

This week's *Laptop* is again a follow-up on last Sunday's message. As we considered Middle Adulthood in our *Journey of Life*, I mentioned that there is a fairly predictable life-cycle for marriage, even as there is for human life itself. And, like last week, this commentary will make a lot more sense if you print out the two attachments that are coming with this *Laptop* so you can follow along on those diagrams.<sup>1</sup>

Marriage counselors have long recognized that there are four peaks of divorce in American culture. Let me tell you what they are, and then we'll look at them.

1. **Peak #1 (years 0-2):** The first peak of divorce happens within the first two years, as marriages that should never have taken place in the first place "run aground almost as soon as they put their boats in the water."
2. **Peak #2 (years 7-10):** The second peak of divorce happens so frequently that it even has its own name, "the seven-year itch."
3. **Peak #3 (years 18-20):** The third peak of divorce occurs toward the end of the second decade of marriage, often growing out of widely-varying understandings of gender roles in marriage.
4. **Peak #4 (c. year 25, or when the last child leaves home):** Marriages that have stayed together "for the sake of the children" dissolve soon after the last child is launched.

While many have noted these breaking points, it was David Augsburger, a Mennonite professor and pastoral counselor, who helped me to see that these breaking points actually represent "chapter changes" in a marriage that lasts a lifetime, and that failure at these points is the result of failure to successfully navigate those chapter changes. If you'll look at the two diagrams, you'll note that the vertical lines separating the four chapters of a marriage that lasts a lifetime correspond to the four breaking points.

I developed both of these diagrams from similar charts in Augsburger's fascinating book, *Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage*.<sup>2</sup> The first diagram, "The Life-Cycle of a Marriage," presents the marital life-cycle as it typically develops when couples marry in their early twenties and begin bearing children several years thereafter. The second diagram, "Four Marriages within a Marriage," presents the same four chapters without relating them to parenting. Let's look at these chapters one at a time . . . .

The basic idea in **Marriage One** is that we are obviously trying to establish the beginning of a marriage relationship, which has to do with looking for commonalities and building bridges between two lives. In order to build these bridges, we emphasize things we have in common and minimize or overlook the many differences we also have.

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<sup>1</sup> While the life-cycle templates I'm describing have broad application in North American culture, I have no idea how well they translate into other cultures.

<sup>2</sup> David Augsburger, *Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25, 32-33.

I often tell pre-marital couples that there are at least three levels of commitment in a marriage. The first level of commitment is a public one, and has to do with the promises we make to each other in the context of the marriage ceremony itself.

The second level of commitment involves a “laundry list” of things “that I’m going to fix about him/her once we’re married.” We seldom talk about these things with each other (although pre-marital counseling attempts to smoke some of them out), but the lists are conscious ones, and we could write them down if we had to.

The third level of commitment in a marriage is the really problematic one. This level has to do with the things we expect to be true of a marriage relationship that we don’t even know we expect . . . until they don’t happen. This third level has to do with things that we so regard as “normal” from our previous experiences in our families of origin that we really would have a hard time talking about them . . . because they’re largely unconscious.

In our marriage, for example (and I have Jill’s permission to tell you what follows), one of Jill’s primary third-level expectations was that our family would “live on the water” as her family did growing up. Her family had a ski boat and a cabin at the lake, and she spent some of the happiest moments of her youth puttering about Lake Allatoona outside Atlanta with her father at the wheel of the boat. (And it was in that cabin late one night that she gave her life to Jesus.)

Jill rather naturally (and unconsciously) assumed that her husband would be like her father in that respect, and, when it became obvious as years went by that this was *not* the sort of man she married, the collision of this unknown expectation with reality brought about the need for a painful recalibration and recommitment as we transitioned into Marriage Two.<sup>3</sup>



The transition into **Marriage Two** generally begins at some point between years 7-10, precipitated by weariness at pretending that all the differences that accumulate as two lives are joined don’t really matter. Rather than “pursuing the dream,” as we do in Marriage One, in Marriage Two the dream is nibbled to death by all these conflicts, small and large. The motto of Marriage Two is “If *you’d* just do things like *I* want to do things, we’d have a *wonderful* marriage!”

Although sometimes appearing quiet from the outside, many (and I suspect *most*) marriages in their second decade are pretty painful on the inside as couples give up on “making nice” and begin trying to obliterate their differences rather than accommodating or ignoring them. Marriage Two typically involves both spouses trying in various ways to manipulate the other into doing life and marriage *their* way . . . but this never works.

In the first place, couples hardly ever succeed in “remaking their mate into their own image”; and even if they do achieve some measure of apparent success, what they lose in the bargain is any hope of having the real marriage for which their hearts hunger. What they get instead is a slave instead of a soul mate.

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<sup>3</sup> And it is this back story that makes it so significant that our house outside Winchester, Virginia, where Jill lives, is on a lake. This is why she got a kayak for her birthday last year and a canoe for her birthday this year (the lake isn’t large enough for skiing).

If couples have children at anything like the “usual” time, they end up raising teenage children during the same years they’re raising a “teenage marriage,” and one is about as difficult as the other. As Marriage Two comes to an end, couples typically have “used up all their ammunition” on each other, and both are “full of holes,” but not much has changed. Marriage Two tends to end in emptiness, a quiet hopelessness that our hearts can ever be mended . . . and it is in that emptiness that the Spirit of God begins to reawaken Hope.<sup>4</sup>

For couples who “go the distance,” as Marriage Two ends and **Marriage Three** begins, those characteristics in our mate that were so engaging in Marriage One and so enraging in Marriage Two begin to be ever-so-slightly attractive again. While Jill and I never really considered divorce, Marriage Two was “appropriately painful” (coinciding with Ph.D. studies and academic poverty as well as teenage children); yet as Hope began to be renewed, we actually said out loud to each other during our 18<sup>th</sup> year—over and over and over—“I’m *so glad* we didn’t quit!”

Marriage Three tends to coincide with mid-life issues and crises as we sum up our life’s direction and our vocational trajectories, both individually and together. Our children are moving from high school into college, we may not be quite so strapped for cash, and we begin to think to ourselves, “Well, maybe you’re okay after all.” As we transition our children toward adulthood and persevere in nurturing our relationship with each other, we begin to experience the birth of a New Dream, one with a deeper and richer melody.

**Marriage Four** can begin at any point after the 25<sup>th</sup> year, but not usually until the last child has been launched and we’ve become “empty nesters.” Like the patina that develops on fine silver after much “knocking about” in use, our relationship in Marriage Four develops the luster of integrity and durability that comes only through perseverance across many years of “real life.” As Marriage Four comes into its own, Marriage Three’s “Well, maybe you’re okay” becomes transformed into a robust beauty that has a depth and wonder all its own.

There is good reason why persons who have been married to each other for a very long time often begin to look like each other. There are no short cuts to such beauty, and just being married for a long time doesn’t necessarily bring about this transformation. Just living together for a long time doesn’t do it. *Loving each other for a long time* does, by God’s grace. And as two lives *really do* “become one” at long last, the beauty that was always God’s intention begins to be revealed.

Now in order for our marriages to not only “last a lifetime” but to also become all that God intends for them to be, most of us need help along the way. It’s not unusual these days for young couples to have never seen or experienced a marriage that endures for a lifetime in the way that I’ve described, and they therefore have no models to follow.

While pre-marital counseling is both important and beneficial, much of the learning we need across the marital life-cycle can’t really be gained until we understand the issues

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<sup>4</sup> It’s worth noting that divorce and remarriage restarts the cycle from the beginning, not from where we left it in a previous relationship. I often tell remarrying couples something like this: “If your previous marriage ended at year ten (or whenever), as you approach that time in this relationship, you’re going to confront those same issues again, because your problem is not—and probably was not—each other. Your problem is that you don’t know the next steps of the dance, and until you learn them, you’re going to keep running your ship aground on the same rocks.”

“from the inside.” The skills we need in order to navigate life together don’t come in any “manual” and they’re certainly not in our “read-only memory” . . . *but they can be learned.*

No pain ever need be wasted, and it is a very wise thing for couples to consider both individual and marital therapy as these key transition times arrive in order to maximize the transformations that God is bringing to birth in each of their hearts and in their life together.

Wear your seat belt. It’s worth the ride.

Dave

## ***The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know*** **O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

### **Week twelve: Did the Devil Really Make Me Do It?**

*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.  
And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.  
But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it*  
(1 Corinthians 10:13).

“Early on in my Christian pilgrimage, I discovered the value of Scripture memorization. First Corinthians 10:13 was the first verse I ever deposited in the memory bank of my mind. Because I had hidden this verse in my heart, only God has recorded how many times across the years— when I found myself faced with some sort of temptation— it surfaced in my memory and kept me from many a potential mistake. Scripture memorization plays a vital role in overcoming temptation. D. L. Moody’s worn Bible, from which he preached to millions in the nineteenth century, had these words written in his own hand in the flyleaf: ‘The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.’

“It is not a sin to be tempted. Temptation comes our way in all sorts of forms and sizes. Our minds are like a hotel. The manager cannot keep someone from entering the lobby. However, he can certainly keep that person from getting a room. Likewise, it is not a sin when a temptation passes through our mind. The sin comes when it does not do that, when it doesn’t *pass* through our mind. The sin comes when we give that thought a room in our mind and let it dwell there.

“One should not confuse temptations with trials that come our way. Most often, trials are allowed, or even sent, by God to cause the Christian to stand. Temptations are sent from the devil to cause the Christian to stumble. ‘*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed*’ (James 1:13–14). The devil never made us do anything. He simply dangles the bait in front of us.

Then we are tempted; we are “drawn away by [our] own desires and enticed” by that which is outside the boundaries laid out for us in God’s Word.”

**The Reality of Temptation:**

*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.*

**The Reminder for Temptation:** *And God is faithful;*

**The Remedy for Temptation:** *he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

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My good friend, Herb Peak, explains that verse in a way I find helpful. Herb says, “Whenever we become aware of temptation, almost in that very same moment we are also aware of how we can resist or avoid it. The first impulse comes from Satan; the second from God’s Holy Spirit. It’s as though God gives us the exit, the off-ramp, just as quickly as Satan springs the trap. If we take that exit, we receive the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13. If we don’t reflexively choose God’s way, then we usually find that it’s a long way to the next ramp.”

It’s when we don’t take the off-ramps God provides that we find ourselves lost in the wilderness. As someone memorably quipped, “sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”

And as often as we continue to make the very same mistakes over and over again, just so often is God’s promise Good News for us: “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9).



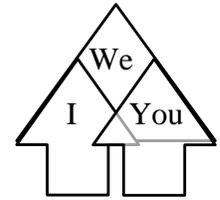
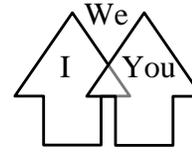
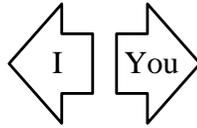
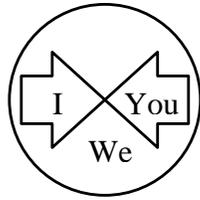
# The Life Cycle of a Marriage

| <b>ERA OF MARRIAGE</b>      | <i>Marriage One</i>                                          |                                                     | <i>Marriage Two</i>                                           |                                                  | <i>Marriage Three</i>                                |                                                        | <i>Marriage Four</i>                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>STAGE</b>                | Stage 1<br>(c. Years 0-4)                                    | Stage 2<br>(c. Years 5-8)                           | Stage 3<br>(c. Years 9-12)                                    | Stage 4<br>(c. Years 13-16)                      | Stage 5<br>(c. Years 17-20)                          | Stage 6<br>(c. Years 21-24)                            | Stage 7<br>(c. Years 25+)                     |
| <b>MARITAL FOCUS</b>        | Initial Commitment                                           | Provisional Commitment                              | Crisis of Commitment                                          | Joint Productivity                               | Summing Up Life Direction                            | Embracing Life's Work                                  | Celebrating Integrity                         |
| <b>FAMILY FOCUS</b>         | Young Married Couple                                         | Child-bearing Stage                                 | Preschool Stage                                               | School-age Stage                                 | Teenage Stage                                        | Launching Years                                        | Middle-age Onward                             |
| <b>GOALS</b>                | <i>Pursuing the Dream</i>                                    |                                                     | <i>Experiencing Disillusionment</i><br>(the Dream evaporates) |                                                  | <i>Discovery of a New Dream</i>                      |                                                        | <i>Depth</i>                                  |
| <b>SOURCES OF CONFLICT</b>  | Conflict of Loyalties<br>(Parents vs. Mate)                  | Conflict over Uncertainties about Choice of Partner | Conflict over Parenting Values and Styles                     | Conflict over Priorities, Parenting, and Careers | Conflict over Parenting and Enduring Life Values     | Conflicts over Directions and Rates of Personal Growth | Conflicts arising from Despair and Stagnation |
| <b>PATTERNS OF CONFLICT</b> | Accommodate Differences<br>(I'll pretend we are just alike.) |                                                     | Eliminate Differences<br>(If only you were like me!)          |                                                  | Appreciate Differences<br>(Well, maybe you're okay.) |                                                        | Celebrate Differences<br>( <b>Wow!</b> )      |

NOTE: This model generally presumes that couples marry in their early twenties and begin bearing children within several years thereafter. Differing patterns of marriage and family development will require appropriate modifications to the chart.

Modified from David Augsburger,  
Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage  
 (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25, 32-33.

# Four Marriages within a Marriage



|                      | <b>Marriage One</b> | <b>Marriage Two</b> | <b>Marriage Three</b> | <b>Marriage Four</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| <b>GOALS</b>         | Dream               | Disillusionment     | Discovery             | Depth                |
| <b>COMMUNICATION</b> | Expectation         | Manipulation        | Invitation            | Dialogue             |
| <b>FEELINGS</b>      | Excuse              | Explode             | Express               | Experience           |
| <b>DIFFERENCES</b>   | Accommodate         | Eliminate           | Appreciate            | Celebrate            |
| <b>CONFLICT</b>      | Avoid               | Attack              | Adjust                | Accept               |
| <b>INTIMACY</b>      | Dependent           | Independent         | Interdependent        | Intimate             |
| <b>ROLES</b>         | Complementary       | Symmetrical         | Parallel              | Intertwined          |
| <b>MEANING</b>       | Hopes               | Hopelessness        | Hopeful               | Hope                 |

From David Augsburger,  
*Sustaining Love: Healing & Growth in the Passages of Marriage*  
 (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25).