

INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet “D”

The short, gray-haired man in the stylish silk suit approached my book table after a seminar in which I had disclosed my history of divorce. He waited patiently while the crowd offered me the usual compliments, bought books, and shared their own stories with me. Smiling, he then asked loudly, “So, you’ve been divorced *three* times?” With a sneer he added, “Didn’t you *learn anything?*” All eyes were on me as he stood there self-righteously waiting for my answer.

For a split second I had the unholy thought of decking him, but my professional training kicked in and I gave him a small, polite nod. I was not afraid to share the truth. “No . . . as a matter of fact, I *didn’t* learn.”

I paused and watched his face fall because he’d failed in his thinly veiled attempt to shame me. Then I continued in a friendly tone, “I’m really glad you asked that question. After a divorce, many of us think we only need to deal with our grief and move on, which is exactly what I did. I had no idea that I needed to learn why I was making such poor choices. I had no one to teach me.” I leaned toward him, reached out, and touched his sleeve lightly, adding with a genuine smile and an upbeat tone, “Thank goodness it’s never too late to learn!”

He turned and walked away without saying another word. Whew! I had survived another subtle attack by a man I’m sure had been married fifty years, blissfully of course, who saw me as some kind of social misfit. I reminded myself that he was just one

of millions of human beings, flawed like me and the rest of the world, but who didn't have to wear the big red "D" on *his* chest.

*T*he Heartbreak of Divorce

My first marriage lasted only a few months. I was twenty and anxious to move out, away from my controlling mother and a household of seven younger siblings. Since I had no job skills and our family could not afford college, marriage seemed the only option. But when my new husband came home drunk (again) one night and hit me, I called my dad to come get me. My spouse refused to get counseling, and we were divorced shortly thereafter.

I was devastated. For years I was deeply depressed and distrustful, but everyone, including my family and friends, told me to move on. "You're young, you'll get over it," they said. I prayed and asked God to help me, and I tried to continue being a good person. Eventually I got over the outward pain, but I had no idea I still carried mental and emotional scars and lacked relationship skills.

When I hit my thirties and my biological clock was ticking loudly, I married mostly out of a desperation to have the family of which I'd always dreamed. Though ill-prepared and uneducated about ourselves and each other, my husband and I thought we had what it took. In reality, neither of us had any idea what we were doing. Despite our good intentions, after a few short years the marriage crumbled and I wanted out. I found myself again with no children, no family of my own, and the stigma of a second divorce.

I refused to enter my forties as a spinster. The compulsive need for marriage, children, and a real family pounded in my head day and night. Haunted by the realization something might be wrong with *me*, I went to counseling and returned to my knees asking God for his help. I learned a lot about dysfunction, relationship dynamics, and how my less-than-perfect childhood had affected me, but I still had miles to go before I was ready for marriage the way God intended.

My last husband came with an adorable two-year-old son, and I just couldn't resist the ready-made family package. Within a short time, however, I realized I had made another poor choice and that I needed help—big time. I begged God to forgive me for trying to direct my own life all these years and for trying to create the life I wanted instead of waiting to see what he wanted for me. Although I'd been a Christian since I was a young girl, I had never completely surrendered my will to his, but now I did, hoping it would save my third marriage. I started attending church on a more regular basis and teaching the children's Bible class. I devoted my entire life to praying, reading, learning, and absorbing all I could from twelve-step programs, marriage enrichment courses, and godly counselors. I listened to tapes, went to seminars, and memorized scripture. As God worked in my heart and healed my emotions, I finally started to become the woman he wanted me to be.

But it was too late for my marriage. After nearly ten years, my husband left one day to go find himself, and I couldn't stop him. Even though I was working on being the best spouse I could be, I couldn't control my husband's choices.

A successful marriage takes two mature people, or two people willing to work toward maturity. In my own middle-aged naiveté, I thought maturity was being over twenty-one, having a college education, owning a home, and holding a job. Like so many women, I thought if we both loved God and tried to be good, the rest would fall into place with relatively few problems. There's nothing like a divorce to make a woman realize how important it is to date prudently and for both parties to slowly and carefully prepare for marriage.

A Doctor in the House

In the years following my third divorce, I've facilitated an ongoing DivorceCare group at my church and participated with other group leaders throughout the world. DivorceCare, a resource from Church Initiative, is an international ministry based in North Carolina. The

program equips churches of all denominations to help hurting people in all stages of separation or divorce. Through my writing and speaking ministry, I've counseled thousands of divorced men and women. Their stories, many of which are in this book by permission, are all different, but also the same. Whether we've been divorced for forty days or forty years, we're all hurting and we all need healing.

Fortunately the Master Physician is in the house. He'll show up with his little black bag any time, day or night, if only we give him a call. If you have any doubt that Jesus can bind your emotional wounds, take another look at the stories in the New Testament. Jesus healed the multitudes, including:

- The lepers (Mark 1:40–42; Luke 17:12–14)—The lepers were rejected by society, just as we are by our ex-spouses, friends, family, and sometimes even the church.
- Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31)—Some of us are plagued by a “fever” of loneliness and frustration.
- The dead (Luke 7:12–15; 8:49–55; John 11:38–44)—Some fall into the “death” of depression and need to be raised back to life.
- The woman who bled (Matt. 9:20–22)—We may be stuck in unending grief like the woman who bled for years, and depleted by our financial, emotional, and physical losses.
- The blind (Matt. 9:27–30; 30:30–34; Mark 8:22–25)—Women who quickly bury themselves in their work or children can remain “blind” to their pain and the need for deeper levels of healing.
- The paralyzed and those suffering seizures (Matt. 9:2–7; 17:14–18)—All of us can be “paralyzed” by worry, have “seizures” of fear, and be so bitter and angry that we seem “demon-possessed!”

As we seek healing, we must remember that God made us flesh and bone, mind and emotions, and a spirit. We have spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, material, and familial needs. And God cares about each one.

So how does God want us to handle the terrible tragedy of divorce? As he said long ago, he says to us today, “Come, follow me” (Matt. 4:19).