

SUSTAINING LOVE THROUGH THE SEASONS OF MARRIAGE

by

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Theme: Provisions exist in the Christian gospel to enable married couples to maintain their covenant amid changes that affect their marriage.

Theme Text: Lam. 3:23; Hosea 2:20

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) are used to indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

The theme for the 1994 International Year of the Family is "Empowering Families for Growth and Change." Change in our world is inescapable. Change is normal in marriage. Today we are considering marriage and how husbands and wives can be empowered to deal with change in their relationship.

Changes in Marriage

Change in the institution of marriage itself. There are a number of ways in which married couples experience change. First of all, contemporary marriage is undergoing a change from marriage as it was known and experienced in the past. (1) Modern societies expect much more of marriage in the way of companionship, emotional fulfillment, mutual growth in personal identity, and progressive levels of intimacy (Augsburger, 1988, p. 17).

Intrusive change. Deaths, disasters, illnesses, family moves, financial difficulties, career failures, and other kinds of losses create particular stresses on the marriage relationship. One attorney, for example, commented that it is not unusual for couples who file for bankruptcy to also file for divorce. Intrusive change often presents situations for which one cannot make preparation beforehand.

Predictable change. Predictable changes have come to light with the study of human development. Social scientists have mapped a life cycle that extends from the prenatal period until death. Just as there are seasons in our individual lives so there are seasons in a marriage. These stages in marriage come about because of the life cycle changes in the spouses, but also because the relationship itself has a life cycle. Each season has certain characteristics. Transitions between the seasons are potential periods of crisis. To know these stages of development ahead of time helps us to prepare for them. (2) The resources of the gospel can be better focused on the special needs created during the times of change.

Marriages Within Marriage

Many developmental models include such stages of marriage as: honeymoon, the career establishment period, the child-rearing period, the empty nest when the children are gone, and

the retirement marriage. An interesting approach to these seasons of marriage is taken by Christian author and marital therapist David Augsburger (1988) who recognizes that, regardless of whether couples parent children, the marriage relationship has a life of its own which changes over time. He believes that those who live in a marriage over several decades are likely to experience the equivalent of at least four different "marriages" between them as partners within their one marriage. "Marriage is not a single style of relating, committing, trusting, negotiating, conflicting and growing. When there is growth . . . there will be multiple marriages, serial marriages, a series of marriages that unfold as the persons grow" (p. 15). (3)

Marriage One: Dream. "I love you. I must be with you. I'll never leave you. You'll always be first. We are in love." Feelings of hurt, fear, or frustration are cautiously shared or concealed. Differences are tolerated or overlooked. Conflict is avoided, since it is damaging to the dream. Intimacy is fueled by the fires of romance.

Marriage Two: Disillusionment. "I still like you, but I can't go on without change. I need space, I need respect. I need to be me as well as 'we.' We are in struggle." The dream begins to evaporate, manipulation occurs as a way to get what we want. We risk sharing feelings, but find them threatening, often uncontrolled, confused and confusing. We demand change of the objectionable differences in the partner. Conflict erupts from frustrated feelings. There is fighting, bargaining, pressuring. Intimacy is intense at times, but absent when there is tension.

Marriage Three: Discovery. "I find you surprising. What I liked at the first I came to resent in you. Now I wouldn't change it at all. We are learning to love." True communication is invitation and work toward equality. We own our feelings and express them with candor. We discover that our differences are creative, necessary parts of each of us and of our marriage. We find more creative ways of resolving conflict, seeking mutually satisfying solutions more quickly.

Marriage Four: Depth. "When I'm with you I feel at home, complete. When we're apart I am at peace, secure. We are loved." There is more genuine mutuality and equality in our communication. We flow with both our thoughts and feelings. We delight in our differences and develop them in each other. We accept conflict as a healthy process and utilize it to work for mutual growth (Augsburger, 1988, pp. 10-12, 24, 25).

While couples and circumstances differ, research and clinical observation shows these "marriages within a marriage" last about a decade with transition periods between them.

Failure to negotiate the passage between 'the marriages within a marriage' makes divorce more likely and complicates immensely the normal patterns of growth. It is the treacherous passage into and out of the second marriage which sinks many basically good relationships that might have matured and become deeply satisfying and fulfilling alliances (Augsburger, 1988, p. 13).

Commitment: Stabilizing Force in Times of Change

If marriage is likened to a progression of seasons resulting from earth's journey around the sun, then the commitment of the partners to each other is like the gravitational force that holds earth in orbit. The commitment of husband and wife to each other for the journey of marriage gives assurance that, whatever betide them en route, they remain committed to each other.

As the source of that gravitational pull is the sun, so Christian marital commitment has its source in God. On numerous occasions throughout Scripture the relationship of God to His people is likened to marriage (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32; Hos. 2:7; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:9). The outstanding quality of God in that relationship is His faithfulness (Hosea 2:20; Lam. 3:23).

The marital relationship of lifelong companionship is founded on total commitment. This is one of the reasons why the author of the letter to the Ephesians has compared marriage to the relation

of Christ with His church (Eph. 5:31-32). Christ has totally committed Himself to His community of followers. He has promised to be with us always (Matt. 28:20). He has made us as His own body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 5:28-30). He has loved us even when we have been unfaithful, and He has poured out His life for us, not hesitating even to die for us in order that we may live. . . . It is that kind of love—the love that Christ has had for us—that we are to have for one another in our marriages (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 38).

The love which is needed to stabilize a marriage is the type of love which God displays to each of us—an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person. This takes energy and effort. It means caring about the other person as much as you care about yourself (Wright, 1982, p. 39).

Strategies for Coping With Change

1. *Put change in perspective.* "Only when one takes a long view of marriage is one truly free to risk the exploration of both the highs and the lows, the peaks and the valleys of a growing relationship. When marriage is seen as a joint journey of mutual growth, a developmental process over a long period of time, then difficult periods can be put into perspective" (Augsburger, 1988, p. 18).

2. *Whenever possible, plan ahead for changes* which are likely to come. "Many of life's events can be planned for in advance—such as having a baby—and can bring security and satisfaction. Some aspects of the various seasons of a marriage are fairly predictable in the changes they bring. These also can be anticipated" (Wright, 1982, p. 12).

3. *Adjust to the changes in your partner.* Some changes can wreck a marriage, such as alcoholism, drug use, mental and physical cruelty, and infidelity. These belong in a class by themselves. However, much change can be accommodated when we truly accept our partners as persons of value. The passage of time by itself changes people. Also, God's love and our love may actually be freeing our partner to grow and change toward his or her potential. In such change we should take delight.

Elizabeth Achtemeier shows the connection between this adjustment, accommodation process, and Christian marital commitment, "We must also learn to accept each other, with all our faults and imperfections. Christian marriage is not only total commitment; it is also accepting commitment, learning to love and value the other for the imperfect person he or she is" (Achtemeier, 1976, p. 43).

4. *Grow and change with your partner.* One wife rationalized that her divorce was appropriate by saying, "I've outgrown him." One of the important avenues to growth together in marriage is communication. (4) Continue to show unconditional love and acceptance. (5), (6)

Conclusion

Christian marriage has a real advantage when it comes to facing change, for it is rooted in God's covenant. The destructive aspects of change cannot harm the marriage that is anchored in God. (7) Covenant love is not threatened by change, rather it transforms change, sees that which is positive in it, and takes a creative approach. Covenant love is committed for eternity. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is a love that never fails.

One (1): Marriage is changing. Couples entering marriage today have considerably different expectations of it than has been the case in the past. Marriage is undergoing a change from the traditional style, characterized by a definite, authoritarian, hierarchical role structure, with specific duties and obligations, to what is known as companionship marriage, which is more equalitarian, democratic, and flexible in its role structure. Whereas external social pressures were a strong factor in holding the traditional marriage together, the companionship model depends much more on love and affection, intimate communication, and mutual interest for unity. Commitment is perceived differently—it is more to another individual than to the institution of marriage itself. In short, one does not marry and settle down, but one enters upon a lifelong work to achieve a mutually harmonious relationship (Flowers, 1982).

Two (2): Some developmental stages and tasks in the family life cycle

Stages	Tasks
Beginning family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Differentiating from family of origin. b. Negotiating boundaries between friends and relatives. c. Resolving conflict between individual and couple's needs.
Infant/preschool family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reorganizing family to deal with new tasks. b. Encouraging the child's growth while maintaining safety and parental authority. c. Deciding how to implement personal and family goals.
School-age family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Renegotiating workload. b. Sharing feelings when child can't handle school. c. Deciding who helps child with schoolwork.
Adolescent family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Renegotiating autonomy and control between adolescents and parents. b. Changing parental rules and roles. c. Preparing to leave home.
Launching family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Separating from family. b. Leaving home appropriately. c. Entering college, military, or career with assistance.
Postparental family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Renegotiating marital relationships. b. Renegotiating time and work. c. Adjusting to retirement.

(Brown & Christensen, 1986, p. 24)

Three (3): Perpetual change in marriage. I should say the relation between any two decently married people changes profoundly every few years, often without their knowing it; though every change causes pain, even if it brings a certain joy. The long course of marriage is a long event of perpetual change, in which a man and a woman mutually build up their souls and make themselves whole. It is like rivers flowing on, through new country, always unknown (Lawrence, D.H., *We need one another* quoted in Augsburg, 1988, p. 16).

Four (4): Continually make adjustments. God is perfect, the ideal of Christian marriage is perfect, and the means God puts at the disposal of Christian couples is perfect. Yet there is no

perfect marriage, no perfect communication in marriage. The glory of Christian marriage is in accepting the lifelong task of making continual adjustments within the disorder of human existence, ever working to improve communication skills necessary to this task, and seeking God's enabling power in it all (Small, 1968, p. 81).

Five (5): Unconditional love in marriage. "A man told his wife that on a particular Friday he was going into the boss' office to request the raise that he believed he more than deserved. He was quite nervous and upset. When he finally got his courage to go into the boss' office toward the end of the day, the boss agreed that he deserved the raise and gave him even a larger increase in salary than he had anticipated.

"When he arrived home, he noticed the dining room table was set with the best dishes. There were candles burning. His wife was preparing a delicious meal. He thought to himself, 'Someone has called her from the office to tell her.'

"He went into the kitchen, told her the good news, they kissed, and then soon sat down at the table for a delicious meal. Beside his plate was a beautifully lettered note which read: 'Congratulations, darling! I knew you'd get the raise. These things will tell you how much I love you.'

"They enjoyed the delicious meal together. When she got up to get the dessert, he noticed a second card fell from her pocket. He bent over, picked it up, and read: 'Don't worry about not getting the raise. You deserved it anyway. These things will tell you how much I love you'" (Joe A. Harding quoted in Charles Allen, 1988, p. 47).

Six (6): Say something nice to Sarah. "The young reporter looked puzzled. He wasn't sure what he had expected the old, snowy-haired gentleman to say in response to his inquiry. But he certainly hadn't expected to be handed a worn gold watch. Nor had he expected such a routine question to produce anything more than a routine answer. He just needed something he could jot in his pad to pacify the paper's social editor so he could get on with his bigger stories for the day.

"He looked again at the watch, then back into the eyes of the old man. They were filled with anticipation as he spoke. 'Go ahead and open it, young man. Written right there inside the cover is all you'll ever need to know.'

"This was a big day for George and Sarah. And these were big doin's for the little Midwestern farm community into which George had settled over fifty years ago. Their son Peter had arranged the whole thing as a surprise for their 50th wedding anniversary. The whole town had turned out. That's why the young reporter had been assigned to interview the old man. And that's how it happened that he had asked the simple question: 'Tell me, Mr. Rampton, what's your secret? How do you stay happily married for fifty years?'

"Looking a bit uncomfortable all dressed up in his shirt and tie and dark gray suit, he gestured as though to hook his thumbs behind his familiar suspenders. But finding none, his arms dropped awkwardly to his sides.

'Well, son, I didn't know much about the ways of ladies or weddin's or makin' a home on the day I got married,' he began. 'I guess you could say the whole thing had me scared right stiff. Only one thing made me get dressed up and go through with the whole thing. I knew I loved Sarah here a powerful lot. And this was the only way I could have her for my own.'

"It was her daddy that gave me this here watch. After the weddin', as I was hitchin' up the team to drive me 'n Sarah out to my place, he walked over to the buggy and said he had a present for me. I could tell he was kinda choked up when he said, 'My boy, that Sarah of yours is pretty special. But inside the watch is all you'll ever need to know.' Then he thrust a box into my stomach and left so fast I didn't even get a chance to say nothin'.'

"The gold glistened in the sunlight. The engraving was a bit worn by time, but the simple statement remained. 'Say something nice to Sarah'" (Family Enrichment Tract Series, A4, Home and Family Service, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Washington, DC, 1982).

Seven (7): Jesus walking on water. The late Dr. Ed Banks, longtime evangelist and seminary professor who with his wife, Letah, founded Adventist Marriage Enrichment, liked to use in their marriage seminars a painting of Jesus walking on the water (see Matt 14:25-27). As a visual aid during their presentation on crises and difficulties in marriage, Dr. Banks would point to this powerful portrayal of the Master amid turbulent seas against a backdrop of ominous clouds and ask, "What does this painting say to you?"

Various observations would be made as one by one members of the group gazed at the painting. "His face is so calm and reassuring!" "He knows no fear." "His feet are completely dry." "His extended hands invite us to walk on the water with Him." Many a troubled couple reported that they found in that simple exercise of reflection on Jesus' mastery of the elements a renewal of their faith in Him as Master of earth and sea and sky, and courage to face changes and difficulties in their lives.

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