

Preserving Your Marriage and Faith When Your Spouse Is Not a Believer

You cry. You pray. You wonder how long you can hold on. You wrestle with guilt and loneliness. You look at other Christian couples with envy. If you're a believer, daily life has special challenges when your spouse is not a Christian.

And whatever your spouse's spiritual status, you also still have all the other "stuff" of married life to contend with: communication, intimacy, money, in-laws, children and more. You may struggle with the same false beliefs about marriage and need to be reminded of what is true about marriage.

You may be tempted to believe that other couples where both partners are Christians have it much easier, or that if only your spouse would "become a Christian," everything would be OK. That's not necessarily so. Some of the most heartbreaking stories I hear are from those whose Christian husband or wife abuses, betrays or otherwise causes them extreme pain.

That said, some of your challenges may be unique. How do you deal with your spouse when they don't share your faith? How do you balance what may feel like competing loyalties? Is it worth it to keep on praying?

Paul encouraged anyone whose husband or wife was not a believer to remain married if their spouse was willing (1 Cor. 7:12-14). God may use you to draw your spouse to Himself (1 Cor. 7:16).

But what practically can you do to both survive and "help" God bring your spouse into His kingdom? Here are five keys:

1. Don't play junior Holy Spirit. God has not given you the job of "fixing" or "saving" your spouse. That's His job. No human being has a right to play Holy Spirit in anyone else's life—not even your spouse's. (You do have a job, though. More on that in the coming steps.) God honors your spouse's free will, and you need to do the same.

This means no nagging, no flaunting your spirituality, no belittling, no arrogance, no using Scripture as a weapon. Put yourself in your spouse's shoes. If some behavior would push you away or make it less likely you would want to join your believing spouse as a Christian, be extremely cautious and prayerful before acting in that way. Using truth as a weapon or acting arrogantly righteous will not win your spouse's heart to Jesus.

2. Be a walking advertisement for God's kingdom. If you were looking at or living with you, would you want what you had? If you were an unbeliever, would you want to join yourself in being a Christian? All of us are broken and in need of Jesus' transforming grace. But to the degree you demonstrate that transformation in your daily words, actions and the way you love, you are either an appealing incentive or a stinking obstacle in your spouse's journey to God's kingdom (2 Cor. 2:16).

You will not be perfect. When you mess up, apologize and ask for forgiveness. Let God continue to grow you. Keep investing deeply in your relationship with your spouse. Let God's love keep teaching you how to love better. That may be the factor God uses to save your spouse.

3. Keep feeding yourself. Any marriage is a marathon, not a sprint. This is never truer than when your spouse is not a Christian. And to make it, you must be very intentional about keeping your soul and spirit filled with nourishing food. It may be easier than ever to neglect this when your spouse does not share your faith.

Jesus regularly needed time alone with His Father while He was here on Earth, and you need the same. Find ways to stay connected to other believers even if you can't attend church weekly. Spend time reading or listening to inspirational media. Invest time in God's Word and in prayer. You're responsible for keeping your own soul filled up, regardless of what your spouse does or doesn't do.

4. Watch for God's work in your spouse's life. God loves your husband or wife more than you do. He is working to draw them to Himself. He knows better than you do what their brokenness is, where they are vulnerable, what barriers they would have to overcome and what it would take to win their heart.

You may, as a believer, get an inside view of how God deals with someone who is "hard to get." Or you may not see any evidence that God is doing anything; don't let that fool you. Sometimes God allows life to break a person in order to give His Holy Spirit an open door; your interference could possibly prolong that process. And He may use your love as a demonstration of His own love to them.

If your spouse shows an interest or asks questions, be yourself. Don't pounce. Freely share your own journey, struggles, victories, fears, hopes and faith. And if God uses someone else to speak into your spouse's life, don't be jealous; be grateful.

5. Continue praying. Prayer works. How long does it take? Only God knows. And only He knows the specifics of the outcome. Don't believe the lie that prayer doesn't work just because you don't see your spouse coming to Christ. The stories are too numerous to believe otherwise, and God's Word affirms it.

So keep on praying—whether it's 7 days or 70 years. Pray for yourself—for your own character growth, wisdom, courage and perseverance. Pray for God to continually show you how to love well. Pray for your marriage—for the connection between you.

Pray for your spouse—that the Holy Spirit never stop doing His work in their heart, regardless of what it takes.

Will your spouse become a Christian? I don't know. But I do know that God can use you as one of His best tools to minister His love to your spouse and draw them to Himself.

Question: If your spouse is not a believer, what special challenges are you facing? What has given you courage or helped you in this journey? {eo}

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