

THE SEASONS OF A PASTOR'S MARRIAGE
Key Principles for the Pastor and His Wife

by Dr. Jim Binney, D.Min.
603 Stallings Road
Taylors, SC 29687

THE SEASONS OF A PASTOR'S MARRIAGE

"To every thing there is a season." (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Can a pastor's marriage end in divorce? For the man sitting across from me, it had. I had known him in Bible college, and he had sought me out following my message. One evening, we found a room to talk privately. "I am a failure," he said. "I went into the pastorate with all the lofty idealism possible. I gave myself - body, soul, and spirit - to the work of God; but I neglected my own wife and family. Then it was over. I am now divorced and remarried. I know I have failed. Can God ever forgive me!?"

As his shoulders shook and the tears fell from his eyes, I asked myself, "How can a pastor, called of God and ordained by the church, come to a place of such sorrow? How can this happen?"

The sad truth is that it does happen, and in unprecedented numbers. The cancer of divorce is eating away at the body of Christ at an alarming rate. Our experience here at L.E.A.D. Ministries is similar to that of other ministries dedicated to counseling ministry couples. Over 75% of those coming to us come because of severe marital problems. One periodical recently indicated that the fastest growing divorce rate among evangelicals is among pastors. It is estimated that soon one of three present pastors will be divorced. One Bible college president recently lamented, "We have more graduates who are divorced than those who are not." In light of this, it is not surprising that an article in Newsweek magazine reported that one survey of 2,400 pastors revealed that "clergy had twice as many divorces as laymen." The preponderance of such evidence has caused one denominational superintendent to exclaim, "Don't even talk to me about pastoral marriages. I've heard so much the past few months, I can't take anymore!"

How can this be? What has brought the church to such a sad state of affairs that its spiritual leaders are now leaders in divorce?

Many reasons can be brought to the witness stand to testify. They are time-worn and proven in their veracity: neglect, preoccupation, communication break-down, mid-life crisis, counseling pitfalls, etc. I want to introduce a new witness, heretofore a stranger, into the midst of these other veteran incriminators. Her name is "Seasons" and she has lived with every married couple since the beginning of time.

Everywhere we look there are seasons: the calendar year has them, the clock has them, the human life has them, and even illnesses have them. We have long recognized the seasons of a person's life from childhood to adulthood, but only recently have we grudgingly granted overdue recognition to the seasons of married life. There are four seasons to the marriage experience: romance, reality, regression, and rekindling. These also fit most progressive life situations. In the Christian walk, we call them conversion, disillusionment, backsliding, and revival. In the ministry, we call them the honeymoon period, disenchantment, discouragement, and renewed vision. These seasons of life are seen all around us, but nowhere are they more real than in marriage.

ROMANCE

This season is full of promise and excitement. It begins with the first attraction, continues into courtship, and includes the first year or two of marriage. It's chief characteristic is emotional intensity. This emotionalism is the Pied Piper who can lead one astray as easily as he can show us the right path.

The power of this season can be seen in the lyrics of popular songs of the past and present: "Before the dance was through, I knew I was in luv with yew!" Another singer croons, "I didn't know just what to do, so I whispered, 'I luv yew.'" The Doors take the trophy for the most impetuous approach, "Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name!"

This season is so rife with clammy palms, dry tongues, wobbly knees, and heart palpitations, that it prompted one poet of note to summarize it like this: "Love is such a funny thing; it's something like a lizard. It worms its way into your heart and nibbles at your gizzard." Such feelings are so sacrosanct; it seems almost sacrilegious to reduce them to mere "emotionalism." Yet, I have heard more than one couple admit, "We don't love each other any more;" they explain this with, "We've lost the sizzle, the thrill of touch, and the pounding heart." In essence, they are saying, "Hey, my gizzard isn't being nibbled, so I must not love this person!"

Don't misunderstand. I am thankful for this initial season of the marriage relationship. It is the magnet which brings two hearts together. As one writer put it, "... a trick of nature devised to bring us together."

A fascinating story out of the 1930s in a small Oklahoma town illustrates the folly of relying solely on feelings. It seems that the local high school had a miserable football team. They had not won a single game and the season was almost over. The next game was with their chief rival. Someone had to do something . . . and someone did. A wealthy oil tycoon met with the entire team in the locker room and promised every man and boy a brand new Ford car if they would win the next game. Pandemonium broke loose! The next week was intense! Pep rallies pumped the team up, they practiced with new fervor! Finally the big game came. They gathered in a circle, put their hands together, yelled "Rah," slapped one another on their padded behinds, and ran out on the field . . . and were destroyed, 38-0. All their emotion could not make up for a lack of discipline, study, training, experience, and character.

So is it in marriage. When a couple enters marriage on the momentum of feelings ALONE, their relationship is only as secure as their feelings. If "[t]he heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," (*Jeremiah 17:9*), to build their future on such an unstable foundation is to court disaster.

The feelings of romance are wonderful, but to fail to add commitment and diligence to your relationship is to miss the meaning of marriage.

When my son was small, he wanted a puppy so badly he could think of nothing else. Of course we reasoned with him about the necessity of feeding, cleaning, and cleaning-up after the dog. "I'll do it, Dad! Honest!" We got the puppy and he did . . . for two weeks. Then everything changed. The food dish went empty, the puppy began scratching at fleas, and little piles of brown stuff spoke volumes about our son's neglect. What happened? He initially saw the puppy as a licking, grinning, loving bundle of joy. In other

words, he saw the puppy as a product to enjoy when, in fact, it was a process to maintain. When we concentrate on the feelings of romance, it is often to enjoy it rather than to maintain it. When we see it as one season of a growing relationship, we will make the commitment to maintain it.

I am not suggesting that feelings are not part of marriage. But as someone wisely said, “Feelings are the dividends paid on the investment of obedience.”

So in the season of Romance, we become blinded to faults, idealize our mate, and deny each other’s flaws. If we quarrel at all, we make up quickly, but we rarely come to grips with the deeper issues between us. Once the emotional bond is in place, we find the veil of romance lifting to reveal . . .

REALITY

While the first season was pure fun, this season is one of discovery and disappointment. I found that my otherwise chic and sophisticated wife had a fatal flaw – she left the cap off the toothpaste tube. (Three cheers for the flip-top lids of today!) This would create a hardened plug of gritty toothpaste which defied one’s ability to use it. I thought of putting the tube on the floor and stomping on it, but I feared that the next day’s headlines would read, **POSTMAN KILLED BY FLYING OBJECT OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN!** On the other hand, my wife soon discovered that I had the bad habit of hanging my clothes on the bedpost (or in the absence of the bedpost . . . on the floor). These were small things, to say the least, but small weeds left unattended can choke out a garden.

The illusion of perpetual bliss is broken by small slights and disappointments – a forgotten anniversary, a facial expression, a gesture, or a tone of voice. Compelling needs from childhood which were hidden under the veil of romance now come forth in raw adult paroxysms: “You don’t touch me anymore!” “You work all the time. You’re never home!” “We just don’t communicate!”

Just when we wonder what we ever saw in this person, God gives the gift of life in the form of a bouncing, beautiful baby. All differences are forgotten as the glow of parenthood calls a time-out on our differences . . . for a while. The demands of parenthood crowd out time alone. Financial pressures, work demands, and in-law relationships further tarnish this idyllic picture.

It is during this season of Reality that small differences and misunderstandings become the seeds of future trees of bitterness. It is here that we desperately need to apply Hebrews 12:15, “*Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.*” When small resentments and disappointments are not dealt with in open communication and spiritual forgiveness, the natural result is . . .

REGRESSION

This season is often accompanied with the advent of teenagers, conflicts over parenting issues, mid-life crises, full-scale resentment, and even unrestrained bitterness. These things often result in a loss of hope for the relationship, and fantasies of escapism. This is the time when the ugly specter of divorce appears on the horizon. Once unthinkable, it now becomes a frequent companion of your thoughts and even finds its way out into the open during tense arguments with your mate.

Gone is the glow of romance with all its attendant amenities of luxurious feelings. Those who don't understand the progression of the seasons dream of better days rather than working on present needs. Wives soak up frothy soap operas or lose themselves in romance novels in a desperate attempt to recapture the "romance." Husbands seek their need for fulfillment in their work. Pastors, who would find an affair unthinkable, nonetheless make a mistress of the church. How can the wife defend herself against that!?! As one author sees it, "A pastor's wife is put in a terrible bind when the church becomes The Other Woman! Her husband isn't unrighteous for sleeping with her. No one considers this obsession immoral; he's doing God's work!"

It is here that one is tempted to give up. Hold on . . . it gets better!

REKINDLING

The children grow up, leave home, and the partners return to "couple-hood." If they have maintained respect and love throughout, this is a time of rediscovery. If the children have become central to the relationship, there may be little to talk about. Whatever the past held, there is the sense of new hope for oneness, romance, and relaxation with one another. The absence of strain, pressures, and obligations is a welcome reprieve.

All these seasons are "common to man" and to ministry couples. They are as normal as breathing in and out. Sinister forces would have you think that your marriage is the worst in America while seeing every other marriage as perfect. They would deceive you into thinking that the only answer is a return to season number one. Honesty demands a realization that the testings we face in each season are common, and if common, "*...God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*" (1 Corinthians 10:13). What is that "way of escape?"

First and foremost, seek outside counseling. God has made provision for even the Christian leader to "*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another.*" (James 5:16). He intends that you allow others to bear your burdens as you bear the burdens of others. The size of some problems and our proximity to them defy objectivity. As wise surgeons seek a colleague to operate on their family members, so pastors should seek the help of others.

Second, realize that you, too, will grow through these seasons of marriage. Knowing the future removes the element of the unknown and enables us to prepare for it and recognize it when it is upon us.

God is aware of your needs even now; and despite them, He desires to “... *make you to increase and abound in love one toward another.*” (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Love is a process of growth, constantly fluid and mobile. It is never static and immovable, never a product but a process, and always in a state of change. The good news is that it can change for the better! Your love can “*increase and abound*” regardless of the season.

It requires a sacrificial, raw-boned commitment to see it happen. The common denominator of victorious marriages is not effusive emotions or common interests. It is not even the highly-touted and prized goal of compatibility. In the final analysis, it is more a do-or-die commitment to the marriage than these things. Last, it takes commitment to see your relationship through the hard times of each season.

A grade school girl brought a note home to her mother regarding an upcoming Drug Awareness day. She had to take a t-shirt to school on which was to be stenciled an anti-drug slogan. The mother forgot about it until the last moment. Her daughter was dressed and ready for the bus when the mother made a mad dash to find a shirt. She dug one out of the drawer and stuffed it into the girl’s knapsack without a glance. It wasn’t until her daughter arrived home, proudly wearing the shirt, that mom realized there was already some printing on the shirt. The original printing on the front of the shirt read, “FAMILIES ARE FOREVER!” while the new slogan freshly stenciled on the back was, “BE SMART, DON’T START!”

On the heart of every marriage partner is stenciled one of these slogans. Which one do you wear? Are you committed to “Be Smart, Don’t Start,” wishing silently that you had never gotten into this relationship? Are you chronically fantasizing about a way out or are you sincerely and totally committed to “Families are Forever!?”

