

RELATIONSHIP RESCUE

Back to Basics

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February is the number one divorce month in America. Why is that? I can think of a few reasons: cold weather, dark days, and Valentine's Day, which many people don't know what to do with.

Consequently, I will focus during this month on the subject of relationships, in a series entitled "Relationship Rescue." Today, I want to talk about relationship myths and truths.

I believe over the next few weeks we will see marriages restored, and the fading fire of relationships rekindled. We'll help people find new hope to cope with the relationship pressures that we all deal with.

Our key verse for this series is Psalm 144:7. It's really a rescue prayer for times of stress. *"Reach down from Heaven and rescue me. Deliver me from deep waters."*

Have you ever found yourself in "deep waters" when it comes to a relationship? Did you pray, "God, reach down and take away this relationship pain." (Or, perhaps, first, "God, reach down and change that other person.") "God, reach down and restore my marriage." "God, reach down and take away my loneliness." "God, reach down and help me make sense of this confusion."

Today's message I call "Back to Basics." This is the foundational message of this month's theme, and we are going to go back as far as we possibly can. We are going to go all the way back to the Book of Genesis.

Let me provide a brief backdrop: God created the heavens and the earth over the course of six days. Each day ended with His commentary: "It is good." Except the sixth day, when He created humans. That day, He said, "It is very good!"

But there was one thing that was "not good." Something that would cause the whole machine to grind to a halt. Something that needed to be fixed.

In Genesis 2:18, we find the problem, which gives us an insight into the whole subject of relationships: *"And the Lord God said it is not good for the man to be alone."* Aloneness would sabotage God's creative genius.

You and I were created for relationships. It may or may not be God's plan for you to marry, but it is certainly His plan for you to have friends. For you to have fellowships. For you to have companionships.

God said, *"I will make a companion who will help him."* And then God created that wonderful creature called Eve. Adam responded, "Wow!" (It's in the original Hebrew.) And that brings us to Myth #1.

MYTH #1: And They Lived Happily Ever After...

Relationships are always messy. They are part of God's plan for our lives to develop our character, to grow us spiritually, and to help us become all that God created us to be. And that doesn't happen without the stress and mess. And so, the first truth...

TRUTH #1: I Can Expect Problems In My Relationships.

Problems happen in any relationship—marriage, dating, or friendship. Problems like doubts ("Is this the right person for me?"), comparisons ("That other couple have such a great relationship! I wish ours was like theirs."), fears ("I wonder if our relationship will last?"). Even friendships between members of the same sex face issues like loyalty and competition.

Genesis 3 reminds us that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship. If there was ever going to be a perfect relationship, it would have been the relationship between Adam and Eve. No competition, no distractions—just the two of them in an idyllic setting, with everything they needed.

Sometimes people think, if the place where I live was better, my relationship would be better. If I lived in an easier place, it would be easier. If I had a cheaper place, it would be... better. If I was in a less crowded area, my relationship would be stronger. Dear friend, the problem is not that you live in an imperfect place. The problem is that we are all imperfect people.

Adam and Eve also had problems because in the middle of the Garden was a talking snake.

In Genesis 3:4-5, the serpent lied and made an exaggerated claim that he could not support: *"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. 'God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.'* The woman was convinced."

The first seven verses of the chapter clearly show that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship.

Some people think that when a problem arises in their relationship, it's a *sign* that they should get out, or that it's an *excuse* to move on. That's missing the whole point!

Problems in relationships can be good. If you will discover the *purpose* for the problem, and maybe learn how to *avoid* the problem in the future, or even how to *grow* through the problem, you will be deeply blessed.

Consider the serpent as a source of *external* pressure on the relationship. There are all kinds of pressures that try to steer us off course—societal pressures, sexual pressures, temptations, addictions (like pornography), or the easy availability of divorce. All external forces promise more than they can deliver.

For instance, God's best plan for sex is one woman and one man, inside of marriage. That's what the Bible has to say about it. And that's also what the Bible has to say about premarital sex.

Based on the culture in which we live, this does sound a bit outdated. Yet study after study that shows that it is the couples who wait until marriage to share a sexual relationship who will experience greater sexual fulfillment in marriage than those couples who don't wait. And the couples who wait until marriage also have greater levels of happiness than couples who don't. And couples who wait until marriage are less likely to divorce than those couples who don't.

Premarital sex, like anything else apart from God's perfect plan, will always promise more than it can deliver. Just like the snake in the Garden. The snake says—it's not going to hurt you, but it will. God's best plan for sex is still one man and one woman, inside of marriage. When you make a commitment to live like that, you will be blessed by the Lord—and you will face problems.

Problems arise even in a relationship that is committed to following God's best plan. Now the question is—how will you respond to those problems? Will you let those problems defeat you? Or will you let those problems teach you important life lessons and draw you closer together?

Not only was the serpent putting extra pressure on them, but Adam and Eve refused to take personal responsibility for their problems. And that brings us to the second myth.

MYTH #2: It Wasn't My Fault!

It's natural for sinners to want to put the blame on someone or something else. "The dog ate my homework." "I ran out of gas." "Someone called on the phone just as I was leaving." "The devil made me do it!"

TRUTH #2: I Can Accept Responsibility For My Relationship Problem.

We may want to point the blame at another person, or at some other external source (like the serpent), but we have to accept personal responsibility in order to build trust. At the end of the day, the external pressures are only pressures. You have the opportunity to choose to say “No” to those pressures or to give in to those pressures. No one forces you to give in.

One guy, confessing to an affair, said, “The stress on my marriage was too great. I didn’t have a choice.” While there certainly were difficult circumstances, in the final analysis, he had a choice either to give in to an extramarital affair or to remain pure and devoted to his marriage. The myth of blame says, “My problems are somebody else’s fault.”

Look next at Genesis 3:12-13, when God confronted Adam and Eve about having eaten the forbidden fruit. How did they respond to Him? Adam blamed the woman. The woman blamed the serpent. And the old joke says that the poor serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on.

First, ask yourself the hard question. What *is* my responsibility? Almost never is *everything* any one person’s fault. Nearly always, each person must bear *some* of the blame—either for inciting the problem, or for aggravating it. What is your share?

Second, ask, “How can God use this problem to grow my character?” A committed relationship is a great character builder. And marriage is the greatest of them all.

That’s why opposites attract. One who has never been on time in their life will fall in love with a person who considers “on time” to mean being ten minutes early. Because character develops. No one is born with character. It is developed in the crucible of life experience. The neat freak always marries a person who loves to use the floor as a closet. Why? It has to be character development.

Our first thought may be to bail out of the relationship. However, here’s the truth: When you climb the mountain of difficulty together, and you get to the other side, that’s where real security and real intimacy are found (really, they are *built* by shared adversities).

If at all possible, take responsibility to make the relationship work and then recommit that relationship to God. Put God back at the center of the relationship, where He wants to be.

Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden. It was hard, but it saved them. It was the only hope for restoring their relationship with God and with each other. If God had left them in the Garden, with the Tree of Life, there would have been no hope (Genesis 3:22-23). They would have been stuck in their fallen condition and spent eternity separated from God by their sin.

Even though the relationship of Adam and Eve got off course, and God was removed from the center of that relationship, God loved them too much to leave them there.

MYTH #3: All You Need Is Love.

This is the myth of the “soul mate”—that one perfect match for you. Are you sure you would know the “perfect match” if you found him or her? This is also the myth of self reliance. If two people just loved each other enough, then the relationship would succeed. But that formula is only partially correct.

TRUTH #3: I Can Invite God To Be The Center Of My Relationship.

You see, for any relationship to succeed over time, not only must two people be committed to each other, they must also be committed to God. Invite God to be the *center* of your relationships—all of them.

Here’s the hope that God revealed when He cursed the serpent: “*He (the woman’s offspring) will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). So even though the consequences are grave here, there is hope left for the man and the woman—hope for their relationship, going forward. God is going to do whatever He needs to do in order to bring you to the realization that He must be at the center of your relationship, if there is going to be a relationship success.

The Bible says, “*A cord of three strands is not easily broken*” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). A braid of hair looks like two interwoven strands, but if you’ve ever tried to braid just two strands, you know that they immediately unravel. However, if you braid three strands—though it looks like two—the invisible third strand holds the braid together. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, God is that invisible third strand—He’s the glue. The best relationships always are made up of three—your commitment to another person, his or her commitment to you, and God as the center of that relationship.

Some of you, are at the beginning of your relationship life—you are still in the dating stage—or you may be starting to date again. Or, you may have been married for six or seven years, and are beginning to experience what some call the 7-year itch (or 13-year itch, or 34-year itch), and you are wondering—did I marry the right person? Is this marriage going to last? Will we ever get it right? But I want you to know, it’s not too late for you to invite God to be at the center of your relationship. Even if you’ve done it before, it bears repeating.

Maybe you have faced a divorce. Maybe you are a child of a divorce and you have seen firsthand the consequences of sharing a relationship that omits God or marginalizes Him. You can make a fresh choice today. You can head in the right direction.

Your next step today can be to make God the *center* of your relationship—any significant relationship in your life. Just make the decision, and turn it into a prayer right now. You have the power to decide—even God cannot do that for you. And only God has the power to support your decision—you can't do that on your own. So make it a partnership today through prayer: you make the decision, then ask God to provide the power to follow through.

Your relationships are begging you to do so.