

## Part Two: Surrender and Acceptance



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### Struggling with God

My spiritual questioning would have been less intense had it not been for the many prayers I said to save our marriage. Throughout our married life, and especially during the final years together, we prayed as husband and wife. I put my hand on Sophie's head and asked God for healing. *The healing did not come.* During moments of reconciliation and marriage renewal, we promised each other to try harder and hoped that through the power of forgiveness, God would give our marriage a new beginning and bestow His grace upon us. *The grace did not come.* Until the day of our separation, I urged God to intervene, perform a miracle and save our marriage. *The help did not come.* When Social Services removed Sophie from the family, my last hope evaporated.

Although the departure was a relief for all of us, it triggered a turning point in my spiritual life. Searching the Bible for answers, I read:

Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. For whoever asks, receives, whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted. What father among you will give his son a snake if he asks for a fish or hand him a scorpion if he asks for an egg? If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Luke 11:9-13 NAB).

It was this very verse that triggered my spiritual collapse. After fervently asking God for help — and being denied — I could no longer contain my anger and considered the promises in the Bible as nothing more than empty fables. In a fury of madness, I grabbed the Book and with great force threw it against the wall. “Who can believe that stuff,” I cried? “Empty promises at best.”

Until then, I believed that every word written in the Bible was a promise from God to mankind. I took the teaching at face value and expected results. As the divorce moved closer to reality and the children got involved in illegal activities, I wondered why such promises were recorded if they didn’t work. After all, I asked for a fish and got a snake; I wanted an egg and received a scorpion. I felt I could no longer trust the very God in whom I had put my full faith. The long walks in the evening, when I was in communications with God, turned into questioning if He even existed.

I finally picked up the wounded book from the floor and parked it on a shelf, this time for good. The pages crumpled but the binding stayed intact. I’m glad that the book held fast because I had made many worthwhile notes during my fifteen years of Scripture reading.

The late Mother Teresa also struggled spiritually. Her secret letters reveal that she spent most of her years without sensing the presence of God and wrote, “Where is my faith? Even deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. If there be a God, [then] please forgive me... I am told God lives in me — and yet the reality of darkness, coldness, and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul... I want God with all the power of my soul, and yet between us there is terrible separation... I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing.”

During this time of struggle, a woman of Sikh religion gave me a shroud with the face of Jesus stitched on rugged cloth. "I made it myself," she proudly proclaimed. *It's a beautiful piece of art that must have taken her a long time to complete*, I thought, *but what should I do with it? After all, I asked Jesus to restore our marriage and He didn't.* Not wanting to be rude, I accepted the cloth, framed it, and placed it in my bedroom. Today it reminds me that we are never alone.

Walking through Robert Burnaby Park close to our house, I noticed a fallen tree in dense bush. Out of the tree stem grew five new trees that were strong and soared up to heaven. I stopped to look at this strange configuration and realized that God was telling me a message: "The tree had to be felled to create new life; so be of good cheer." Mahatma Gandhi<sup>8</sup> once said: "A man with a grain of faith in God never loses hope, because he *ever* believes in the ultimate triumph of truth."

## **Betrayal Barrier**

When something goes terribly wrong and the hurt pierces to the very core of our heart, many believers enter what is called the *betrayal barrier*. The journey begins by examining the purpose of life and exploring if God is real. Little did I know that I was entering this long and dark tunnel myself. It was a journey that took several years to pass through. I did not realize that this passage was a one-way street with no return. The experience was so powerful that it awakened in me a new spiritual understanding. For lack of a better word, I called this a "rebirth."

During the long and strenuous passage through the tunnel I felt helpless and dependent, but was never alone. Someone was walking with me, watching over me, giving me guidance and encouragement. When I finally stepped out of the abyss on the other side, my family and friends were waiting for me, and welcomed me back with open arms. The world looked friendly again and greeted me with sunshine and warmth. My son Todd encouraged me to play the piano again and I found great enjoyment doing so. My faith took on a new dimension, a self-realization that there was a God after all. This occurred under a new covenant: I saw a Creator who gives us freedom to choose, permits suffering and allows us to fall. I also learned that God puts His loving arms around us when we walk in darkness to prevent us from drowning.

Chuck Colson, founder of the *Prison Fellowship Ministries*, says, “Only when we are powerless can we see the strength of God. . . I am convinced that the best things God does are the things that grow out of our weakness and desperation.” In 2 Corinthians 12:10 the Apostle Paul writes, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” The nineteenth century Preacher C. H. Spurgeon left us this meaningful reflection behind:

We are not strong when we compliment ourselves upon our ability. We are strong when, under a sense of absolute inability, we depend wholly upon God. Only the seed, which the Creator puts into the hand of our weakness, will produce a harvest.

C. H. Spurgeon

The passage through the betrayal barrier made me bold and fearless. *What is there to lose*, I thought. *Sink or Swim!* The time in the gutter helped me become a better person and a stronger leader. Ernest Hemingway writes, “The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, some are strong at the broken places.” I like to believe that I became strong at these broken places.

I see the betrayal barrier as *puberty*, a critical passage from childhood to adulthood. As a child we absorb everything that is taught and we believe it. Passing through the teenage years, we begin questioning old rules and challenge the value system. We revolt against authority and seek a new way of life. Only when we grow into adulthood do we regain equilibrium. As puberty forms the bridge from childhood to adulthood, so also does the betrayal barrier provide spiritual maturity, a new underpinning and a self-realization that there is a God.

Coming out of the darkness into daylight, I began to appreciate the little gifts in life. Material things that were important before no longer had the same appeal. An inner joy formed; an awareness of having conquered darkness. I began walking tall above the debris of the broken pieces that lay shattered at my feet, and accepted the notion that the cracks can never be filled again. Leonard Cohen got it bang on in his song that says, *Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*

## **Forgiving Sophie**

Forgiveness was easy during our good times together. This changed when Sophie became uncontrollable and started the frivolous spending spree. Her conniving conduct and blatant disrespect towards me placed a solid wedge between us. I was no longer in the right frame of mind to forgive. Nor could I forgive during the court hearings when we fought tooth and nail over the family assets and business ownership. Sophie's generous divorce settlement, the court-mandated maintenance payments, and her careless squandering of this hard-earned money posed a further hindrance in granting forgiveness.

Today I know that her abrasive behavior and big spending spree were connected to the manic phase of her illness. She no longer has the financial freedom she once enjoyed. The money is long gone and she must depend on my monthly contributions. She has seen me pull through hard times and noted the many bumps and bruises I received along the way. My in-laws now say that she is sorry for what happened and regrets the divorce. By humbling herself my anger towards her turned to compassion and it became easier for me to forgive.

Would I have been able to forgive had she continued with the insults and disrespect towards me? God knows our stubborn nature and asks us to forgive unconditionally. Forgiving is hard, especially if we have been crushed to the depth of our soul and clemency seems impossible. Credit goes to those who try in spite of the impossible.

Forgiveness does not mean reconciliation, a new friendship, or a restored marriage. Sophie and I will always live separate lives. Nor does forgiveness mean approval of what had been done. The opinions can be miles apart and the parties may never see eye-to-eye. Forgiveness is giving the past over to God, clearing the debris out of the way, and going on with life.

I could not forgive Sophie. Then I began including her in my prayer and a miracle happened! The dark obstacles lifted and my negative thoughts about her evaporated like snow in spring. I saw her as a person again, a human being who has feelings and yearns to be loved and accepted.

If you are unable to forgive, start praying for the aggressor. Total forgiveness may only be possible with prayer because petition removes the chains and sets us free. Being able to forgive brings an eerie feeling of inner joy that has never been experienced before. It is as if God wants to reward us for doing something that seems impossible.

The harder the act of forgiveness, the greater the blessing will be. The Lord has a way of measuring the depth of suffering and then returning more than we asked. The person who does the forgiving will be the true victor.

### **Altered Level of Consciousness**

Folks are at a loss in what to do when visiting a mentally ill person. They see the frustration that the healthy spouse experiences in caring for a sick partner and realize how little they can do to help. In many ways, mental infirmity is more devastating than a physical illness because an unsound mind robs a person of the ability to think clearly, respond normally, and behave in a socially acceptable manner.

Uncertain what to expect, many acquaintances hesitate to call on a mentally ill patient. This, however, shouldn't be an excuse to stay home. When visiting, the caller should remember three basic rules: First, a psychiatric disorder does not heal like a physical wound. Second, the patient may be in denial and does not admit having an affliction. But the most important third rule is understanding that the ill person is a human being who seeks love and acceptance in a world that has become estranged.

The visitor may find the patient behaving absolutely normal. He or she is jovial, optimistic, and wants to conquer the world. This ecstasy may only be a fragile veneer that can easily be broken with a careless remark. At another call, the ill person may be cold and aloof. Comforting doesn't help, and rather than accepting empathy, the patient may blame the visitors, thinking they are the villains who have come to bring anguish. He or she may utter inappropriate remarks, putting the guests on the spot and making them uncomfortable. And then, there are times when the patient is so depressed that he or she doesn't want to socialize. The caller must accept the condition of the day and exercise patience. Lending a listening ear is always the best contribution one can make.

When Sophie was living on her own after the divorce, Frank and Mary paid a visit to the apartment she managed by herself. They expected to be welcomed cordially, as they had always been when visiting our home in Burnaby. But instead of being received with the customary smile, Sophie made slanderous remarks. In her confused mind she thought the friends had come to plot against her and cause physical harm. Luckily, her condition has since improved and she enjoys a close circle of friends again.

Not all folks with mental illness are paranoid. Many do well living in a caring community. Accepting the illness and taking the prescribed medication is key to achieving stability. Equally, if not more important, is the human touch. Dr. Frank Ayd (1920-2008), a psychiatrist who studied early antipsychotic and the use of antidepressant drugs said, "Medication is no substitute for compassion, nor does it replace patience and lending an attentive ear." Hearing these words from the architect of antidepressant drugs is refreshing in a world that relies so heavily on pharmaceutical products.

The Christian community strongly disapproves of divorce. One hears of moving testimonials of couples who have stayed married in spite of debilitating illnesses, such as paralysis, blindness, brain injury, cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. They want to keep the family together at all cost, even if it means caring for the spouse 24 hours a day. They say that divorce is never an option, and believe that God will give them the grace and strength to make a seemingly insurmountable task possible.

When the movie *A Beautiful Mind* opened in December 2001, the mental health community called it a winner. It tells a story of a Nobel Prize-winning mathematician who suffered from schizophrenia. He eventually overcame the disability and returned to his career as a brilliant university professor. The tireless support of his wife drew applause from families in similar situations. Alicia, who loved and always believed in her husband, took on the role as breadwinner, monitored his medication and refused to give up even when his prognosis looked hopeless. Such a turnaround would not have been possible had she dumped him.

As we applaud Alicia as the real hero of the story, we secretly question whether we could do the same, especially with children involved. Watching someone else's story unfold on screen hardly touches the day-to-day frustrations, tears and fears of actually living the saga. I should mention that Hollywood got creative and added some coloration for the sake of the box-office.

### **Friends that Help and Hinder**

Throughout our family crisis I kept in touch with my good friends and asked them for guidance. Being a practicing Christian, I gravitated towards folks with a conservative view. I perceived them as the wiser bunch with the right answers. However, when my

problems continued and they kept insisting that divorce was wrong, I changed my mind and went my own way. Keeping a dysfunctional marriage alive for the sake of religious rules began troubling me. As we began diverting further in our thinking, I started to realize that people who never had to endure deep hardship could not effectively guide those traveling on a difficult road. They assume, “For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7).

“Tell the Lord what you need and He will answer your prayer,” they encouraged me. “Join our church and God will melt away your problems. The Bible promises so.” At first, I took these supportive words to heart and let my hopes rise, only to be crushed again, worse than before.

“You are not praying right,” my Christian friend objected. “Or perhaps you have disobeyed God’s commands. The Lord will help.” After a while, these comments began to annoy me. *What experience do these folks have in advising me on marriage and divorce when they’ve never had to crash-land a plane with engines on fire*, I thought. I began brushing off their advice as goodwill gestures and kept looking for more practical answers.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the great French philosopher and mathematician, once said that there are only two types of people in the world: The *seekers* and the *non-seekers*. I am a *seeker*, and being at a crossroad I could no longer accept textbook answers as the be-all and end-all solutions to life. I searched for a deeper meaning — a way of life that lay outside the well-traveled path of the ordinary.

My friends noticed my change and tried to prop up my falling faith by quoting Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Although well intentioned, this was the worst possible time to recite this verse. The words crashed down upon me like a ton of bricks. “God working for the good of those who love him?” I wanted to scream. “What possible good does a mental illness have that tears a family apart? Who in the world would put such a text in the Bible? Unrealistic and nonsense at best!”

Bible verses do help people in trouble, but let me advise the reader to go easy on them. Quoting scriptural verses when someone’s mind is in a knot can be perceived as preaching from the hilltops. Instead, lift up the troubled person by sympathizing with them and giving hope. Find examples of other families that have made it through the

crisis. Most importantly, give love and support by being there and allowing the person to express his or her feelings. By doing so, you put biblical teaching to work rather than preaching it.

A divorce is one of the most difficult trials a human faces. The helping friend must be strong, practical, and not be overcome by emotion. He or she must *respond* rather than *react* to the situation. When divorce draws closer, you, as the mediator, should guide the person to the next step. This may include finding a good lawyer and a new place to live. It might also mean talking to the children and explaining to them that these steps are necessary. A confirming voice from a mature adult outside the home will moderate their fears. This is especially important when they see their beloved Mom or Dad leave or being taken away by the authorities, forever altering their lives. You become the anchor in whom the children will find refuge at a time when their own parent might be overburdened with legal and social issues.

Until now we have only addressed the custodial parent and the care of the children. Let's not forget the non-custodial parent who is alone and also needs love and attention. Who can offer the much-needed help for the estranged partner, especially if ill? It's not fair that a dear family member is being tossed out of the home and forgotten because he or she no longer fits into the home. The Bible says we must take care of the sick and needy. The very person who might be in greatest need is often overlooked.

We must set priorities, and as harsh this may sound to some, I rank the family members the highest. The welfare of the children must come first to put them at ease. Number two is making certain that the custodial parent has the physical and mental stability to cope with the changes. Only then can we meet the need of the disposed parent.

Some may stand up and shout "unfair" — and they are right. But let those who raise the voice the loudest be the first to help. It's biblical to do so. Fortunately, Sophie's sister and husband were kind enough to take her in and care for her. They did an excellent job, and I would like to thank them for this. If in-laws and friends cannot assist, government authorities have the responsibility to assist.

## **Solid Answer to Divorce**

In this concluding paragraph of Part Two we address divorce and the Bible. This is a delicate topic and I confess that I am not qualified to discuss this with great accuracy. I am not a Bible expert. I have read the Bible several times, cover-to-cover, and my perception is that of a layman. But then. . . most of us are laymen and have a limited understanding. When we discuss divorce and the Bible, we talk layman-to-layman.

Divorces will continue to happen, some are necessary, but most are preventable. Many couples get a divorce when they shouldn't; others stay married when a divorce would be better. A divorce should never occur if the partners are blessed with a healthy and rational mind. As much as we desire this dignified state, the human brain often fails, and so does the relationship. If this occurs, a divorce is often the only alternative to keep ones own sanity and prevent the family from falling apart. Verse 2383 of the Catholic Catechism says this about a marriage that needs resolving:

If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of the children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense.

(Catholic Catechism, Verse 2383)

Second Chronicles 1:10 says: "Learn to be wise and develop good judgment and common sense." I took this Bible verse to heart and came up with my own directive as to when a couple should step out of a troubled marriage. The aim is to liberate the disadvantaged spouse from an unworkable marriage by restoring human dignity and building a functional home in which to raise obedient children. Having said this, allow me to state that:

1. *Divorce is recommended* if the behavioral disorder of one spouse destroys the dignity of the other, endangers family assets, causes medical problems, and the situation cannot be reversed.
2. *Divorce is necessary* if the behavior of the spouse causes the family to become dysfunctional, interferes with raising the children, and such behavior cannot be reversed.
3. Divorce is *necessary* if the partner endangers the personal safety of the spouse and/or the children, and the condition is continuing with no sign of change.

I admit that I have gone beyond biblical interpretations and ask you to use your own discretion. The reason for my deviation is simple: I have a hard time understanding the

biblical reasoning behind divorce. The Mosaic Law of the Old Testament made it too easy for a man to divorce his wife. Simply issuing a certificate of divorce for any fickle reason could put her away. The New Testament added new rules that permit divorce if: (1) the marriage occurred prior to salvation; (2) the mate is guilty of sexual immorality, and (3) the mate is an unbeliever and deserts the believing partner.

These New Testament rules are the more accepted guidelines in Christian circles, but they don't fit well into today's culture, as far as I can tell. For one, the demeanors are correctable. The couple has the choice to adjust, change the way of life and make the marriage work. Behavior problems and mental illness, on the other hand, are permanent and continue with their destructive path.

We must appreciate that the New Testament was written when Christianity was young and needed protection similar to a tree sapling planted in fresh soil. The biblical writers wrote what lay on their hearts and what was most important at that time. Marriage laws, as we know them today, did not exist then.

I am so bold as to say that I cannot find workable answers in the Bible on divorce. When going to the experts, church ministers say, "Our hands are bound by the Bible." This ambiguity concerns me, especially in wake of today's high divorce rate. Without solid answers from church leaders, the affected person has no other option that to seek answers from secular sources. In the secular world, the hands are not bound.

Many thinking Christians struggle with the Bible. This is a serious issue that is being ignored by many church leaders and must be addressed more openly. Allow me to assure the reader that I am not in disagreement with the Bible. The many scriptural references quoted in this book ensure my full support of Scripture. I am concerned, however, with the *rigid interpretation* of the words of the Bible. This can be obstructive to those facing a serious crisis. Isolating verses from the Bible while ignoring the greater biblical exhortation that include compassion, peace and freedom can have serious implications. Narrowing ones mind to a tunnel vision does not fair well in our modern culture. We must unbind rather than bind our hands, and Jesus did this so effectively when He lived among us.

Are we able to turn to the Bible for definitive answers on such important issues as marriage and divorce? I believe that in finding biblical truth we must look beyond isolated texts and search for the deeper meaning, bearing in mind the totality of the biblical

message and the cultural influences, which shaped the biblical text on such topics as marriage and divorce. We must be prepared to explore current day problems in light of biblical principles rather than applying unbending rules on passages that are taken out of context. There may come a time when one cannot live by strict biblical interpretations alone, and I strongly believe that an irresolvable behavior problem can and should be a valid reason for divorce.

Pastors who provided critical support in writing this book also express concern that the Bible is unclear on *divorce for just cause* and wished better guidelines were given. A Catholic priest said that the church has never held the position that we are obligated to remain in a destructive marriage. He suggested that separation may be required if medical and psychological treatments are unsuccessful. In his view, continuing with such a relationship would simply be unbearable, and a civil divorce might be necessary for financial reasons to stop a money leak. The priest elaborates further that governments provide many services today to help mentally challenged people survive outside of marriage. These amenities were not available during biblical times, and a person was fully dependent on the spouse for support.

Times and cultures have changed and I believe that the responsible parent is the most qualified judge in deciding what's best for the family. A mother and father carry the ultimate responsibility in raising the children. Yes, marriage is meant to be permanent, but nowhere does the Bible say that we must stay in a dysfunctional marriage.

Jesus asked the crowd, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep" (Matthew 12:11-12)! Sabbath was (and still is) a day of rest and Jesus performed many miracles on that day. He did this to demonstrate that there is no law against doing good on a Sabbath. He wanted to show to the Pharisees that a loving relationship with God and neighbor takes precedence over laws that kept people enslaved by fear and hopelessness.

How I wished we could ask Jesus again on such sensitive issues as *divorce for just cause*. He liberated himself from rigid rules and took the common sense approach. He received his people with unconditional love and always placed compassion ahead of observance of man-made laws. He grabbed the lamp stand and placed it where light was needed.

Some religious leaders have taken the same lamp stand and anchored it in concrete. If the light does not shine where illumination is needed, then we are out of luck. Rigid Bible interpretation can inhibit rather than enlighten God's enduring message to us. The lamp becomes a stationary object that is biblically correct but only satisfies the authority who delivers the interpretation. Applied in a dictatorial way, the religious laws become a rod that smites, and the Bible becomes a religious entrapment rather than liberation. No one wants to go back and be ruled by the Pharisees of old. Religious extremism has kept many devote Christians from entering a church again.

Rules are necessary and we must obey them. However, rules can only work if they benefit citizens, parents and children. There is a time when one must look beyond rigid textbook laws and use our God-given intellect. The path we choose may not always agree with established conventions. God supports our choices and blesses them if done in love and good faith.