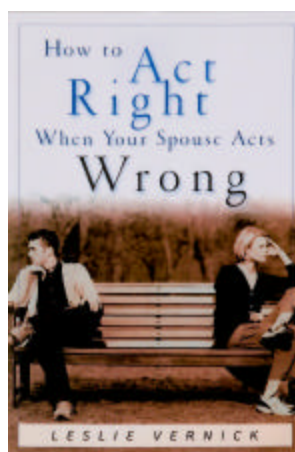


How To Be Happy in an Unhappy Marriage

by Leslie Vernick



After two failed marriages, Janice decided to try one more time for the relationship she dreamed of. Yet, just one year later, her marriage to Hank was crumbling. Defeated and confused, Janice cried out to God for some answers. “In that moment, “she says, “I began to realize that there is no perpetual honeymoon to any marriage. Sometimes it’s just plain hard work. It was then and there that God told me I could not depend on my husband to make me happy. I would only find my true happiness in God.”

Even as Christians, many of us have grown up with unrealistic expectations of marriage. Hollywood and Harlequin have taught us that we must find our perfect match? our soul mates? to be happy. When difficulties occur in our marriage, we may wonder, like Janice did, whether we have found the right person or may even think we have made a terrible mistake. After thirty-one years of marriage and over two decades of counseling couples I have learned that God

created marriage to mature us and for us to enjoy, but it was never intended to fulfill us or make us happy.

Marriage is God's great idea, but in every marriage there are seasons of difficulty and times of dryness where one or both partners may feel dissatisfied with the marital relationship. As we work to improve our marriage, sometimes our efforts don't produce the changes we want. During these times, the question we need to ask ourselves is not, "Should I leave my spouse so I can find another person who will make me happy?" but rather, "Can I learn to find contentment and joy while in the midst of an unhappy marriage? And if so, how?"

Change Your Focus

Everyone I know wants to feel good inside but few know the secret to lasting happiness or even what happiness is. Is happiness a feeling of emotional ecstasy? Intense pleasure with life's circumstances? An internal state of well-being or contentment? Happiness can comprise all of these things.

Several years ago my husband surprised me with a beautiful pearl necklace I had admired. I felt really happy? for about three days? until I began longing for some earrings to go with it. We all search for something to fulfill us and make us happy, whether it is people, objects, or positions of status. When we get what we desire, we feel a certain emotion we call happiness. This feeling, however, is always short-lived and, like Solomon with his 700 wives and me with my pearl necklace, we begin longing for the next thing we desire that will bring us more satisfaction.

While on a trip to Walt Disney World, I was struck by the number of cranky youngsters and frustrated parents. My children, like many others, were caught up in the excitement and wanted everything they saw. They felt elated whenever they got what they wanted but their happiness didn't last. When the next thing they desired was denied, the thrill they felt just minutes before quickly deteriorated and they became miserable.

Soon after my Disney experience, I traveled overseas to do some speaking and teaching in the Philippines. I observed barefoot children merrily swinging on old tires, living in houses constructed from cardboard boxes. These children didn't need lots of stuff to make them happy. Thought maybe just for the moment, they were enjoying what they had.

Many of us feel dissatisfied in life because we are not content with what God has given us. We want more. How does this apply to our marriage?

Jesus tells us that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also (Matthew 6:21). If our treasure, or deepest desire, is in having a great marriage or a fat bank account or certain other things we deem essential to our well-being, then we will feel unhappy when we don't get what we want. For whatever has our heart, has us.

No one is more concerned with our happiness than Jesus is. He just tells us a different way of obtaining it than the world does. He tells us that happiness is never found by pursuing happiness or pleasure or people, but only found by pursuing him. He says, "Blessed (or happy) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Too many of us hunger and

thirst after happiness (or a good marriage or a big house), instead of hungering and thirsting after God. We forget that Jesus is the only one who can deeply satisfy our soul. Everyone desires unfailing love (Proverbs 19:22); it's just that we will never receive that kind of love continually from our spouses.

Created in his image, God designed us to experience happiness when something brings us great delight. For example, God is delighted when we find our greatest pleasure in him. But often it is not God that brings us our greatest joy but what he gives us. We desire his gifts but we don't realize that our greatest gift is God himself. Oswald Chambers explains: "The great enemy of the life of faith in God is not sin, but the good which is not good enough. The good is always the enemy of the best." We want and pursue good things, but often neglect the best thing. The Psalmist reminds us where lasting happiness is found. He writes, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). God's love is the only love that never fails (Jeremiah 31:3).

Guard Your Heart

To find any joy in an unhappy or difficult marriage, we must learn to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23). Many individuals who struggle in marriage get very good at guarding their hearts, but the walls they build to protect themselves are against their spouse instead of against their real enemy. In the midst of an unhappy marriage, our spouse may feel like the enemy, but God tells us that our real enemy is Satan and the Bible warns us that he is out to devour us (1 Peter 5:8)*

Satan's goal has always been to get us to question God's goodness and to doubt that what God says is true. Jesus tells us that Satan is a liar (John 8:44) and his strategy is to take something that seems true and twist it ever so slightly. In a difficult marriage, Satan may whisper lies like, "Why should you be the only one trying in the marriage? It's not fair. Find someone else who will make you happy." Or, "Don't forgive, she doesn't deserve it. You're entitled to feel this way after what she did to you." Or, "He will never be the person you want. You made a terrible mistake marrying him and God doesn't want you to spend the rest of your life unhappily married to this person."

Satan wants us to believe that God is not good and that he does not know what is in our best interest. Remember, he is not interested in our well-being or our happiness. He wants to destroy us and our families.

Guarding my heart not only requires me to be aware of Satan's schemes, but to draw close to God and listen to truth. Don't let Satan deceive you into believing that any lasting happiness can be found apart from God.

Live for the Eternal

In the midst of hardship, our natural response is to look for the nearest exit. That's true of difficult marriages as well. Whether we exit in big ways like divorce or adultery or in small ways by shutting down and withdrawing emotionally, we want out. Yet the Bible tells us in James 1 that it is in the midst of difficulties that we have the opportunity to develop one of the most important disciplines we need to live life well? perseverance. Without this quality we will tend to live for what brings us relief or pleasure in the short-run.

I love to eat, especially sweets. I love tasting warm, gooey chocolate in my mouth, and I could be happy eating chocolate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Yet when I over-indulge, I'm plagued with other emotions like guilt and regret. I'm angry that I've sabotaged the bigger goal I have of gaining self-control and maintaining good eating habits. I've also discovered that when I succeed in saying no to the chocolate temptation, I actually feel happier with myself.

We only understand what makes us truly happy when we have a long-term perspective on life. Living for the moment can fool us into thinking that temporal pleasures bring happiness. The writer of Proverbs warns us, "At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, "how I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction!" (Proverbs 5:3,11,12). Many have discovered only too late, that what brought joy in the moment caused hardship and grief in the long run.

The apostle Paul reminds us that it was only when he kept the eternal lens fixed tightly to his spiritual eyes was he kept from utter despair in times of great difficulty (see 2 Corinthians 4). Looking at the big picture gives us perspective in the moment and helps us see that God is good and is doing something good in us, even in the midst of a difficult marriage (Romans 8:28,29).

Knowing that you can find some joy in the midst of an unhappy marriage will give you enough staying power to persevere until things change. You can experience a sense of well-being as you learn the secret of being content in whatever situation God allows in your life. When we take the high road in the midst of marital trouble it leads to growth and spiritual maturity. In addition to that,

our children will watch an example of what it means to walk with God and to trust him in all things. And while enjoying these blessings you may discover that your marriage improves. However, the greatest happiness in all of life will come when we hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And in the end, that is all that counts.

** If your marriage consists of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, you may also need to take measures to protect yourself and your children in ways that are beyond the scope of this article. Please consult with your pastor or Christian counselor to find ways to deal with this situation. Also you may want to read *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship: Seeing It! Stopping It! Surviving It!*.*

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