

Beyond DIVORCE



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Beyond DIVORCE

By Dan Kohn

Dan Kohn has been married thirty-five years. He is the father of two adult children and two grandchildren. He is also a Christian counselor, trainer, and author. Dan has been working in the counseling field for nearly thirty years, with relationship counseling being one of his specialties. He is currently pursuing a seminary degree to become a pastor.

The Journey Begins

As Shannon sat in the divorce support group listening to the stories of others, she knew she wasn't alone. And, as she sat among those who had given her understanding and support, her mind wandered back.

She pieced together what the last six months had been. Yes, "pieced" was a good word. The divorce, and the months that followed, had been like an unexpected puzzle in her life—one that had no picture to follow.

She didn't know where the pieces of her life and those of her two children now fit. Lots of disconnected pieces now lay scattered on the other side of divorce.

As the group facilitator talked about the steps of grief connected to divorce, Shannon realized that she had never looked at her experience in that way, but now it made sense. She had definitely dealt with the first and second stages that were being described.

Yes, there was that numb, overwhelmed feeling that hit when Jerry had first told her of the affair. And then the shocking news that he wanted a divorce, since he found he no longer loved her. "Affair." "Divorce." Those two words hit like a windstorm. Confusion and fear clouded the way of clear thinking that day, and the days right after that shocking news.

It was like someone had dumped out a 3000-piece puzzle on the floor in front of her, and then hidden the box and picture. Where to begin? Why even try to make sense of this pile of disconnected pieces?

When Shannon thought of Jerry, her questions bounced off a cold heart. “Why are you doing this to me?” she thought. “What about the kids?” and “Six years of marriage – why now?” plagued her thoughts. And last, she wondered, “Can we work this out?”

Then there was the second stage where she found herself now—the “pendulum swing of emotions.” One day it was all helplessness, hopelessness, anger, and confusion. And then the confidence would return, mingled with renewed hope about getting through this. But she couldn’t control the emotions. Sometimes they swung wildly, even within the same day. She had been a mess during many of those dark days, but she had hidden it well from co-workers, family, and friends. What would they think?

She tried to work on the borders of the puzzle to create a framework to guide her and the children. Yes, Morgan and Jacob needed her. She needed them. There was still love to be shared. Jerry’s callous comment about the children—“They’ll be fine”—only reinforced her deep desire to protect them, and herself, from him, from what he was doing to their lives. “How dare he steal love and hope from our lives!” she thought.

That first week was the hardest. No one had prepared her for this mess. The questions were overwhelming:

- How do I tell Morgan and Jacob? How will they handle the news that their lives will never be the same again?
- How could I face my co-workers? And family and friends, what would I say to them? I couldn't wear a fake smile every day. It took too much energy!
- How will I, will we, survive? We've always relied on Jerry's income!

Yes, those emotions hit and they hit hard. They were like a pendulum swing. How many boxes of Kleenex had she gone through? How many nights had her mind raced when there was no slow down for needed sleep. Somewhere in that journey, her “why” questions turned to “how” questions:

- How do I get through another day?
- How do I get past the “mask” and get real?
- How do I continue to reassure Morgan and Jacob when I don't even feel reassured myself?
- How do I put my life together—the one torn down by the man I thought I loved, that part of me that still loved?
- How do I get past the chaos of daily living, and hold on to hope?

There were also the “who” questions:

- Who could I trust to help me get through this and move forward?
- Who in the family would really be there for me when I just needed to cry and not feel ashamed?
- Who am I after all that has happened?
- The big “who” was God. Up until the divorce I thought I knew who He was; but where was He now?

Maybe you fit into Shannon’s story. Maybe you’ve experienced the numbness and the wild swing of emotions. If you have, you are normal. As strange as that may sound, the shock and stress of divorce has this kind of affect on most people who go through this major life trauma.

The Complexities of Divorce

Divorce is a challenge. It is complex. It is not at all what society paints it to be. It's not the simple solution to a complicated marriage. No, divorce further complicates most people's lives, whether they're children, parents, or other connected individuals.

Many times the circumstances of divorce are further complicated for those who are Christians. People often assume that Christians don't experience marital problems or divorce. Sadly, today just as many Christian couples as non-Christian couples experience troubled marriages and complicated divorces. So, what about non-Christians? Regardless of your beliefs; you are not alone.

And you are not a statistic either. You are a valuable person whose world has changed in many different ways. Being out of control at times following a divorce is evidence that you are human and, therefore, you have limitations when it comes to dealing with a major stressor like divorce. According to research, divorce ranks in the top three major stressful life events.

Keep in mind that grieving is normal, and it's a process—not a single event. You may need to remind yourself that you need to be patient with you! After all, grief takes time. It takes time to heal whenever we lose something, or someone, of great value.

And the reality that your spouse is still alive, but distant, makes this area of grieving even more complicated.

You may also be grieving the loss of dreams and expectations you had for the marriage and the family. Maybe it's the loss of financial security you are worried about. And don't underestimate the loss that comes from changing roles. You are now a divorced person and, in many ways, a single parent. As a mother, you may find yourself taking on some of the duties your husband once did—fixing appliances, disciplining the children, or being the primary breadwinner. As a father, you may struggle to offer your children the nurture, creativity, and attention to detail your wife once provided.

Also, there can certainly be the loss of mutual friends and some family members, especially on the divorced partner's side of the family.

These losses are real! Depending on the circumstances of your divorce, grieving can continue for several years, but not at the same high intensity it held in those first days, weeks, and months. Over time the emotional pendulum swings become less extreme. It is also important to keep in mind that these losses, and this grieving, are not the end of the journey. Indeed, the work you do during this time can help build the foundation for a new life beyond your divorce. There can be a path to inner peace that is attainable. A foundation for a new life can be built.

Perhaps these two similar prayers will be of help. The first is one you have likely heard or seen before. The second, is related and is also valuable:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know that person is me.”

Where Does God Fit?

God recognizes the complex puzzle of divorce. He deeply desires to maintain marriages so that couples and children do not experience the various forms of grief and wounds that take place in most divorces, such as we looked at earlier.

God knows our weaknesses and understands our pain firsthand. He wants us to look to Him for our ultimate comfort. He longs to be a healing force for those who are experiencing, or have experienced, divorce. He also knows that this time of life, as with other life crises, can be a remarkable time of growth and faith building. This outcome occurs when His Holy Spirit, the Counselor and Comforter, is given room to work.

Let's go back to our list of "who's" for a moment. God can be the most significant force at this time in a person's life. As Triune God, He is Father, Redeemer, and Counselor. From a practical viewpoint, another way to appreciate G-O-D is that He also provides a Good Orderly Direction for life.

God promised to never leave those who place their faith in Him. He does not abandon those who wander from His planned purpose in their lives during a life crisis. No, His deep desire is for their return, for the reviving of their faith walk with Him.

Now, what I am about to say may be difficult to hear, but I am saying it from the standpoint of understanding, not as judgment on the reality of your own divorce. Divorce is something that deeply saddens God for five important reasons.

Divorce breaks a covenant between a husband and a wife that was to be life-long. If a couple exchanged Christian vows, God was part of that covenant agreement. God knows that divorce complicates the lives of those who divorce. He knows that divorce is often chosen as a simple solution to the complex issues that may be leading to deterioration in an existing marriage; but He knows that divorce rarely makes life easier.

God has a special concern for children. He is well aware of the challenges these young victims face when parents divorce. He deeply desires to protect children from the pain and provide for their future, since most will eventually marry as well.

One of the common dilemmas children face during these trying times is a difference in discipline between parents. This confuses and frustrates children when a united front, as God intended it to be, is missing. Sadly, manipulation and using children as messengers often adds to the complications of this puzzle. After all, children have less ability and experience to address such emotional dilemmas.

Divorce is often Satan's playground. He weaves his deception and destruction into what was a love relationship. God knows that Satan attacks whatever is good and godly, and love is at the very essence of who God is. And since God created the institution of marriage, it is one of Satan's main targets.

Divorce offers a poor witness of Christian living. It is a sad testimony on what holy matrimony was meant to be. It is seen by many as yet another hypocrisy of Christian living.

Let's go back to Shannon's story. Let's make the assumption that she found the courage and wisdom to get past her confusion and anger toward God. She came to rely on Him even more during the divorce process. She knew the solution lay beyond herself, and beyond mere human options. Let's also make an assumption within the framework of this story that Jerry found himself walking in the opposite direction. Satan and sin dominated his life as he continued to pursue his affair and as he progressively abandoned his love obligations to Shannon, Morgan, and Jacob.

Each person involved is under God's watchful eye. And God longs to bring everyone through this ordeal and into a renewed relationship with Him. Yet God also knows that each is in a unique position as the divorce progresses.

The marvelous news is that the Holy Spirit can work in their lives in marvelous ways, tied, in part, to how open each is to His spiritual influence.

God does not demand our attention. God invites us to experience Him and what He can do to transform our lives. God can use human crises to bring us into a position to search for deeper answers—answers only He can offer—or to find inner peace that only He can provide.

Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Grace and Forgiveness

We live in a time when there is a strong emphasis on individual rights and freedom to choose. This has had two effects when it comes to divorce recovery.

To begin with, more divorces are taking place because, for many, there is a decrease in firm commitments to someone other than oneself. Marriage is more about personal comfort and convenience than a clear conviction to remain faithfully married regardless of circumstances that pose discomfort.

Second, there is a reluctance to forgive, tied to the idea that if I'm the one who's been hurt, then I don't have to forgive. One can find support for the idea that standing up for yourself is in your best interest. Forgiveness is often seen as personal weakness.

But in reality, forgiveness is we-centered, rather than me-centered. One way to understand the word forgive is to see it like this: "For you I give a chance to be fully loved again." Forgiveness is a necessary step in order for reconciliation to begin; it is the extension of love to the unlovable. Forgiveness assumes that something unlovely took place; now the question is whether to allow this unlovely thing (i.e., anger, frustration, disappointment, etc.) to reign, or to continue placing love as the main force in the relationship.

Forgiveness is alien to our typical way of thinking. Our natural, human, sinful nature rebels against loving someone who appears to be unlovable. In varying ways the other partner has become the enemy and is, therefore, seen as undeserving of forgiveness.

It has been said, “Unforgiveness is the poison we drink, hoping someone else will die.” What does this mean? It means that the person who chooses to not forgive is actually causing more injury to him or herself, than to the other person. The stress tied to this “unforgiveness” is an emotional (sometimes physical) “poison” that destroys the joy and love of life.

So there are two victims, and no victors, when it comes to unforgiveness. There are two divided hearts, minds, and souls. There are two lives struggling with God and His command to love—even one’s enemies.

Within God’s plan, love is the antidote. Such love comes from the One who authored love. “God is love” (1 John 4:16). He is also the ultimate source of love (v.7).

God the Father sacrificed Jesus, His very own Son, to create the road to forgiveness. Read carefully these additional words from this same chapter of John’s letter: “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is made complete in us” (vv. 9-12).

Those who hold onto the love that Jesus demonstrated have a higher calling when it comes to love, especially when it comes to loving our enemies. Jesus made this bold statement, and He “walked His talk” when He said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you ... lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High” (Luke 6:27-28, 35).

This level of love is tied to grace and one way to describe grace is “undeserved love following in the footsteps of Christ.”

During a divorce, forgiveness and grace can be very difficult. The messages from the Bible may be clear, but the reality of living them out can be a real challenge. The mixed emotions and mixed messages about how to treat someone who has hurt you can seem beyond your ability to accomplish, which it is. We need God in the formula. So we forgive as commanded by Christ.

Jesus went on to say, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured out in your lap. For the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:37-38).

Forgiveness is not about fairness. Forgiveness is not about easy. It's about effectiveness – effectively seeking and finding inner peace, as Christ's Spirit works to bring that about through forgiveness.

Forgiveness is also a great lesson and model for children. They can learn about this deeper form of love through a parent's words and actions. And it's a chance to study the Bible together so that you can learn even more about forgiveness, and your children can be better prepared to make forgiveness part of their future relationships.

Forgiveness also aids in the grieving process when you make a choice not to hold on to the painful past. “Letting go and letting God” is a motto for inner healing and living hope. There is no guarantee that forgiving your ex-spouse will lead to reconciliation, but it will do two things:

It will create a door that is more open to that possibility. And, it will be the environment where God can work out love in all who are involved.

Let me add a third benefit. One of the goals of divorce recovery is to live without regret. This means that you intentionally take steps to leave maximum room for healing.

You will not be looking back with thoughts of “What if I had” You will have done those things to create room for reconciliation. You are never responsible to change the past. That’s because it’s not possible. You also have no power to control the actions and reactions of others. God does not hold you responsible for either of these. He does ask that you love and forgive; He takes care of the rest. The burden of what happens to your ex-spouse is placed in God’s hands. Your ex-spouse can be prayed for. Here is a sample prayer to start your thinking in this direction:

“God, I cannot bring about the miracle of reconciliation. I thank You for the wisdom and courage to forgive. Take charge of my life. I ask that You work in the life of _____ also. It is Your will that I seek for myself and for _____. Help me to live love and, through this path, to find the deep inner peace You have promised. For Jesus’ sake, I pray. Amen.”

Toward Recovery

The following guidelines are a summary of thoughts to guide you toward inner healing and peace. The timing of these insights in your life may vary. Read them carefully, and make a decision to use them in your successful recovery story.

- Divorce recovery is a healing process. It is not a program of change; it is a journey of many steps in the same direction. Grieve within God's grace, not allowing the dark emotions to dominate this journey of healing.
- The healing you seek is individual in nature. There is no one way to get through the past and focus on the present toward a new future. You are a unique person with a unique personality, needs, and life situation.
- It is only in the present that you can do the work of healing. Seize each day as an opportunity to gain ground. And if there are setbacks, which are common, remember – a renewed focus on your goals is doable and valuable.
- Write down your life goals. Make them specific and attainable. Write out primarily short-term goals (i.e., those you can complete in the next six months), and then add long-term goals that give you a picture into the foreseeable future.

- Keep your goals in key places where you will see them often. Share them with family and friends, but only those who are supportive. Ask them to help keep you accountable to the fulfillment of these life goals.
- Find resources that offer support, encouragement, and affirmation. Find at least two positive people whom you can count on to be there to build you up. Don't hesitate to seek professional help as needed.
- If you want to get into counseling, talk to the counselor ahead of time, and ask how he or she would address the concerns you have. Christian counselors are available. There is a listing through the American Association of Christian Counselors at www.AACC.com.
- Get past the blame and pain through forgiveness and a focus on loving life to the fullest. A great book on this topic is "Total Forgiveness", written by R. T. Kendall.
- Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Remember that getting better is about letting go of bitter. Keep the poison out of your life!

- Do a personal inventory regarding you, your life experiences, and your marriage. Do it within God's grace, realizing that He gives you two pieces of glass—a mirror and a window. The mirror is for self-reflection, honesty, and personal growth.

The window is your view of the world that He gives you—to live with love. The window is also people's view of you, as a model that impacts their lives, especially those you love and who love you.

- Find a sanctuary (your private, quiet place) where you give yourself permission to go regularly. Make a plan with and for your children, so that you can have uninterrupted time for yourself. This is your private, necessary healing place and time. It can be in your house, a favorite spot in nature, or whatever location matches your needs and circumstance.
- Give God lots of room to work in your life. Set aside time to pray and read Christian books regularly. If time is a factor, borrow books on tape or CD from the library and listen to them when you drive.
- Give God the credit and the glory for the changes He makes possible in your life. The gain through pain is one of those times in this life when He does some of His best work.

One Last Look

Shannon worked through a lot of questions about her divorce. She was willing to look at herself with honesty and openness to the needed changes that improved her life.

Shannon and her children reconnected with church. Attendance had been one of those things that had slipped after the children were born. Now, Shannon and her children are involved in worship and Bible classes. She had found a second family who gave her and her children a place to be loved. It was also where her Divorce Support Group met.

Forgiving Jerry came slowly; but it did take a burden off of Shannon's heart when she sent the letter outlining the action she was taking and how it tied into God's plan for her life. So far Jerry hasn't responded; but Shannon did not have that as a goal when she wrote the letter. That response is between Jerry and God. It's in His hands, just like her forgiveness of Jerry had been. She was thankful God had led her to find inner peace through forgiveness.

The Divorce Support Group continues to be an experience Shannon looks forward to each week. She has shared her written plan with two other women she's become close to in the group.

God has truly made a difference in Shannon's life. She's the first one to give Him the credit when others comment on the progress she has made. It's her inner peace that gets the most comments. And when she hears those compliments, Shannon has a real smile to give back to them, along with her testimony of what God has done, and is doing, in her journey beyond divorce.

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