grace with our lives. Jesus begins to paint between those stones. He begins

painting the canvas with substance, meaning and beauty.

But the greatest miracle of all is how God chooses, in His mercy, to integrate the original stones from our past into the current picture of our lives. He covers our sin and mistakes, but incorporates our history into His plan. Why? Because He is using “all things.”

Given time, God will change everything about your life. Given time, Jesus will turn your life into a work of art for the world to see. No longer will you feel like four discounted stones from a hurtful past. You will realize you have become a beautiful work of grace.

The stones will always be there. History remains. But Jesus can take those painful memories and incorporate them into something new and valued.

He will use the painful things. The broken things. Yes, even the “divorce” things. God includes “all things” in His portraits of grace. But the key is love—both God’s toward you and yours toward Him.

Legalism will be with us until heaven comes. But your victory is not dependent on a perfect church—only on a perfect Christ who is in the process of perfecting His church.

If you’ve been stung by legalistic attitudes or mumbling preachers who would rather avoid you than love you, I invite you to take your eyes off all of that for the moment.

No, I have a better idea. Take your eyes off of all of that forever. Your canvas is beginning to look different already.

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Where to Turn If Your Marriage Fails

Don't let divorce ruin the rest of your life.

These 10 guidelines will put you on the path to restoration.

1. Pursue biblical counseling. The objective guidance of a professional counselor will help you process your pain in a healthy way while walking you through a systematic pathway to recovery. A good counselor can open your eyes to issues lurking under the surface that need to be exposed. But there's a catch: You must be honest, vulnerable and willing to take responsibility for counseling to help.

The American Association for Christian Counselors (AACC) will refer you to a licensed counselor in your city. Call (800) 526-8673 or visit www.aacc.org. Local mental health agencies make referrals to Christian therapists, as do many churches. Try asking friends if they have had a positive experience with a counselor and get their referral.

2. Surround yourself with support. Ecclesiastes 4:10 says, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up." A good friend will walk with you through deep waters and help you get to the other side.

Consider finding a support group in your community. Divorce Care is one such group that meets throughout the country. Check their Web site at www.divorcecare.org.

3. Stay connected to your church. Don't pull away from people during crisis. You need them now more than ever. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves exhorting one another" (Heb. 10:25, NKJV).

Great healing can occur simply by being in an atmosphere of praise and worship. God can use those around you to speak encouragement.

4. Read books that will give you insight. One of the most helpful is the Fresh Start Series. The Fresh Start Divorce Recovery Workbook and Fresh Start: 8 Principles for Starting Over When Your Relationships Don't Work are available from your Christian bookstore or through Internet vendors.

5. Beware of rebound relationships. Good friends are an invaluable support, but wrong relationships only breed disaster. Proverbs 12:26 says, "The righteous should choose his friends carefully."

Don't jump into a serious dating relationship before you have fully dealt with the issues surrounding your marriage and divorce. If you do, you'll carry old baggage into your new relationship and risk repeating past mistakes.

6. Give healing time. Emotional healing doesn't happen overnight—it is a process. But if you give God time, it is a process that works. "A wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment, because for every matter there is a time and judgment, though the misery of man increases greatly" (Eccl. 8:5-6). Be patient. God is at work, even when you don't feel it.

7. Let the Holy Spirit minister to your emotions. You may feel like you are riding an emotional roller coaster. You'll be making progress one day, then the next day you'll struggle with rejection or anger. This is a normal part of healing.

In the Psalms we find that David embraced emotional moments—he didn't stuff them. He expressed himself freely, pouring out his heart to God. The Holy Spirit can help you if you walk through the emotions with Him.

8. Don't let condemnation cripple you. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Christ offers forgiveness, but you must walk in that forgiveness. Voices of condemnation will whisper in your ear. But this is never from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will convict us, but He instills hope at the same time. Condemnation, however, is accompanied by spirits of fear, hopelessness or despair. The best way to combat condemnation is to dwell on Scriptures of forgiveness and promise. Write verses on 3-by-5 cards and keep them handy. When the enemy attacks, you'll have your weapons ready.

9. Be open to remarriage. Some people take Jesus' statements on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19 out of context and subsequently throw future happiness out the window. They believe that if they remarry, they are committing adultery.

But it should be noted that Jesus was not giving an exhaustive teaching on divorce and remarriage. He was not trying to list all of the situations in which divorce would be an acceptable, if tragic, outcome.

The Pharisees, seeking to trap Christ in His own words, asked Him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife "for any and every reason." In so many words, Jesus answered no. His subsequent statements confronted frivolous divorce. He was not making an all-inclusive statement outlawing remarriage for those who have suffered divorce yet have repented of wrongdoing and have been healed. Be open to God bringing the love He has designed into your life.

10. Believe that God can still use you. Many people write themselves off after divorce, thinking they have ruined their testimony forever. But does that sound like a redemptive God?

God used David even after he committed adultery and murder. He used Peter even after he denied Christ three times. Jesus refused to let stones be cast at a woman caught in sexual infidelity.

God is in the restoration business. If you have taken responsibility and are living in honesty and repentance, God wants to use you to minister to others.

By Bill Shepson