

COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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Finding hope when your relationship is struggling.

Is your marriage in a difficult place right now? Are you battling over a never-ending list of conflicts? Do you sense a distance between you and your spouse? Where do you find hope in times like these?

Throughout the many years of counseling with couples I have found that hope is an essential ingredient to sustain any relationship through difficult times. Without hope couples become frustrated in their attempt to resolve difficult issues. When despair sets in, the relationship becomes stagnant. Some couples give up entirely and seek separation and even divorce. Therefore, it is critical that you encourage your spouse to become hopeful.

How can you find hope?

1. Seek the God of hope. Seeking the Lord may sound very simplistic, but it is the best place to begin if you want change in any heart attitude. The most important truth to understand is that *you* must first be changed if you want your marriage to change. A marital relationship is only as good as the two Christians in it. Therefore, you need to seek the God of hope to come and fill you with His Spirit so that His hope and peace will fill your heart. Paul prayed for this very thing for the believers at Rome: *"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit"* (Rom. 15:13). Therefore, a wise first step in finding hope for the struggles in your marriage is to seek the God of hope.

Many times when couples come for counseling they tell me that they have tried all kinds of books, seminars, and programs looking for help in their marriage. I usually ask them, "But, have you sought God for His help and direction?"

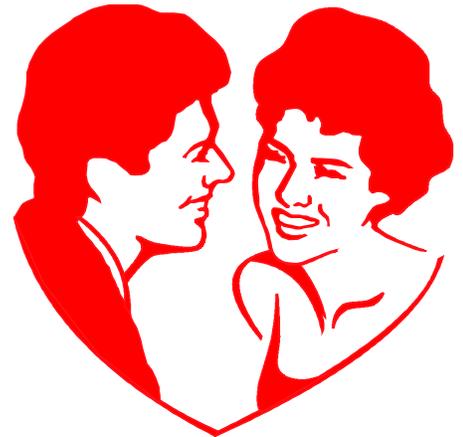
Many have told me that they are far from God and are not really seeking Him as they know they should. I encourage them that seeking the Lord with all their heart is where hope and healing begins.

How about you? Are you willing to ask the Lord for the power of His Spirit to fill your heart with hope? Will you seek His direction to resolve the issues between you? When you finish reading this article, will you invite your spouse to pray with you and ask the Lord for His forgiveness and His intervention in your marriage? If you seek the Lord, you will find Him. Listen to God's promise: *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart"* (Jer. 29:11-13).

If you are reading this article and you are not a Christian at this time, then my encouragement for you is to also seek the Lord for His forgiveness and invite Christ into your life. Will you consider that God has a solution for your marriage? He is the One who created you and the institution of marriage and He knows how it works best. But, to obtain God's help in your marriage you must first have a relationship with Him. If you are willing to seek God's help and the hope He wants to give, here is what you should do. Acknowledge to the Father that you believe that He is real and that He sent Jesus to die on the cross for your sins. Humble yourself before Him and ask God to forgive you and invite Jesus to come in and take over your life. Jesus said, *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened"* (Matt. 7:7-8). If you sense your need for God's forgiveness and help then ask Him now!

2. Seek hope in His Word. The second way you can begin to find hope is to open up the New Testament and begin to

read God's Word. Why is reading the Word of God important to finding the hope God wants to give? Because God's Word guides you to change your behavior, which will then change your marriage. Paul explained the power of God's word to give hope when he wrote, *"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"* (Rom. 15:4). Therefore, the Scriptures will give you the comfort and instruction you need in specific attitudes and behaviors that must change. As you follow God's commands He naturally gives you hope, because you will see the beneficial changes in your own life and then in your relationship.



Build hope in your spouse!

If you have walked with the Lord for any length of time and you have read the Scriptures extensively, you need to go back and look more closely to determine what truths you may have neglected. Many know what the Bible declares but have failed to apply and implement these truths into their lives. If you realize that you are failing to be obedient to God's commands make a list of the areas where you are failing. Then ask God for the grace to begin taking the actions necessary to change. Hope will begin to fill your heart.

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14

3. What has God already done? In addition to making the personal changes necessary to bring hope to your heart, stop now and remember what the Lord has already done in your life. Can you think of other difficult times and situations that God has resolved in your personal life or your marriage? If the Lord has saved you and set you free from deeply rooted sinful habits, He can also deliver you from the selfish habits you have formed in your marriage. If the Lord brought you out of darkness into His marvelous light so that you could know the truth, He can also reveal the truth today that is necessary to change your marital relationship. If He has satisfied your life personally can't God do the same in your marriage? When David was in total anguish of soul over the success of ungodly men, notice what he did to find hope: *"But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the works of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will also meditate on all Your work, and talk of Your deeds"* (Ps. 77:10-12). Take a moment now and remember His mighty deeds in your life and meditate on His power that changed and set you free.

A marital relationship is only as good as the two Christians in it.

But, you may be wondering how simply meditating on God's past works could fill you with hope. By remembering what God has done you are fixing your eyes on His ability. Paul encouraged the Ephesian believers to remember that God *"is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us"* (Eph. 3:20). Do you believe that His power is at work inside you right now? You need this kind of faith as you seek hope in your marriage. Remember, whatever God requires you to do He will enable you to do. Paul declared: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Phil. 4:13). You too can do all that God requires of you, if you will just allow Him to work inside your heart.

4. Look at other couples. When couples come for counseling I often tell them the stories of other couples that I have coun-

seled who have dramatically restored their relationships (of course, keeping their identities anonymous). I tell these distraught couples about marriages that were much worse off than their present situation and explain how these individuals turned it all around. Stories like these are a tremendous source of hope. God gives us the example of others to help us see that godly behavior is truly possible. Paul said of himself and those who worked with him, we *"make ourselves an example of how you should follow us"* (2 Thess. 3:9).

I would encourage you to look around you and I can assure you that there are marriages right in your own church that have had awesome and powerful restorations. Ask your friends if God has taken their marriages through difficult times. I'm sure you will find many such stories that will give you hope.

5. Hope comes from patience. When Paul encouraged the believers in Thessalonica he declared, *"We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Thess. 1:2-3). Notice that Paul connected faith, love and patience of hope together in this passage. Patience will naturally result in any heart that loves and believes in the Lord. If you love your spouse you will also be patient with their faults. Paul declared that *"love is patient and kind"* (1 Cor. 13:4). But, how does patience inspire hope? Notice that Paul taught that patience is the primary characteristic of love and that love hopes all things (1 Cor. 13:7). When you are lovingly patient with your spouse it is because you are hopeful that change is possible. God has patience with you because He is hopeful you can change. You must show that same patience with your spouse. You will also be patiently hopeful because you understand that no one changes quickly. Jesus even acknowledged that the disciples were *"slow of heart to believe"* (Luke 24:25). I think you would agree we are all slow of heart to believe and obey.

However, despair can result from two basic misconceptions. First, many lose hope because they have the unrealistic expectation that change will come quickly to their mate. This is simply impatience. We all want what we want, yesterday. We don't like to have to wait for anything. Many of us get impatient when

the microwave isn't heating our food fast enough, even though it may be ten times quicker than a conventional oven. Don't let impatience rob you of your hope.

Second, many lose hope because their spouse isn't turning out as a carbon copy of themselves. It is unrealistic to believe that your spouse is going to become just like you. You can't expect that God will change your non-verbal spouse into a talkative individual, or the other way around. It is unrealistic to think that a homebody is all of a sudden going to become adventurous. You can't expect God to change your mate so they like everything you like. You must base your expectations on the Word of God. Use His promises and commands to adjust your expectations correctly.

Can you think of other difficult times and situations that God has resolved in your personal life or your marriage?

For example, God promised the Children of Israel that they would return to their land. After giving them this promise God spoke these words: *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope"* (Jer. 29:10-11). The word *hope* is translated "expectation" several places in Scripture. Your expectation is what you hope for and desire. God's promise was to be the basis of the people's hope. Consequently, if your expectations are incorrectly based on your own desires then you will naturally lose hope because these expectations will not be fulfilled.

Therefore, examine your expectations to be sure they are in accordance with the promises of God. Where your expectations are unrealistic you need to adjust them. Where your expectations are correct, you need the patience of hope. Ask the Lord right now to adjust your expectations and to give you His longsuffering.

How can you encourage your spouse to be more hopeful?

If you are the partner who has caused your spouse to lose hope because of your resistance to change, then you have got some work to do. Hope for change always has two sides to the equation. What can you do to bring hope to your mate's heart?

1. Concentrate on actions. How do your actions create hope in your spouse? Let me give you an example. I spoke with a man several years ago who was separated from his wife. He said to me, "My wife has given up on our marriage. I know I've promised to change and have not followed through with my promised action one too many times. She has no hope that things will ever change." I told this man, "Your spouse has got to see some proof that you mean what you say. She must see action, not hear more words. Even a small change will give her hope."

When you are lovingly patient with your spouse it is because you are hopeful that change is possible.

What is it about concrete behavioral changes that give a person hope? Actions are real and tangible proof that a person can see. Words are just breath in the air until you do something practical. We have hope in the Lord's words of promise because of the actions that followed. Notice what Peter declared concerning why we have faith and hope in God. Speaking of Jesus he said: "*He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God*" (1 Peter 1:20-21). Our faith and hope are in God because He promised to send the Messiah and He actually did it. Here was tangible proof of His love. But, the Father not only sent His Son but allowed Him to be put to death and then raised Him to life again fulfilling scores of prophecies. These were all concrete actions. Therefore, when God makes any promise you can put your faith and hope in Him to do what He says.

If you want to inspire your spouse to believe that change is possible, follow God's example and be a man or a woman of your word. Jesus declared that He didn't want His disciples to become like the Pharisees. Why? One characteristic of these religious men were that they were not men of their word. Jesus taught, "*Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do*" (Matt. 23:3). The reason Jesus was so hard on the Pharisees was because they were hypocrites. One of the most hypocritical and offensive things you can do is to not keep your word. Therefore, when you make a promise to your spouse, ask God for the self-discipline and the grace to follow through with your promise. Increased hope will always be the result. If you need help with self-discipline in your life see chapter 19 in my book *Married and How To Stay That Way*.

2. Seek character changes. Real and lasting change in anyone's life will always entail growth in your moral character. Issues such as: explosive anger, selfishness, pride, drug or alcohol abuse, lying, lack of self-discipline, or unfaithfulness are all character issues. These and other character flaws must be corrected if you want to inspire hope in your spouse. These are examples of the concrete behavioral issues I spoke of in the previous point.

How does God change your character? Change begins when you acknowledge the flaws in your moral character and ask the Lord's forgiveness (Jer. 3:12-13). By humbling yourself in this manner your heart has taken the first step in dealing with the root issues in your character, not just the issues of external behavior. Real behavioral changes will always begin in your heart (Matt. 15:19). Then as you invite the Lord to come and transform you, He then floods you with the Holy Spirit who causes these desires and deeds of the flesh to die within you. The Spirit also renews your heart and mind empowering you to do the things you should. Therefore, express to the Lord that you want to put off your sinful behaviors and invite Him to replace them with the character qualities of love, giving, humility, self-control, and truthfulness (Col. 3:5-10). When your spouse sees these character qualities in you, he or she will naturally begin to hope that a better relationship is ahead.

3. Look for creative solutions. Finding lasting practical solutions in every marriage requires a couple to humbly acknowledge that they need God's wisdom. Many of the solutions you seek, with respect to your differences, are not going to be directly spelled out in Scripture. This means that you will need to use the principles in Scripture and apply them to the specific problem. Finding these practical solutions will require wisdom from God. Wisdom is the application of knowledge to the specific problem you are having. How can you find this wisdom? You need to pray. James encouraged all believers: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him*" (James 1:5). Again, this is why you need to be seeking the Lord with your spouse for His help.

If you want to inspire your spouse to believe that change is possible, follow God's example and be a man or a woman of your word.

Therefore, have you asked God for the wisdom you need? Are you willing to compromise and yield up what you consider as your rights, to find harmony in those difficult issues of your marriage? Notice what James also said was the fruit of God's wisdom: "*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace*" (James 3:13-18).

Do you have the meekness of God's wisdom that enables you to be willing to yield? If so, then you will see the fruit of

peace in your relationship. If not, ask Him now for His meekness.

4. Become a giver. One of the biggest misconceptions in relationships is that we usually expect others to give to us before we give to them. In reality, this thinking is backwards according to Jesus. Here is what Jesus taught: *“First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye”* (Matt. 7:5). *“Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them”* (Matt. 7:12). *“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you”* (Luke 6:38). Therefore, if you want your spouse to be gentle and speak respectfully to you, you should first speak respectfully to them. If you want your mate to be thoughtful and giving, shouldn’t you be considerate and generous? If you desire your loved one to be willing to compromise when there is a difference of opinion, you should show your willingness to adjust your desires as well. In other words, you can’t expect your mate to do what you are unwilling to do!

5. Be gracious. Being gracious with your spouse is so important because we all have failed and will fail to some degree in fulfilling our responsibilities as husbands and wives. Becoming gracious will always give your spouse hope. You experience hope in the fact that you know your Heavenly Father is gracious, forgiving, and accepting of you even when you fall short. Notice that Paul found hope in: *“Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace”* (2 Thess. 2:16).

You can demonstrate this graciousness to your spouse as you willingly forgive when the next conflict occurs. Jesus said: *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven”* (Luke 6:37). Don’t judge and condemn, but forgive! Forgiveness strengthens your bond of love; condemnation only drives you further apart.

You can also demonstrate your graciousness by the way you speak to your spouse. Paul declared: *“Let your speech always be with grace”* (Col. 4:6). Gracious words are revealed in your tone of voice, in the gentle words you choose, in

your patient listening, and with your calm demeanor. Remember, if you want this grace to be given to you, then you must first give this grace to your spouse! *“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes, it is a tree of life”* (Prov. 13:12).

Beloved, pray and ask God for His hope to flood your heart to believe that your marriage can be restored. He also wants to show you what actions you should take that would encourage hope in your spouse. Come right now to the God of hope and let Him fill you with hope, as you trust in Him!

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For more information concerning the ministry of Pastor Steve Carr or for additional marriage resources for couples and counselors, please contact us at our web site www.covenantkeepers.org or by email at ccag@calvaryag.org or at 805-481-2320.

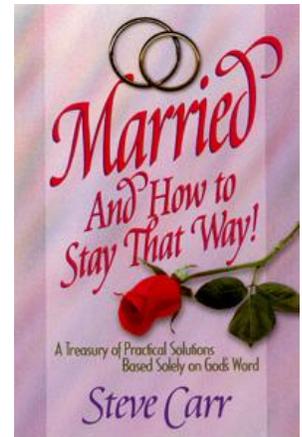
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