

When Your Marriage Starts Unraveling

Most brides look forward to their wedding day through rose-colored glasses while dreaming of a happy future with Mr. Wonderful. But sooner or later, dreaming gives way to the reality that happiness doesn't automatically happen.

At the time we marry we may not consciously think, *Now I will be happy because the one I love not only loves me but is committed to me.* Yet the underlying idea usually is there. Of course this only sets us up for disappointment; no human being has the power to guarantee another's happiness.

Each partner brings into the relationship his or her own expectations for marriage. Each one also brings emotional and cultural "baggage" from the past that affects how he or she contributes to the relationship.

No matter how well you think you know each other, the daily routine of life reveals things about your mate you've never seen before. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, a difficult marriage actually can become a laboratory in which God's love has the power to bring healing.

Problems Yield to Prayer

Our friend Sarah found that prayer enabled her to cope with difficulties in her marriage. She and her husband, Wayne, were Christians, but the foundation of their union was very shaky.

When they married, Sarah didn't realize he was bound by perfectionism and a need to be in control. She came from an abusive home and struggled with insecurity and rejection—fertile ground for the enemy to try to destroy their relationship.

While their children were still quite young, Sarah came into a truly close relationship with the Lord and began receiving healing for her own problems. Then she determined to stand in the gap for her marriage.

"I set a special time to spend in my prayer closet very early each morning before my family got up," she said. "There I would meet with God in praise and worship, intercession and spiritual warfare. Sometimes just living with Wayne was such a spiritual battle I would be physically exhausted when it was time to pray—barely able to drag myself out of bed."

Sarah lived for this prayer time each day. For 12 years she prayed for what she called her "Christmas Miracle"—a breakthrough in her relationship with Wayne she felt the Lord had said would come at Christmastime. After 12 years of looking for its fulfillment, Sarah was about to put aside her hopes.

That year, in the Christmas Eve service, as their pastor was praying for the congregation, Sarah sensed God's power upon her and Wayne as they stood side by side.

"It was as if I saw and felt in the Spirit an anchor joining us together," she said. "I hugged Wayne close and knew something awesome was happening spiritually—as if God was making us truly one in Him.

"The next day, while driving in my car, I asked God what it meant. I'd expected a more tangible manifestation of my miracle. When I turned on the radio, the first song I heard was 'This is it—this is your miracle. This is it—what you've been waiting for.'

"God did bring my miracle, but it took nine more months to become fully evident in Wayne's personality. Gradually he became more loving and tender, more concerned for my needs. [And] he stopped shutting me out when I wanted to talk to him.

"We've been married 29 years, and we now have a beautiful, biblical relationship. We pray together each morning, we fast together once a week, and every night we pray the Scriptures over our children. My husband is healed and growing more passionately in love with the Lord (and with me) each day!"

Sarah knew her own efforts to change Wayne were hopeless. She chose the best route possible to see her marriage healed: First, she found her strength in God and allowed the Holy Spirit to change in her the attitudes and behaviors that needed changing to bring healing to her own heart; and second, she engaged in prayer and spiritual warfare that opened the way for the Lord to change her husband's stony heart.

An Abusive Marriage Saved

Carmen spent 20 years in what she called a "hellish" marriage, which she figures took place only because she became pregnant before the wedding. Her husband, Steve, would humiliate her and show no regard whatever for her feelings.

After 10 years of frustration, she had an affair with someone she met at church. "Of course I realize now how vulnerable and how badly deceived I was," she said.

"Before my lover's best friend exposed me, I decided to confess to Steve. When he asked why I had done it, I told him, 'Because you never tell me that you love me or that I am pretty. My lover did all the time. I was starving for someone to value me, to give me a sense of self-worth.'"

Carmen repented for her sin, made a new commitment to the Lord and began praying regularly. Once she asked God whether she could leave her marriage but felt His answer was no. God's challenge to her was, "Are you willing to be made willing to love your husband unconditionally? And to treat him with as much love and kindness as you would Me, the Lord Jesus?"

Her response was yes, she was willing to be loving and kind

even if she didn't receive love and kindness in return. But she felt the Lord would not require her to be treated like a doormat. So when Steve berated her, she would tell him firmly but kindly, "Don't talk to me like that—your attack is unwarranted."

When Carmen stopped lashing back at her husband's angry words, he saw he couldn't get into a fight and would back down. Then she would embrace him and say, "This behavior really is beneath you—I know you're a loving, caring man."

As a result of her new approach, she's not pouting anymore, and he's softening toward her. As she prays for strength and wisdom, the Lord helps her to respond in the appropriate spirit.

"If you're struggling even to desire to respond to your husband this way, ask God to give you a willing heart," Carmen says. "I would remember how valued and loved I felt by God; then I could give His love to my husband. Now I realize I will never receive my sense of value and self-worth from my husband—that comes only from God."

Women need to know that they do not deserve verbal abuse and do not have to tolerate it. If you are being victimized, tell your husband you will not respond to him as you have in the past—no more yelling back or giving him the silent treatment.

Explain that you want a good marriage but now you're requiring respect from him and establishing limits. When his behavior is inappropriate and unacceptable, tell him so firmly but kindly. You may need to take similar steps to protect your children, if your husband is verbally abusing them.

Don't blame yourself—it is not your fault. But it is wise to establish a plan for getting to a place of safety in case the abuse becomes physically threatening.

Pornography Threatens Marriages

We are dismayed by the growing numbers of women who tell us their husbands are involved with pornography. Many say they became aware something was wrong when their husbands began spending huge blocks of time at their home computers exploring the Internet. They would go online and connect to all kinds of sexually explicit programs under the pretext of “working on the computer.”

This kind of pattern is dangerous. Once hooked, a husband may begin staying away from home more and frequenting X-rated businesses. Or he may indulge his habit at home in the middle of the night. Though his “public face” is quite convincing, an astute wife knows an evil force is slowly shredding the very fabric of their family.

One woman awakened at 3 a.m. and discovered she was in bed alone. The Lord impressed her to go into the family room, and she found her husband (a deacon in their church) watching the pornographic cable channel.

A woman who stuck by her husband until he gained victory over pornography wrote us about her experience: “A few months after our wedding when I found my husband’s porn magazines, I considered leaving him. But after asking some friends to pray for me, I rededicated my life to Christ and began changing my own attitudes.

“My husband saw the difference and started going with me to church. Then he also began to change. But still there was strife during our intimate times.

“Twice he admitted he still had a problem with lust, and I threatened to leave. But he cried and said he’d kill himself if I did, so I stayed. He assured me he had ‘taken authority’ over the problem as a Christian and was now delivered from lust.

“The third time I found out he was still involved in pornography, I gave him a choice. Either he would agree to get

help and become accountable to another godly man, or I was leaving him. He knew I meant it this time.

“That evening, he confessed his problem to our pastor and asked for prayer. After he confessed, repented and through prayer was delivered from a spirit of lust, our relationship changed for the better.”

Based on her own experience, this woman feels a wife should confront her husband the very first time the problem of pornography is exposed. Delay only makes the matter worse. She believes because she put off the confrontation, it took her much longer to receive healing for herself and to be able to trust her husband again.

We advise you always to seek the Lord for His strategy on how best to broach this volatile subject. If God has allowed you to discover such a problem, He also will give you directions on how to deal with it appropriately.

Overall, marriage conflicts have no easy answers. But it is possible to build God-honoring relationships on a foundation of sacrificial love and a willingness to receive God’s help and healing.

In the process, both partners will undergo changes and grow stronger in their walks with the Lord. Though it’s not an easy road, the journey toward wholeness can begin for a couple even when only one partner takes the initiative to cooperate with God and practice a firm but loving approach to solving problems.

Quin Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock speak, write, and travel extensively, ministering to women around the world. They have co-authored several books, including A Woman’s Guide to Spiritual Warfare and How to Pray for Your Family and Friends. Adapted from A Woman’s Guide to Getting Through Tough Times by Quin Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock. Published by Servant Publications (1998). Used with permission.