

The Good News About Marriage

Gen. 2:18-25

Introduction

Often when we talk about marriage and divorce it can be discouraging. It can be discouraging to single people who want to be married. It can be discouraging to divorced people who often feel guilt and bad memories. It can even be discouraging to married people because it seems like it always ends up making us feel like we are not doing enough.

By the way, we're going to be using the "D-word" a lot today. But we'll not make a habit of it.

I want this lesson to be an encouragement to you, no matter your marital status or history. Even though our cultural myths and pressures weigh on us. Our own experience, childhood examples, and personal baggage make a great marriage seem like a remote possibility. And the ultimately high standards of Scripture can seem unattainable.

There is good news!

The resource behind this lesson is: *The Good News About Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths About Marriage and Divorce* by Shaunti Feldhahn.

For starters, let's answer a few questions: What is the overall divorce rate in our country? _____ What is the divorce rate within the church? _____

Background Passage:

Gen. 2:18-25 – ¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰And 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.

²¹So 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. ²²And the LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

²³And 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." ²⁴For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

This is God's institution of the institution. Note that verse 24 is repeated three other times in the Bible: Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7-8, Ephesians 5:31. It is

pretty rare for God to include something in the Bible four times. (That puts this passage in the same company as "The just shall live by faith.")

What is the "cause" in verse 24? _____

Knowing that God instituted marriage as His general plan for all of us, we have the first part of the biblical foundation set. Now on to the contrary matter.

Malachi 2:16 – "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."

God's position on divorce is also clear. He hates it. This isn't to beat down those who have been divorced. I bet that nearly everyone who is divorced would also agree with God's thoughts on the matter. I suspect the only ones who love divorce are divorce attorneys.

So the clear biblical truth is that God created marriage for our good, and that He hates divorce. To summarize His position on the matter, "Get married. Stay married."

The Word on the Street

Earlier I asked you to answer the questions about the divorce rate in the US and within the church. You answered exactly as I expected.

How does your answer make you feel about marriage? _____

Does it make you try harder? Does it give you an out?

We've been told those statistics for years by experts in every field, and even by those in ministry. Here are a few quotes I found quickly on the internet:

"However, about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher." – The American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>)

"50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce, according to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri." (<http://www.divorcepad.com/rate/>)

Show the DailyInfographic graphic. (<http://dailyinfographic.com/divorce-in-america-infographic>)

The problem is, they're wrong. In fact, they're very wrong. And that wrong information is hurting marriages.

What are some possible outcomes of thinking that half of all marriages end in divorce? _____

“The sense that ‘We probably won’t make it,’ is itself one reason why some marriages *don’t* make it. The couple thinks, ‘Well, at least we have a lot of company,’ instead of ‘Most marriages make it and we can, too.’” Feldhahn, p. 15.

Further, some don’t marry. They wonder, “Why bother?”

In addition, the general consensus is that most marriages are not happy, and that also demoralizes those who are married and drives others to avoid it.

And there is a myth that marriages in the church are no better off than those outside the church.

And finally, there’s even worse news for those who are remarried.

The Facts (From the book)

Divorce Rate:

“The current divorce rate is nowhere near 50% and has never been close to the 50% mark.”

“According to the Census Bureau in 2009, 72% of people are still married to their first spouse.” (Note that the 28% number would also include those widowed.) And “looking at all marriages (including second and third marriages) among women, just 30.8% have ended in divorce.”

Better estimate is 20% to 25%.

Rate peaked in 1981 and has been declining ever since. (Estimate of approximately 37% at that time.)

Demographic Factors for Divorce:

The following factors increase the likelihood for divorce:

- Marry young (teens and young twenties)
- Don’t go to college
- Live together before marriage
- Do not attend religious services together

“Those who get married in their mid-twenties or later, go to college, don’t cohabit first, and/or worship together could realistically have a 5% to 10% divorce rate.”

“By and large, the greatest spike in divorces occurs not with the infamous ‘seven year itch’ but with those who never make it to their fifth anniversary.”

Happiness in Marriage:

There’s a strong sense that few marriages are happy.

Q – Are you, personally, generally happy in your marriage these days and enjoying being married? *Yes! Yes, most of the time. It depends – sometimes yes, sometimes no. Not really. No! I am really unhappy!*

71% (34%+37%) were both at least happy, and at least one said “Yes!”

“Around 80% of marriages are happy, with around 30% being very happy!”

Q – Do you think you married the right person, or not? Yes (95%) No (5%)

Q – Would you marry the same person if you had to do it over again? Yes (93%) No (7%)

“The vast majority (93% or more) are glad they married their spouse and would do it all over again—including those who had at one time considered divorce.”

But what if you’re not happy? Should you give up?

“Two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later.”

“Among those who rated their marriages as **very** unhappy, almost eight out of ten who avoided divorce were happily married five years later.”

“Marriage may require hard work, but that doesn’t mean that most marriages are hard. For most couples, marriage is the most delightful earthly relationship they will ever know.”

Faith and Marriage:

“The notion that ‘the divorce rate is the same in the church as in the general public’ is not true.”

Q – Do you regularly attend church with your spouse?

“...when a person attends church, it lowers their chances of divorce by roughly 25% to 50% compared to those who don’t attend.”

Barna in 2008 – “Divorce rate drops 27% among churchgoers.”

Brad Wilcox’s National Survey of Families and Households – “Divorce rate drops by 50% among churchgoers, and most of that is due to church attendance, not other factors.”

Q – Is God at the center of your marriage?

“...among couples where both the husband and the wife agreed that ‘God is at the center of our marriage,’ fully 53% were at the highest possible level of marital happiness!” And 40% were happy. Only 7% were struggling.

“A FamilyLife survey of more than 50 churches found an average overall divorce rate in those churches of 22.4%, and because this survey had a higher-than-normal sample of high-risk baby boomers, the actual average divorce rate for church-goers is likely to be lower.”

Q – Do you pray together with your spouse?

“A FamilyLife and PREPARE/ENRICH assessment of 7,700 married people found that 68% of highly connected couples said they prayed together regularly and that 73% of highly disconnected couples said they didn’t.”

Bottom line: The divorce rate in the church is 25% to 50% lower than among those who don’t attend worship services, and those who prioritize their faith and/or pray together are dramatically happier and more connected.

God Is a Redeemer of Marriages!

First of all, let’s look at the percentage of marriages that are first, second, and subsequent: (US Census Bureau 2009)

First – 80.5%, Second – 15.8%, Third – 3.8%

Remember the mythical statistics I quoted in the first section:

“50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce, according to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield, Missouri.”
(<http://www.divorcepad.com/rate/>)

Many quote the stats from Jennifer Baker above, but she says, “Unfortunately, those statistics are not mine, and even though I have asked the website to remove my name as a source, I’ve been unable to get them to do so.”

Another quoted source, a 2006 Census Bureau table, is used to support 60% and 73% divorce rate for 2nd and 3rd marriages. On investigation, a Census Bureau staff member said, “Those aren’t our numbers. We did look, but they’re just not there. The Census Bureau is quoted as being the source for a million things incorrectly.”

Here’s another funny one:

“46 of every 100 marriages today is a remarriage for one or both partners (US. Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Of the remarriages, 24 are a remarriage for both persons.” Association of Marriage and Family Ministries
(<http://www.amfmonline.com/articles/templates/templateamfm.asp?articleid=134&zoneid=5>)

There is no such agency as the US Bureau of Statistics.

Why such discouraging information aimed at remarried people?

The same census information that showed that 71% of women are still married to their first spouse, shows that 65% who are remarried are still married to their second spouse. (And note that since those marriages would naturally start at an older age on average, they are even more likely to end in the death of their second spouse versus divorce.) (Because of that, it’s possible that the divorce rate among second marriages is actually lower than first!)

Even third marriages end in divorce or death much less often than 50% (41% or 25% (female versus male)).

Overall, the divorce rate among second marriages is likely around 6% more than first marriages.

As in first marriages, second marriage divorce rate peaks in the fourth year.

Overall, roughly one in four first marriages end in divorce, and one in three second marriages end in divorce.

Relevant fact: If you check Facebook once an hour, a University of Missouri researcher says you’re likely to experience “[negative relationship outcomes such as cheating](#), breakup and divorce.” – Jim Dennison

Things That Most Often Cause Unhappiness in Marriages

When we talk about marriage difficulties, we often talk about how financial problems are the single most common cause of divorce. And there are the much less frequent “big ticket” issues of addictions, serious emotional problems due to childhood abuse, or unfaithfulness. But in every one of those cases, both with the exceptional major issues, and the nearly ubiquitous challenges of limited funds and other common problems, the success or failure of the marriage really boils down to much more fundamental principles. **It’s not the issues, it’s how we respond to them.**

Q – Do you care about your spouse, and want the best for them, even during painful times?

Fact #1 – More than 99% of spouses deeply care about each other. Even in troubled marriages 97% would say they care about the other spouse and want the best for them.

Fact #2 – Their mate doesn’t always believe it. In the same survey, in marriages that were troubled, only 59% believed their spouse cared about them.

“That gap is a major reason for all the unnecessary unhappiness and angst in marriage.”

Remember what we discovered a few years ago when we studied 1 Corinthians 13:7.

1 Corinthians 13:4, 7 – ⁴Love ... ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In their research for *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriage* they found that one of the most important characteristics of the happiest spouses is that they “try to believe the best of their spouse’s intentions even when they have been hurt.”

Happy spouses believe the best anyway.

What are the actions and attitudes that determine the best chances for happiness in marriage?

It’s amazing to me as I look at the data how God’s Word addresses core marital issues so wonderfully.

Ephesians 5:33 – ³³Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

Q - What is the one most important thing you wish your spouse knew?

When they performed the surveys when writing *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*, they gave the husbands and wives an open-ended question and blank space to answer it: “What is the one most important thing you wish your spouse knew?”

The top answer for men were focused on “how much I love her.” The top answer for women conveyed that “he is my hero.”

That is love and respect!

Remember earlier we discovered that in 78% of all marriages, both spouses reported they were at least happy, and at least one of them claimed to be very happy. Let’s look at the remaining 22% of “struggling marriages.”

Fact #3 – In 82% of those struggling marriages, one spouse is unaware that their partner is not happy! And remember from our earlier data that of the very unhappy couples, in five years, those who stuck with the marriage were happily married. That suggests that the issues the unhappily married couples were dealing with were not deep-rooted and highly complex.

These facts should give us hope, since “it would seem to be far easier to get one slightly oblivious and one hurting person to change than to get two people entrenched in anger and hurt to change.”

In most cases, the solution is centered on the husband learning how to love his wife, and the wife learning how to respect her husband.

For example:

Wife –

- Saying “thank you” (important to 98% of men)
- Recognize the self-doubt he has inside (like 75% of men)
- See that physical intimacy is primarily an emotional need (97% of men)

Husband –

- Recognizing that your 70-hour work week to support the family is not nearly as important as ensuring the two of you are close (70% of women)
- Pulling yourself out of a funk when you are in a bad mood (97% of women)
- Reassuring her that “we’re OK” when you are in conflict (like 95% of women)

Obviously, the solutions to most of our marital problems are simple, if not easy. And there is great hope for every one of us, that with some relatively minor changes in our behavior toward one another, we can change our marriages dramatically for the better.

Conclusion:

There is hope! The statistics are not nearly as bad as we have heard. And the pathway to marital happiness is likely much simpler than you think.

After our next series, we’ll return to this topic, and look more specifically at the small things we can do to ensure our marriages are very happy.

Additional Data:

[Celebrity marriages](#) are reflections of the culture that makes them celebrities. According to *The Economist*, the typical American marriage lasts eight years. There are exceptions to the apparent rule: Mark Harmon and Pam Dawber have been married for 27 years; Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson have been married for 26 years, as have Michael J. Fox and Tracy Pollan. Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward were married 50 years.

God often uses marriage as a metaphor for his relationship with his people (see the Book of Hosea; Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 19:7-10). Here's one reason: a wedding does not make a marriage. Just because a couple pledged their lives to each other does not guarantee they will keep that pledge. Yesterday's promise must be today's commitment.