

# Is There Hope for a Lasting Marriage?

**The following relationship advice will help you minimize marriage problems and avoid being a divorce statistic.**

By Dennis Rainey

A woman once shared with me her view of marriage:

*"It's as though I'm scanning a desert with a pair of binoculars. Everywhere I look I see bodies strewn about in various stages of death and dying -- divorce, isolation, abusive and decayed relationships, all types of devastation. After viewing this I ask myself, Why would I want to begin that journey?"*



Many students today are asking the same question. Although they deeply desire the security and joy of a lifelong relationship, they fear marriage. One new bride said in a *Newsweek* article: "I had watched my parents' marriage fall apart, and I didn't know if I could keep one together."<sup>1</sup>

## Results of High Divorce Rate Statistics

No generation reaching the age to marry has ever brought with it more baggage related to family breakdown. In the United States more than one million children each year experience the breakup of their families.<sup>2</sup>

A large number of students remember experiences like this:

**Mary:** One afternoon she came home from school and met her father coming out the door with a suitcase. He was leaving the family. "I'll be back to see you, Honey," he said. Mary's father kissed her on top of the head and left. She hasn't seen him since.

**Robert:** His parents divorced when he was five. He has lived with his mother who married three other men and drinks way too much. His first stepfather beat him up one time when Robert spilled a Coke in the car.

**Carrie:** Her parents are still married but heavily focused on their lucrative careers. Her dad and mom seldom attended her orchestra concerts during

high school, and now that she's away at college, she rarely speaks to either of them. When the family communicates, usually it's by email or messages on their answering machines.

**Philip:** During junior high Philip was awakened one night by the sounds of his parents arguing. He heard a crash and a scream. Philip found his mother in the kitchen bleeding from a knife wound. Philip called the police and they arrested his father. Philip, his mom, and two younger sisters went to live in a shelter. He doesn't know where his dad lives.



You probably know people like Mary, Robert, Carrie, and Philip. Your own experiences may be similar to theirs or even worse. Maybe your home boiled with conflict, disharmony, and unrest. As a result, you've thought a lot about whether you should get married -- you don't want to end up in a relationship filled with pain and disappointment, and cause an emotional earthquake in your own children. You like the idea of sharing your life with someone who loves you, but if you're honest, marriage is pretty scary. You may ask yourself, "Will I ever be able to get beyond the damage my family did to me? Will I be able to experience a happy and healthy marriage and family?"

**The answer is unequivocally yes.**

Since 1976 I have worked with an organization that helps families and have seen thousands of marriages succeed that looked hopeless. God has a way for broken people to experience whole relationships. More on that later.

## Marriage--Worth the Problems

With all the problems and pain, why do people still want to get married? Even though marriage receives so much bad press these days, walking the aisle is still very popular exercise. A recent Louis Harris survey found that 96% of college students want to marry or already are married. Ninety-seven per cent agreed with this statement -- "Having close family relationships is a key to happiness."<sup>3</sup>

So even though about one in four of American adults age eighteen and older are divorced,<sup>4</sup> the possibility of having a good, lasting marriage makes nearly everyone willing to give it a try. Just why is marriage so appealing?

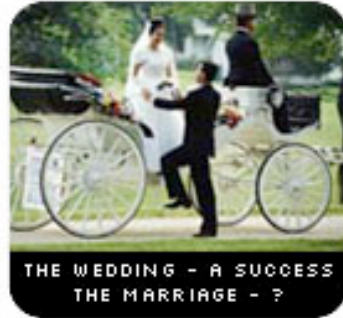
The truth is that no one wants to be alone. Although we make a big deal out of "doing our own thing" and insisting on individual rights, we all long for the security and warmth of an intimate relationship with someone who is crazy

about us. We may say we "want to be alone" and desire "some space," but our stronger desire is to share some space with someone who loves us.

And although sexual attraction is an important part of our desire for intimacy, these longings to connect deeply with another person are not just about sex. This fervent desire to be known and appreciated by someone else is how we were designed in the first place.

### Causes of Divorce Rate Statistics

Why is it then that so many people, who want and need to be close to someone, end up divorced, often filled with anger and disappointment? Many who marry attempt to achieve a strong, enduring bond based primarily on emotions. In most relationships the love and acceptance continue as long as the other person is meeting a certain level of expectation. If the feelings are warm, a husband and wife can enjoy one another's company, overlook a partner's troubling or annoying traits, communicate adequately, and still express affection.



But when the feelings cool, one or both find they have no reserves or capability to love an obviously imperfect person. Now needs are not met, which causes hurt, which promotes defensiveness, which reduces positive communication, which heightens misunderstanding, which provokes conflict, which fuels anger and bitterness. If forgiveness and reconciliation do not break this downward spiral, the ability to love one another is paralyzed.

This pattern in nearly all relationships may be avoided for awhile as long as the tough issues that provoke selfishness do not exist or are obscured. But sooner or later reality hits. In spite of a couple's best intentions, they eventually realize that two independent people cannot both have all of their needs met all of the time.

### Relationship Advice--How to Avoid Marriage Problems

For a relationship to succeed, teamwork is required and both persons need to deny many of their personal wishes. Self-sacrifice must replace selfishness. Sometimes one person in the marriage can do this reasonably well, but eventually patience runs out. Self-sacrifice is not natural; selfishness is. **Why is this so?**

If we lived in a world where people were perfect, then their marriages would hum along in total harmony, just the way God wanted marriage to work in the first place. But we don't live in a perfect world. Quite honestly all of us are

affected by our tendency toward selfishness and "sin." What is sin? We often choose to do the wrong things not the right things. We can be selfish, mean, hurtful, bitter, arrogant, unwilling to forgive, and so on. It's no wonder husbands and wives struggle to get along.

An I-want-my-needs-met attitude in relationships breaks down a necessary spirit of cooperation. The negative cycle begins and continues until intimacy is lost and a marriage begins to crumble.

Let's face it, we all need help -- some inner strength that enables us to love another person the way we must if a marriage is going to have a chance.

Our selfish, sinful behavior not only separates a husband and a wife, but it also separates us from God -- our greatest source of help. As the Originator and Designer of marriage, He knows how relationships work. He wants us to first have a relationship with Him, and then look to Him for direction.

Not only does God help us with problems and challenges we face on a daily basis, but He also offers healing for scars and wounds we have collected from the past. For instance, He provides complete forgiveness and cleansing from wrong choices we may have made as teenagers in a relationship with the opposite sex. God loves us and wants us to enjoy the benefits of being His child, which include His help in our marriage.

I would like to illustrate this with two scenarios involving a typical husband and wife. In the first example, our couple (I'll call them Jon and Lisa) do not acknowledge any dynamic involvement of God in their lives. In Scenario B, Jon and Lisa have more than a relationship with each other, they also have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

### Possible Marriage Problems--Scenario A:

It's Saturday morning and Jon wants to play golf with his buddies. He rolls out of bed and tells Lisa that he's leaving and won't be back until about 4 p.m. Lisa complains, "You promised we could go on a picnic today!"

"I never said that," Jon says, his voice on edge. "Anyway, I haven't played golf in two weeks. It's a beautiful day. I'm out of here." Jon slams the door on the way out.

Lisa feels snubbed and after shedding some tears, she stomps angrily through the apartment and throws the pillows on the couch across the room.



"I'll show you, Jerk," she yells. She calls a girlfriend and makes a date to go out for lunch and some shopping. At the mall Lisa buys \$300 worth of new clothes -- she needed a new outfit, but by buying a few "extra" things she knows Jon will hit the roof. Their credit card is now nearly maxed out.

Meanwhile, Jon is finishing his golf round. He stops with his buddies for a drink at the golf club bar. One drink soon leads to two. Jon notices how attractive the waitress is. As the young woman is giving Jon his third drink, he whispers a flattering remark in her ear. The woman acts insulted, but her smile indicates that Jon has scored some points. The next time she returns, he notices her phone number on the napkin placed under his drink. Jon tucks the paper in his pocket.



Jon arrives home at 5 p.m., walking with a bit of a wobble. Lisa is watching TV with the volume turned high. He notices a pile of packages on the couch. Angrily he switches off the TV and points at the packages. Lisa swears at him and walks to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. They argue far into the night. Jon ends up sleeping in the guest bedroom.

### **Possible Marriage Problems--Scenario B:**

It's Saturday morning and Jon wants to play golf with his buddies. He rolls out of bed and tells Lisa that he's leaving and won't be back until about 4 p.m. Lisa acts surprised and says, "I thought we were going on a picnic today!"

"Oh, can't we do that tomorrow?" Jon says, his voice on edge. "Anyway, I haven't played golf in two weeks. It's such a beautiful day. I'm out of here!" Jon shuts the door hard on the way out.

Lisa feels snubbed and after shedding some tears, she stomps angrily through the apartment and throws the pillows on the couch across the room.

"You jerk!" she yells, wishing she could tell Jon to his face just how angry she feels.

Lisa decides to go for a walk, and by the time she passes through a park, her hurt and anger are subsiding. On her way back home she's able to pray, "Dear Jesus, I'm really mad at Jon and think he's being selfish. Please help me not to be selfish, too, and let my anger get out of control."

Lisa decides to call a girlfriend and they make a date for an early lunch and some shopping. While at the mall, Lisa buys a new outfit.

Meanwhile, Jon is finishing the front nine of his golf round. He and his buddies stop for a sandwich and drink at the club snack bar. Jon notices how pretty the girl behind the counter is, but he just gives her a friendly smile and walks to join his friends. Earlier this morning Jon had thought Lisa was pretty whiney and clutching on to him -- unfairly wanting to keep him from a good time with his buddies. But now Jon feels guilty for how he treated her. He's not enjoying himself.

"Hey guys," Jon announces, "I'm going to quit for today and go home. I need to spend some time with Lisa." Two of his friends tease him, but Jon sticks with his decision.

When Lisa gets home at 1 p.m., she's surprised to find Jon sitting at the kitchen table. She notices the picnic basket is out and half-filled with food and drinks.

"Why are you home so early?" she asks, the hurt still evident in her voice.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted this morning," Jon says. "I wanted to play golf and didn't care about your needs. I guess I was being kind of selfish. Will you forgive me?"

Lisa bites her lip. She's still hurt, but Jon looks like he's really sorry. And it's pretty incredible that he quit his golf round early. "Yes, I forgive you," Lisa says quietly.

As they hug, Jon says, "Could we kind of start this day over? I came home early thinking we might still have time for that picnic? Do you want to go?"

Lisa resists the temptation to pout and make Jon "pay." Instead she smiles and nods her head.

The day turns around for both Jon and Lisa. The anger has been cleansed from both of them. Their relationship feels as fresh as the earth after a spring shower. In both of their lives Jesus has been at work, first showing them how to live and then giving them the strength to deny themselves and forgive -- two actions essential to love but very difficult to do consistently and authentically without help.

Of course these two scenarios offer just a surface view of a complicated interpersonal situation, but they do illustrate why God's involvement individually in the lives of a husband, wife, and their marriage makes such a difference. The Christian faith is not simply a collection of principles and rules -- it's a living, moment-to-moment interaction with God through which we receive guidance and power to live life the way it was designed to be lived.



## To Avoid Being a Divorce Statistic--Listen to God's Word

God is very clear in the Bible about the destruction of divorce, about the need to humbly consider the other person's needs above our own, about being truthful with each other, about avoiding sexual immorality, and much more. But being told what to do does not necessarily mean we will want to do it. His guidance is often different from what we would feel like doing (for example, telling your spouse the truth at a time when lying would appear very useful). But repeatedly couples have found how wise God is, and how smart it is to trust and follow His blueprints for building relationships.

For example, God still says that marriage needs to come before sexual intimacy. Yet in our culture 64% of college students in a poll agreed with this statement -- "Living together as a couple before getting married is a good idea."<sup>5</sup> Many of these students watched their parents' marriages fall apart and reason that "trying out" the relationship seems like a good idea.



So why does God put marriage before sexual involvement? Because He wants us to experience lasting, fulfilling intimacy. How can two people feel secure enough to be totally vulnerable -- a requirement for deep intimacy -- in an environment where either person can bail out at any time? Research shows that the divorce rate is actually higher among those who live together before marrying later.<sup>6</sup> God's wisdom is unerring, it's always right. And always God's directions come from His caring, protective love for us.

But God does not merely want to be a marriage counselor, dispensing advice into our lives. He wants us to know Him, to be in relationship with Him, and to trust Him. In order to faithfully love someone else, He says we first need to experience His unconditional, faithful love for us.

Prompted by His love for us, God did something remarkable on our behalf. We've talked about how our selfishness separates us from one another, and it especially separates us from God who is holy and perfect. The Bible says "your sin has made a separation between you and your God."<sup>7</sup> No amount of good deeds or effort on our part can erase our sin before God's eyes. Worse, there is a penalty for our sin...death. It means eternal separation from God, even after our earthly life. And there is nothing we can do to fix it. His standards require perfection, and we don't measure up. However, God's justice is accompanied by His tremendous love for us -- demonstrated by the solution He provided.

Jesus Christ, who is God in human form, came to pay the penalty of death

for our sins. Jesus also came to teach us God's ways and to give us a meaningful life. But primarily He said His purpose for coming as a man was to die in our place. He fully paid for all of our sins -- my sins, yours, the whole world's -- when hanging on a cross (a Roman form of execution), so we may be forgiven. After being buried for three days, Jesus physically came back to life. Many eyewitnesses went on to tell the world about Him and the life God offers us.

## To Overcome Marriage Problems--First, Start a Relationship with God

It is not up to us to work for God's acceptance. He offers us a relationship with Him as a free gift. It is our choice whether we want to receive His forgiveness and enter into a relationship with Him. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>8</sup> He wants to come into our lives, but again, it's an individual decision we need to make. If marriage is a significant decision, this is even more so. Do you want to have an eternal relationship with God and allow Him influence in your life? Do you want to be guided by His wisdom and supported by His strength?

If so, you can ask Him into your life right now. Just as a couple are not married until they actually make that public commitment of "I will," beginning a relationship with God is also a knowledgeable act of the will. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door [of your heart] and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in."<sup>9</sup> The Bible says, "But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God."<sup>10</sup>

Would you like to know God's love for you and ask Him into your heart? This might be a way you can express that to Him: "Lord Jesus, I want you in my life. I want you to guide me, and forgive me for all of my sins. Thank you for paying for my sins on the cross. I now ask you to come into my life. Thank you for your promise that you would come into my life, if I opened the door, which I am now doing. Thank you that now I can begin to really know you. Amen."

If you sincerely prayed this, you have begun a relationship with God. What effect can this have on your marriage problems? You *can* have a love-filled marriage. Like all husbands and wives, you will make many mistakes and sometimes you will need to exert strenuous effort to have a great marriage. But, as you rely on Him, God will give you the strength and vision needed to love your mate in a selfless, forgiving manner and experience a lasting marriage.

**Dennis Rainey** is director of FamilyLife, a division of Campus Crusade for Christ. He is also an author and is host of the radio program "FamilyLife Today." He and his wife, Barbara, have six children.

- (1) Kendall Hamilton and Pat Wingert, "Down the Aisle," *Newsweek*, 20 July 1998, p. 54.
  - (2) John J. Dilulio, Jr., "Deadly Divorce," *National Review*, 7 April 97.
  - (3) "Generation 2001: A Survey of the First College Graduating Class of the New Millennium," conducted in 1997-1998 by Louis Harris and Associates for Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, 720 E. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53202, pp. 8, 11.
  - (4) Dilulio, Jr., "Deadly Divorce."
  - (5) *Generation 2001: A Survey*, p. 11.
  - (6) Shervert H. Frazier, *Psychotrends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 106
  - (7) Isaiah 59:2
  - (8) John 14:6
  - (9) Revelation 3:20
  - (10) John 1:12
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